Account of practice:
Research and development in teaching

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This account of practice is about how a research and development project into ways of closing the attainment gap led to the adoption of a new approach to teaching and learning for pupils at three primary schools, and a narrowing of the gap for pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM).

The research led to the use of a ‘learning success scale’ in the majority of classes in the three schools. The scale (from 1 to 5) was designed to enable pupils to rate their own understanding at key points during lessons. This feedback mechanism has resulted in more flexible groups and better use of teacher time when working one to one and with small groups.

The teachers using this tool were paired in supportive co-coaching partnerships and use video to review and develop their practice. Staff and parents report that children are more engaged with their learning and better at articulating what they have learned.

An initial evaluation over two terms showed that there had been a decrease in the gap for FSM pupils in 9 of the 15 groups adopting this approach. Significant restructuring and change at two of the schools are considered to have reduced the positive impact of the work, and where there has been stability, greater progress was achieved.

The approach is now used in 26 classes in all the schools. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the gap for FSM pupils is reducing in almost every class.

Background

The project has its origins in Halterworth Primary School’s work as a national support school (NSS). The school is a large primary with 427 pupils. It is situated on the outskirts of Romsey in Hampshire and was graded ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted in inspections in 2007 and 2010. Halterworth became an NSS in 2011 and entered into a formal collaboration with Awbridge and Wellow primary schools in September 2012.

These two small primary schools were graded ‘satisfactory’ by Ofsted at that time, had recently federated and had acting headteachers in post since neither school had been able to find suitable permanent candidates to appoint. After an initial period of productive support from Halterworth, the two schools decided to formalise the collaboration and Halterworth’s headteacher Jo Cottrell (a national leader of education) became executive headteacher for all three primaries. The deputies or acting headteachers at the schools became heads of teaching and learning for their respective schools.

Jo explains:

We wanted to strengthen the schools as quickly as possible, so we shared a lot of our processes and systems, developed capacity through co-coaching, and organised shared staff meetings. We’ve wrapped around these schools professionally, building enduring relationships across the three schools.
In Ofsted inspections carried out since the collaborative leadership arrangement was formalised, both Wellow and Awbridge have been graded ‘good’. After visiting Wellow in July 2012, inspectors noted:

_The outstanding driving force for recent improvements in achievement and in teaching and learning has come from the comparatively new partnership between the executive headteacher and the head of teaching and learning. They have steered the school through a difficult period of change and have kept a clear sense of direction and focus…. This has led to an improvement in the quality of teaching, satisfactory at the previous inspection._

Awbridge’s inspection report, published in early 2013, praised the school’s new leadership for bringing about ‘swift and positive changes and... wholehearted commitment to setting up a programme of improvement and high expectations. As a result there is an outstanding capacity to improve.’

The research project and new approach to teaching practice have played a part in the improvements at the two partner schools, and promise to lead to further gains.

**Narrowing the gap for FSM pupils**

An important driver for the research was the desire to bring together teachers from the three schools to work on a shared project. The two primary schools were undergoing major restructuring with significant turnover of teaching staff. Raising the quality of teaching and professional development were also wider aims of the project, as Jo explains:

_The quality of teaching in the two small schools was variable. There were quite a few new members of staff in the schools and across the collaboration there was no shared history. An important goal of the project was to generate deep thinking on teaching practice._

The three schools serve relatively advantaged communities in Hampshire. The proportion of pupils eligible for FSM is below the national average at each school. Jo felt that because the FSM group in each school was small, the attainment gap could be larger and more problematic to eradicate:

_The reason we focused on this group is that it’s not an area of expertise for our staff, as the FSM pupils are such a small group. If pupils do face issues around performance, they can feel more at odds as they are very much in a minority. These children can become stuck and hard to reach, with a danger of falling off the Level 4 radar and potentially going on to underachieve at secondary school._
The research and development project aimed to develop teaching strategies that would narrow the gap for this group of pupils. The work was based on research by the Sutton Trust on the attainment gap and the findings of John Hattie’s work on ‘visible learning’ (2008) and the impact of effective feedback from pupils. A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses covering more than 80 million students and bringing together more than 50,000 smaller studies, Hattie’s 2008 study is the largest collection of evidence-based research about what works best in education.

