



## CASE STUDY REPORT

# Developing a learning community through Assessment for Learning (AfL)

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*This study was originally published in 2009 as part of the 'What Works Well' initiative, part of the National Strategies for Education in England.*

## Abstract

**Background:** The purpose of the study was to explore how to improve pupil learning through CPD approaches, research, and support from teachers and school leaders.

**Aims:** The main aim is to improve pupil learning by involving them more in designing, planning, and reviewing learning, and by providing CPD materials, research, and expertise.

**Methods:** The participants included carers, head of school improvement, headteachers, middle leaders, national strategies consultants, parents, pupils, senior leadership teams, SIPs, subject leaders, and teachers. Methods used included CPD materials, research, expertise, collaboration, observation, monitoring, planning, teacher perceptions, and dialogue with children.

**Findings:** The main findings are that involving pupils more in designing learning, planning for learning, activities for learning and review of learning has resulted in improved attainment, increased motivation and engagement in learning, more ownership and responsibility for learning, and increased metacognition.

**Implications:** The findings suggest that a collaborative, whole-school approach to CPD, involving research, dialogue, and reflection, can lead to improved pupil learning, teaching, and school organisation and leadership.

*This abstract was generated by Camtree using a large language model (LLM) and added to the original report in 2023.*

Keywords: Primary education

## Introduction

### What were your reasons for doing this type of development work?

I had engaged with research at a previous school and experienced the positive impact on staff and children.

### Who might find this case study useful?

- Carer
- Head of school improvement
- Headteacher
- Middle leader
- National Strategies consultant
- Parent
- Pupil
- Senior leadership team (SLT)
- SIP (School Improvement Partner)
- Subject leader
- Teacher

## Description

### What specific curriculum area, subject or aspect did you intend to have impact on?

- All aspects
- All subjects

### How did you intend to impact on pupil learning?

- Involving pupils more in designing learning, planning for learning, activities for learning then review of learning
- More shared dialogue between teachers and pupils and pupils and pupils
- More motivation and involvement
- More ownership of learning and next steps

### What were your success criteria?

- Use of success criteria with children
- Increased self and peer assessment during lessons
- Improved questioning skills
- More explicit and consistent feedback and marking
- Reinforcement of pedagogical theories of learning
- Change in practice
- Experimental and creative approaches to teaching & learning based on wider knowledge and understanding of current research and more focused whole school CPD
- The development of a learning culture

### What information or data did you use to measure progress towards your success criteria?

- Logs or interviews
- Observation outcomes
- Periodic teacher assessment

- Pupil consultation data

## Describe the CPD approaches you used

We also used materials from the Learning How to Learn website, discussion articles, research papers, educational books and INSET from relevant outside providers.

## What CPD materials, research or expertise have you drawn on?

Relevant National Strategy resources:

## Who provided you with support?

- Middle leader
- Senior management
- Subject leader

## How were you supported?

Sharing success and failure with honest discussion led to new ways of working and became self motivating. Analysis of school improvement also helped to develop confidence in approaches as it was evident changes were having an impact on attainment.

## Impact

### What has been the overall impact on pupil learning?

- As expectations are modelled and discussed more frequently, children understand more clearly what they are aiming to achieve
- Improved attainment over four years
- Motivation and engagement in learning
- More awareness of process of learning not just content of curriculum
- More ownership and responsibility for learning and the curriculum
- Demonstration/ identification of quality work helped children to recognise and achieve goals
- Increased engagement in thinking about learning increased metacognition
- More involvement in assessing learning independently or with peers helped boost the 'I can' mind set
- Learning as a process has been developed as well as quality of work
- Children take more time to consider and act on feedback in order to improve
- More awareness of learning strengths and areas for development
- More able to recognise error and be positive about trying to change it
- Language focused on learning has helped understanding
- Children recognised who helped them learn and that learning can occur outside and inside school
- Children more engaged in curriculum content with improved motivation to succeed
- Empowered as active participants in the learning process

### Thoughts you think are relevant to overall impact on learning

The impact on learning depends on how learners engage to take learning forward. Ultimately a pupil needs to want to learn and teachers need to inspire a love of learning.

Sometimes quality does not result in an 'end' product. Sometimes we do not know what learning is going to happen but we can recognise it and explain it to the children when it happens so they will develop further. It's

about allowing learning conversations to develop & flourish in order to improve the quality of thought and ideas.

In response to the question 'How do you know when you have learnt something?' one child replied, 'I take it home and my mum puts it in the loft.' It made me ask the questions 'What would I like them to recognise about learning? Who owns it? Who is it for? What do we do with it? What does learning look or feel like?'

## Quotes you think are relevant to overall impact on learning

Teachers:

- "Children say the word learning more and understand it."
- "More awareness of why they come to school."
- "When I cover for PPA, children can always tell me about what they have been learning."
- "We don't always know what we are going to learn."
- "Do we kill some of it by always saying this is what we're going to learn?"

Pupils:

- "I learn best when we know what we are going to do."
- "If she did not put it up on the board it would be much more exciting for us."

## Quantitative evidence of impact on pupil learning

- Data comparison of cohorts
- Periodic teacher assessment
- Test results

## Qualitative evidence of impact on pupil learning

- Logs or interviews
- Observation outcomes

## Describe the evidence of impact on pupil learning

We have gradually developed so that attainment is described as significantly above the national average in all Key Stage 1 areas this year. Observations and conversations confirm strategies to develop learning are continually being developed and refined.

