

Case Study: RRSA – Pupil Voice

The school in Devon (Blackawton primary) is hoping to be a hub of excellence for **children's voice** (article 12) because of the impact they have seen when you actively engage children in their learning and school life.

The Head says:

Over the last 18 months we have fully engaged with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child through the Rights Respecting Schools initiative. This underpins our schools vision and values and has become an invaluable toolkit for establishing a common language through which to address school improvement, behaviours for learning and raising attainment and progress. In July 2016 Blackawton was in the top 10% of school nationally for KS2 results overall and in the top 5% for reading.

We replicated this again in 2017 with a noticeable increase in progress made by deprived children.

What has enabled us to achieve such strong data? The key answer to this is by engaging the children in their teaching and learning; listening to their ideas and opinions on what works well for them and facilitating the classroom and outdoor environments to enable the children to become active and independent leaders of their learning.

As adults we have tried to unpick what enables us to grow strong, independent learners who achieve. It is by continually asking them what works or doesn't in regard to teaching and learning and using the UNCRC language to underpin our practice that has helped create active learners. Adult initiated, child-led practice is highly successful in the majority of Early Years settings where teachers are establishing an environment which facilitates learning through play. We have tried to develop this good practice at an age appropriate level which still allows children to learn through experiences that they are choosing but are increasingly less 'play' based as they move through the school. What we increase is engagement with the children; responding to their needs and establishing frameworks and practice which they are asked to feedback on; to the adults, themselves and their peers.

By developing programmes and practices set against the common language of the UNCRC children are able to see themselves as central in the teaching and learning experience. Respecting children's rights to have an opinion and to be taken seriously can be a powerful tool in school improvement. Equally, focusing on their physical and emotional well-being in a broader context, in this case a peer mentoring system, supports the more vulnerable members of the school community through giving their voice a platform.

An example is listening to children's views on the teaching of grammar - Having already invited Heads of English from two of our feeder schools in to listen to the children's opinion of teaching of grammar and how this has impacted on their writing, systems have been put in place to enhance transition. Now children from our school do an independent piece of writing so that the secondary school teachers are aware of the high standards they are capable of producing before the summer break. Thereby enabling secondary English school teachers to 'hit the ground running.'

In addition she said:

We think that if you empower children to have a voice and make decisions about their learning, then they make better progress academically. The classroom and outside environments are set up so that the learning is adult initiated but child-led. The UNCRC language is common across the school so it enables us and the children to communicate from an understood starting point.

Emotionally and socially, if you are spending time listening to their concerns, particularly around behaviour (not just being punitive or telling them to just get on with things) then there is more trust, issues get properly dealt with and therefore they are able to engage more fully – not still worrying or angry about the incident. Children want adults and peers to help them to work through problems, the feedback we're getting from them is positive. They want adults throughout the day (TA's and lunchtime supervisors) to listen and help them work things through; subsequently we are seeing less post break time taken up dealing with fall-outs.

The children have written their own play and lunchtime action plan and we are gradually meeting their requests for change; i.e an area to 'relax' as well as play. We have started a global citizens club to debate and campaign (currently they've chosen to buy goats and are running the whole project). Through the PSHE lessons, some of the children have chosen to write to our milk provider to request that they no longer provide straws because of their impact on the environment.

I think if children (and adults) feel they are heard and taken seriously then they engage more fully in the school. They feel a greater part of the whole process. Obviously this is more evident as you move through the classes as they are more articulate. Parents and the community also respond to requests or projects better if they have come from the children.