The first step was to identify the children from the three schools who were eligible for FSM. The classes with the highest number of FSM pupils were then chosen to pilot the project. This involved three classes from Halterworth, two from Wellow and one from Awbridge.

A working group of eight teachers was then put together to explore a ‘visible learning’ method to attempt to narrow gaps in attainment for the FSM group. The team was led by a senior teacher, and included the teachers of the six classes involved as well as a graduate teacher on placement.

Jo explains her thinking behind the composition of the group:

> I made sure the dynamics of the group were right. I put a lead teacher in charge who was very engaging, as well as one or two less experienced teachers who would benefit. The project broke down a lot of barriers, with everyone sharing the challenge. We invested in this work by giving the group time to meet during the school day so that the project would have a sense of importance and value.

The working group focused on pupil feedback and the use of one-to-one teacher time. The aim was to improve the practice of assessment for learning (AfL), focusing on the construction of success criteria and how children rate their own success against these. From this, a scale from 1 to 5 was developed for children to reflect on and measure their learning:

1. I can teach someone else.
2. I understand.
3. I understand most.
4. I understand some.
5. I don’t understand yet.

The scale is designed to be used at the mid-point of a class or at the end of a topic. The teacher asks the children to assess their own understanding of the lesson and their responses influence the groups that the teacher and teaching assistant (TA) then focus on.

Typically, children who rate their understanding at ‘1’ are given the chance to explain the topic to a peer or peers that identified themselves as ‘2’. The TA or teacher might listen to check that the topic is being reframed or re-expressed in a way that shows it is understood. The teacher would spend time with those that assessed themselves as ‘3’, ‘4’ or ‘5’ individually or in small groups, going over the learning point in a new way to help them understand.
‘The advantage of this approach is that teachers are working with the least able instead of TAs, who were then working with pairs of children in a much more flexible way, supporting them to become active and engaged,’ says Jo.

In the targeted work, the FSM pupils who assessed themselves on grades 2 to 5 were prioritised for one-to-one teaching support for short periods during the lessons, or during other short slots during the school day, to go over the topics they had identified as not fully understanding. As well as the specific topic, the focus of one-to-one work was very much on the language of learning and the acquisition of strategies to improve learning behaviour which would enable them to build success.

Developing and embedding the new approach

The 1 to 5 scale was initially used in the five classes identified as having the highest numbers of FSM pupils – three in Halterworth, two in Wellow and one in Awbridge. It has now become part of mainstream teaching and learning at all the schools and is in use in 26 classes.

Jo says:

*We laid the ground for using the learning scale more widely by sharing good news stories with staff initially. We then took things further by having demo lessons, and then expanding the coaching partnerships as a way of really showing this method and teaching teachers how to use it.*

Using the learning scale requires teachers to be flexible and respond to the feedback the pupils are giving them, she adds:

*Some teachers really fly with this and are using the scale and responding accordingly very confidently. Others are developing their practice and use of the scale. At the same time, some of my strongest traditional teachers have got locked into a way of teaching and this approach is a challenge for them as it changes what they have to do and the way children behave in the classroom.*

At the time of writing, the senior leadership team considers that in 15 of the 26 classes where the scale is being used, the teachers are using it with confidence, and in 10 the teachers are developing their practice. Jo is using a differentiated approach to teacher practice:

*The more confident teachers are working in partnership to extend and develop this approach. It’s really important they are given time to reflect on and develop their own practice. There are other staff who need more mentoring and coaching. We take a personalised approach as we don’t think it is necessary to develop everyone through same development framework.*
The schools’ monitoring system is organised through team leaders, each with responsibility for ensuring four classes are on track. The team leaders report back to the heads of teaching and learning who are responsible for developing monthly or half-termly plans. The observations and other data are fed into dashboards for each class and also inform performance management. Jo explains:

*This work does link to performance management as it provides a lot of evidence and feedback, and not just around targets. Previously, there would have been lesson observations once or twice a year. With this approach we have a much more solid and richer picture. Also, as teachers have to respond to pupils’ feedback about their learning, it makes it harder to put on a special lesson when they know they are going to be observed.*

Although the learning scale is designed to be used by children from Year 1 upwards, how the children were taught to use it is adjusted according to their age. For example, the youngest pupils are taught to use physical actions to identify where they are on the learning scale for a given topic.

