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Moving practice forward together: Boldon Nursery School

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Brief description

This example shows how Boldon Nursery School has improved from satisfactory to outstanding. The leadership of the headteacher has transformed the quality of teaching and, as a result, children make outstanding progress during their time at the school. This example is one of a set of 10 that have been published to support the survey report: *Getting it right first time*.

Overview – the nursery’s message

‘Arriving as a new headteacher, I identified that the quality of teaching was weak, staff knowledge of the early years was lacking, self-evaluation of the school was over-confident and teamwork was inconsistent. Ofsted judged that the school was satisfactory; however our capacity to improve was recognised. Our journey to become the outstanding nursery we are today has not been easy but it has been extremely rewarding for all. Key to this improvement has been high quality investment in the following three areas:

- Training: investment in staff and their professional development through high quality training. We have also developed on going partnerships with other settings in our local area. Grants and other funding has enabled staff to visit further afield both nationally and internationally.
- Action research: when identifying the areas for development we used action research to focus our improvements, rather than trying to change everything at once.
- Reflective practice: weekly team sessions are used to unpick and learn from our professional experiences. The sessions are additional to planning or staff meetings.

The impact for children is that they are leaders of their learning, with adults who understand how to scaffold their learning and support them to make outstanding progress’.

Sue Stokoe, headteacher

The good practice in detail

Background

In March 2006, an Ofsted inspection judged the school to be satisfactory. By May 2009 the school was judged to be good and by [November 2011](#) it was judged to be outstanding. How did this transformation happen?

Effective training

A well-qualified and highly trained staff team has been developed through training targeted on individual as well as team needs. Training days for the whole-staff team are sharply focused on improving the quality of teaching. The first staff training sessions when Sue joined as headteacher focussed on understanding the role of the adult in the Early Years Foundation Stage. As she says: 'Teaching can only improve if you know the children really well and listen, respond and get alongside children in their learning'. The emphasis on strong teaching has been maintained as some staff have left and new staff have joined the school, often from different backgrounds and qualification routes.



It has been hard to ensure that all staff develop a good understanding of the differences between adult-led and child-initiated learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Fear of the unknown has often been the reason why some staff have been unwilling to change their practice. Sue's approach is to spend lots of time in the classroom alongside staff. She models good teaching and coaches staff individually. Staff report that whatever their level of expertise, the headteacher provides them with strong support. Every member of staff is formally observed once a term and given feedback about their strengths and weaknesses. There are also opportunities for staff to coach one another.



Staff attend national research conferences and Sue disseminates research findings such as those from the DFE-funded [Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project](#). Ensuring familiarity with the revised Early Years Foundation Stage framework has also enhanced the work of the school. Observations of teaching now evaluate how well staff promote the characteristics of effective learning.

In improving the school, Sue has spent much time sharing her vision and values with staff and exploring with them how high ambitions for the children can be realised. Staff respect this and acknowledge that while the direction for improvement is clear, the journey for the team was complex but as a result, the team has become extremely effective.

Strong partnerships

The school seeks partnerships that will 'provoke us to question our practice and provision'. Their partnership working includes:

- links with other outstanding maintained nursery schools to learn from their practice
- paired lesson observations with a headteacher from another outstanding school
- meeting with other nursery school headteachers from across the north of England to discuss improvement, facilitated by a national training organisation
- enabling staff to participate in meetings of the local group of Early Education, a national early years charity
- links with the local [School-Centred Initial Teacher Training Programme \(SCITT\)](#) to enable teachers to look at quality in other schools.

The emphasis on staff learning from other outstanding provision extends internationally. Staff have learnt about supporting children's creativity and listening to children through studying what has been achieved by provision in Reggio Emilia, Italy. They have learned about improving learning outdoors through looking at examples of forest school provision from Denmark and a nature kindergarten in Scotland.



Action research

Staff are confident in what they do because they are well informed by evidence from early years research internationally, nationally and at school level. This is reflected in the vision for the school; staff actively research their own practice and use this learning to set the priorities for improvement.

International visits inform the topics for action research and an external freelance early years expert undertakes project work with the team. As a result, staff are learning together about what makes a difference to children's learning and progress. They have improved how they listen to children and use children's interests as a basis for planning learning and teaching, how they play and explore with children throughout each day and extensively model what it means to be a learner. Children are outdoors most of the time, and are enthusiastic, independent learners.

Reflective practice

'You need to invest in staff so that they are willing to learn and adapt and are enabled to become more reflective', says Sue. This has translated into a carefully planned range of opportunities for staff to continually reflect upon their work.



Regular staff meetings are focussed on how to improve children's learning. Staff support, challenge and question one another. At the heart of this approach has been an emphasis on staff talking together, trying new ways of working and acknowledging that one can't get everything right all of the time. These weekly 'pedagogy sessions' last over an hour, focus on teaching and learning and take place in addition to typical staff meetings and planning meetings.

Teachers have time each week outside the classroom to not just complete planning and assessment but to read research relevant to their work. Improving from being a satisfactory school was closely linked to how thoughtful, honest and evaluative staff were about their own effectiveness and that of their colleagues. Now the opportunities for reflection happen every day and at set times of the week, term and year. Teachers write reflective journals containing questions and insights into their work. This idea has been so welcomed by staff that they have chosen to continue with this means of deepening their own learning over recent years. Sue describes this as 'creating an ethos of learning for all'.

Nursery background

Boldon Nursery School is an average-sized maintained nursery school. It shares a site with Boldon Nursery Children's Centre. Most children are from White British backgrounds. The proportion of children known to be eligible for free school meals is above average, as is the proportion of children who are disabled or have special educational needs.

Other examples published in this set

[Blagdon Nursery School and Children's Centre](#)
[Childminder 510228](#)
[Garstang Pre-school and Nursery](#)
[Highters Heath Nursery School](#)
[Southwater Village Hall Pre-school](#)
[Newstead Children's Centre](#)
[Our Lady Star of the Sea Nursery](#)
[Witton Gilbert Nursery](#)
[Wheatley Hill Community Nursery](#)

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.