

An innovative approach to personalised learning: Rodbourne Cheney Primary School

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Brief description

Teachers and support staff at this school structure the Early Years Foundation Stage and the National Curriculum around children's expressed needs and desires. Reception and Year 1 pupils share a large unit which is divided into learning zones. Children democratically choose their own learning topic each week. They build and design their own role play and design new learning zones. All elements of literacy and numeracy are taught in this child-friendly context which helps to ensure that each child understands what they are learning and why.

Overview – the school's message

'Having been on a research trip to Australia it was noticeable that in the kindergarten stage of all schools the physical environment had been broken down into agile learning spaces where the invitation to learn was made irresistible and free flow was encouraged. This arrangement allowed for creative uses of resources and the development of a wide range of social and academic skills simply due to the volume of adults that became part of the children's everyday experiences. At Rodbourne Cheney we took the brave step to knock down a wall between our traditional box classrooms and develop a HUGE learning space for the children in school where they would learn freely in a range of zones and have greater freedom to self-initiate the way in which they could access literacy and numeracy learning opportunities.'



Lauren Connor, Headteacher

The good practice in detail

The school's aims and objectives are focused on enabling all pupils to have a 'willingness to learn' which 'leads to success'. Inspectors reported that 'the key to the success of this

outstanding school is the way it promotes learning as a lifelong skill'. This is demonstrated exceptionally well in Reception and in Year 1 by teaching staff who provide the best start to school life through the provision of memorable experiences which help children to develop personally and academically. Many children start school with skills that are below age-related expectations. Progress is outstanding in Reception and in Year 1 and a significant proportion of children exceed their age-related expectations by the time by they are ready to move on to the next stage of their education.

How has this been achieved?

Lauren Connor describes how this has been achieved: 'We let the children lead their learning and get them to tell the teachers what to teach. Kids in control deliver every time.' In addition to the creation of a large space from the two existing classrooms, surplus furniture



Child-led learning

has been removed and learning zones created. The impact on the children's learning was immediate. For example, Lauren explains that, 'encouraging reading and writing and number in a variety of places instantly had an impact on boys' engagement'.

'Now they can lay on the floor, cosy up on a cushion or build a den. They choose a comfortable environment and personal learning space where they know they can produce their best work. We also see children dressing up before reading or writing or number work, almost as if they get into character before attempting a task. We have seen children in telephone boxes

and under tables and propped up on a bookshelf, but the quality and improvement in the standard of work now that they are self-initiating their personal space are phenomenal. Progress measures have gone through the roof for accelerated learning in all aspects of literacy and numeracy.'

How are the topics chosen and agreed?

Every week a focused session which includes all the children and the teaching staff takes place. The children review what they have learnt so far and decide together if they would like to move on to a new theme. During one of these sessions the children were observed agreeing to carry on with their topics which were based around different houses, the cartoon character *Scooby-Do* and the *Harry Potter* books. For example, they talked with confidence about how they had collected data relating to the likes and dislikes of the tree-house and the haunted house role-play zones and had used their mathematical skills to analyse the results of the survey.



A child's display about the Tree House

The children had made potions in a large cauldron, the ingredients of which had been carefully calculated. Reading skills were used to create diaries and work out clues to find aliens and monsters. They excitedly explained how they had made moveable and pop-up pictures of skeletons and vampires. After reviewing their learning, they made suggestions to extend these topics but also voted to introduce further learning activities based around a 'Chocolate Land' theme. Ideas included using the computer to find out how chocolate was made, cooking with chocolate and creating machines that produced white, dark and milk chocolate! There was a buzz of excitement as these ideas were recorded for all the children to see.

How these ideas move forward into learning activities

Claire Keeping, the Early Years Foundation Stage and Year 1 leader explains: 'We provide a blank canvas such as a roof using fabric and colours on a backing, and then they add the rest of the bits. That is our starting point and it grows from there.'



Claire Keeping

The children then design and build their own role play and label the classroom accordingly. They also design the new zones with help from the teaching and support staff. Once the learning environment has been set up, the teacher's role is to then structure the Early Years Foundation Stage and the National Curriculum around the children's needs and desires using [response plans](#) where the key skills to be developed are clearly identified. A [learning environment sheet](#) is produced which highlights opportunities for literacy, numeracy and foundation skills to be developed.

Adaptations are then made to the learning environment to ensure that key skills are systematically covered and teaching assistants know exactly what is to be developed in each area. 'Planning in this way', says Lauren Connor, 'puts all elements of literacy and numeracy into a child-led, child-friendly context. It ensures that experimental learning is at the heart of everything we do. As the children become more comfortable with leading their learning, the level of topic ideas becomes wider and more adventurous. We see a progression from princesses and castles to dinosaurs, to planets to why do we have germs? This development of their understanding of what learning can be is far in advance of their chronological age.'

How do teachers ensure that the children are challenged and their learning is focused?

Lauren Connor explains about learning hotspots. 'Hotspots focus the children to investigate and enquire further. Large yellow spots in every learning area and in every place are an opportunity to learn. The hotspots may have a question or a challenge or an activity to guide the extension of the children's work or to develop particular skills, but it is the invitation to learn that is overwhelming and draws them in.'

To ensure that the children balance their time sensibly in the different learning areas, 'hotspot champs' have been introduced to extend the children's experiences. As Lauren Connor explains, 'Children who may not naturally go for a mathematical activity or a writing activity are being promoted to 'hotspot champs'. For a day or a session it is their job to

encourage as many children as possible to take part in the learning activity at their hotspot. They have to explain the learning, make it inviting and model the activity or enquiry. This gives them added confidence in an area of learning and additional practice.' Claire Keeping also points out that this personalised approach is really beneficial to Year 1 pupils, 'because they continue adding and rehearsing their skills'.

How is the children's progress measured?



'Hotspot champs' at work

The children make exceptional progress as a result of this way of working. Slips of paper, which are always readily available, are used to record 'magic moments' when it is clear those individuals have learnt a key skill. For example, one child was observed receiving a magic moment slip when he had successfully managed to create a moveable object. He explained how he had cut out pieces of paper to make wheels. 'They were half circles so it could go round and so it can move. If it didn't have wheels it would not work.' The teacher responded to this by asking lots of questions and a high level of encouragement promoted

his learning even further when the child then explained why square wheels would not be suitable. Lauren Connor adds that, 'the level of magic moment evidence that has been collected and collated, the learning journey evidence, the 'assessing pupils' progress' levels and official record-keeping systems are bursting with quality evidence for all groups. We have pupils making 30 points of progress in six weeks, a sublevel in six weeks and even children with significant special educational needs are demonstrating accelerated learning in literacy and numeracy.'

How has this approach influenced other Early Years practitioners?

The school's inclusive approach has far reaching effects beyond its own community. For example, one local headteacher commented that: 'Since sending my foundation staff to Rodbourne Cheney there has been a palpable change in the staff team. They are lively and enthusiastic and talking about new strategies and pedagogical thinking and for this I am truly grateful. I know we can make some great choices now as we all understand what good quality literacy and numeracy learning looks like.'

The school's background

Rodbourne Cheney is a small primary school, serving the northern part of Swindon. It is an area which includes a high proportion of social housing. The school is federated with Moredon Primary and Nursery School and Nyland Special School. Nearly all the pupils come from White British families and none speak English as an additional language. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is above average. There are an average number of pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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