

Resource 10: An interview with Chris Watkins

This extract is adapted from the NAHT Primary Leadership Paper 6, 'Leading Learning' (June 2002)

(Chris Watkins explains what he would be doing if he were a headteacher wanting to develop pupil learning in his school.)

Well I would be using every opportunity presented, with pupils and staff, to refer to learning and to help pupils 'wonder' about learning and enquire further about what 'learning' was all about. There would be 'learning' assemblies, there would be evidence all around the school that the focus was on learning.

So what specifically would you be doing with staff?

I would be working with them to help them develop their skills in knowing how to frame questions that would help them take forward their pupils' understanding about learning. For example:

'What did you notice about...?'

'Why do you think we did that activity?'

The questions teachers need to ask to develop and stimulate pupils' understanding of learning need to go beyond the 'taken for granted'. This is a new approach for many teachers and they need support initially in rethinking and recasting the questions they ask.

I would help staff to remember that 'meta is better' – that the more children understand what learning is about and the more children understand themselves as learners the more effective they will become in managing the 'learning experiences' that the teacher designs for them each day.

What would a classroom that had a focus on learning look like?

Well – they will look different from other classrooms. There will be a lot of statements about learning displayed. For example:

There would be pupils' own accounts of their learning displayed alongside the product of their work. For example, there will be statements about what independent or autonomous learners do. In another primary school half a wall is covered with pupils' examples of what helps them learn.

And finally I would not be using the word 'work' – I would be using the word 'learning'. When I visited a primary school recently a pupil came to the headteacher's room to collect her exercise book which she had left behind, only instead of saying that she had come to collect her work she explained that she had 'come to collect my learning Miss'. In this same school all lesson time is referred to as 'learning time' and no pupils are allowed to miss 'learning time' if they have misbehaved – that is dealt with in the time that is not formal 'learning time'.

There would be a different sort of process taking place in the classroom. The teachers must start noticing 'learning' – the teacher would be able to 'stop the flow' as appropriate when they notice that there is an opportunity or a necessity to talk about the learning.

Pupils will probably have their own learning log that they will use to help them reflect on and understand more about how they learn.

The pupils will show more engagement with the work and will not be disabled when they get stuck, but will be able to 'talk themselves forward' – they will be able to keep their own 'learning story' going.

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What does your work with staff and pupils in developing a focus on learning show you?

We continually underestimate pupils' own ability to understand the process of learning and their ability to have a conversation about learning. When we give pupils some more space most pupils will use it to take more responsibility for their learning.

Classrooms that include a focus on learning are more effective for all of the pupils.

Teachers with a learning focus are:

- making learning an object of attention
- making learning an object of conversation
- making learning an object of reflection
- making learning an object of learning