## What has been the impact on teaching?

Opportunities to observe teaching and reflect what activities are like from a learner's perspective has enabled more thought and discussion on planning activities to maximise learning. Clear observation criteria has helped clarify the focus on pupil learning.

Classroom enquiry based on individual interests led to changes in pupil learning then some ideas were adopted by the whole school. This has resulted in:

- More awareness of the learning process
- More application of assessment strategies
- More of an enquiry approach, which generated questions
- More ownership and dialogue relating to learning and teaching
- Links/distinctions between formative and summative assessment
- Engagement with research evidence & ideas
- Examination of beliefs and theories about learning behaviourist/ cognitive constructivist/social

cultural and their relevance to everyday lessons

- Opportunity for wider reading in order to increase knowledge and understanding
- Application of knowledge and understanding to learning process, current strategies, directives & needs of learners now and for the future
- Shifted from content to process: 'What I am teaching?' to 'How are children learning?'
- More explicit dialogue with children about their learning

### Quotes you think are relevant to the impact on teaching

- "Children are more tuned in to learning."
- "It's helped me to help them assess their own work."
- "It's OK to try things out and ask for help."
- "We are reinforcing the learning objective throughout the whole lesson now not just at the beginning and during the plenary, and what I'm expecting to see; the success criteria."
- "That word learning is one that's come in to the school's vocabulary."
- "They are talking more about their learning and beginning to question whether they are learning, and what they are learning and how."

### Evidence of impact on teaching

- Evidence from observation and monitoring
- Evidence from planning
- Improvements in curriculum documentation
- Teacher perceptions

### Describe the evidence of impact on teaching

Both formative and summative assessment has become instrumental in supporting planning and identifying the need for appropriate intervention strategies.

### What has been the impact on school organisation and leadership?

- A clear vision about the nature of learning, teaching and assessment and the revision of policies helped to keep the vision in focus.
- A collaborative learning and assessment approach led to a partnership in learning.
- Greater understanding of how children learn, how teachers/adults can help them to learn and how teachers can develop their own and others learning has improved performance management in terms of expectations relating to professional growth and understanding.
- There has been more consideration of how child initiated learning in foundation stage could be continued and developed throughout key stage one to capitalise on motivation, engagement, thinking, knowledge, understanding and attainment.
- Assessment has had a direct impact on the planning of the curriculum and plans have been redesigned as a result.
- Direct involvement of children in planning some aspects of the curriculum has enhanced motivation and ownership and is helping to shape a more personalised curriculum.
- Specific time was set aside to encourage and promote dialogue about education and create time for reflection on practice.
- Regular acknowledgement of the fact that risk taking had to happen in order to change practice was built into staff meetings and success and failure celebrated.

- There was a specific planned emphasis on whole school CPD.
- A collaborative approach helped people learn from each other and share ideas.

## Evidence of impact on school organisation and leadership

'Living' learning and teaching, feedback and marking and assessment policies have developed along with ideas. Whole school adoption of Assessment for Learning in a structured programme of reading, trying things out and reflecting together has ensured more consistency in learning and helped all staff to share and develop. All subject leaders have incorporated AfL and thinking into monitoring and planning and have been instrumental in its development across the school as a generic process.

## Summary

### What is the crucial thing that made the difference?

What is the crucial thing that made the difference?

For me it was helping others engage with research ideas, so that practitioners had time to challenge their own and others practice and principles. By extending personal learning through trying out new ways of working in a supportive yet challenging environment conclusions at an individual or whole school level could be reached which helped everyone reflect on the impact on children.

Practitioners had other ideas and these are their thoughts:

- "It was our whole school approach, people working on things together."
- "The development of cross curricular links so children can make sense of the learning."
- "The more flexible timetable released pressure and the feeling of guilt which has given us the chance to do more exciting things."
- "The children's input and involvement with planning learning."
- "Children's attitudes as they are thinking and questioning more."
- "The learning is different as its now learning for a purpose."
- "Where we are as teachers as it's about the next step for us personally too."
- "There are different strengths in everyone and we recognise we all have a different place to move to."
- "A chance to observe others and think about ideas but still develop my own way."

### What CPD session and resources were particularly useful?

All research materials/workshops from the 'learntolearn' project.

### If another individual or school was attempting to replicate this work, where would they start and what would the essential elements be?

Learning How to Learn website or published books and materials relating to the project. Whole school collaborative approach, time to develop (do not under estimate the time needed to be given: at least four to six staff meetings a term).

### What further developments are you planning to do (or would you like to see others do)?

We want to further our thinking on curriculum design, taking into account how young children learn, in order to consider what personalisation might look like for Key stage one, and the implications for assessment. Also the relationships between formative and summative assessment and how each impacts on learning.

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## About 'What Works Well'

This case study was originally published as part of the 'What Works Well' section of the National Strategies for Education in England. The National Strategies were professional programmes aiming for improvements in the quality of learning and teaching in schools in England. 'What Works Well' involved teaching practitioners from all phases and areas of education sharing accounts of real developments which had improved learning and teaching, and made a difference to pupil progress. 'What Works Well' case studies were designed to support practice transfer and include sufficient detail and resources to enable others to implement the effective practice described. They were reviewed by experts prior to publication as 'User Generated Content' (UGC) under a licence which encouraged reuse and derivative works, but which precluded commercial use.

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