Just as teachers have been supported to adapt to the new approach, so have the children. They have been given numerous opportunities to learn and internalise what each number on the scale means. Posters showing the learning scale are on the walls of every classroom and copies are pasted into pupils’ workbooks. Jo explains how this works:

*When it comes to grading themselves, we do need children to be honest. This way, if you don’t understand something at first, you celebrate the fact that you are overcoming and learning. This is a major cultural change and teachers have to do a lot of work to help the children to be honest, to not feel exposed, to create a classroom where there is no blame, and where pupils don’t feel they have to please.*

**Impact and future development**

The impact of the use of the learning scale in the first two terms in the six classes initially involved was that the attainment gap for FSM-eligible pupils decreased or disappeared in the majority of cases.

Across the 3 schools, 9 of the 15 assessed areas showed a decrease in the gap between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers. In two cases it remained the same and in four cases it increased. The senior leadership team believes the restructuring and upheaval at the two supported schools had an impact as new staff took a while to become familiar with the new way of working.

The method has been adopted to cater for any children in the class who have gaps to close, irrespective of FSM eligibility. They can become a targeted one-to-one pupil for a fixed period of time, usually approximately half a term.
The approach makes teachers more responsive and pupils more active, Jo believes:

*The gap has significantly narrowed in most of the classes because the children have become such active and engaged learners. This approach eradicates passive learning and helps teachers give learning back to pupils.*

*It has also meant that teachers are getting to spend focused time with pupils who don’t understand a particular learning point and who need help. In many classes we have moved away from traditional groups. It’s not always the brightest children who identify themselves on the scale as 1 and 2.*

This way of teaching ensures children are working hard to make sense of their learning. Over time, children get used to grading themselves and start to have a better dialogue around how effective the lesson was. Children have realised it’s fun to teach their peers and this has created more supportive relationships in class.

Teachers also found the scale useful as they knew which pupils required additional support and the exact nature of the support needed. Ability groups are more fluid and teachers are able to make much more effective use of support staff.

Parents have noted the change. Giving children the opportunity to teach others for a short period during some lessons has led to increased self-confidence and articulation as learners. Some parents have seen their children come home wanting to teach them something they can do well. Similar findings have been reported in staff meetings and noted in lesson observations.

The July 2012 Ofsted inspection at Wellow Primary School also picked up signs of the project’s impact:

*A programme of peer observation and coaching has been effective, contributing to improvement in teaching and the achievement of pupils.*

*Pupils known to be eligible for free school meals are now working at levels very close to those of all other pupils.*

With the use of learning scale becoming embedded in the three schools, Jo is already looking towards the next step. The schools are also starting to looking at children's mindset, based on the work of psychologist Carol Dweck (2012), whose research has found that people have underlying or implicit beliefs about where ability comes from.

Some believe you are born with an ability and it is a finite resource (fixed mindset), others that abilities can be learned and developed (growth mindset). Dweck has also shown that subtle differences in the language used by teachers can have a significant impact on outcomes: pupils praised for their intrinsic abilities (‘you are so bright’) were less likely to persist in the face of difficulties and to take fewer risks, while those praised for their effort tried harder, persisted for longer and were willing to take on harder problems. Jo comments:
We want to look at the blocks to learning with children who are underperforming and who can’t or aren’t making progress. I have a feeling that it’s something to do with attitudes to learning and ‘mindsets’. The work will look at what kind of language we should use to help children to learn.

References

