

# Just imagine

At Horsforth Newlaithes Primary School, assistant head teacher **Elizabeth Powell** describes how she has embraced the freedoms of the new EYFS to develop a curriculum that fosters children's passion to learn and know more

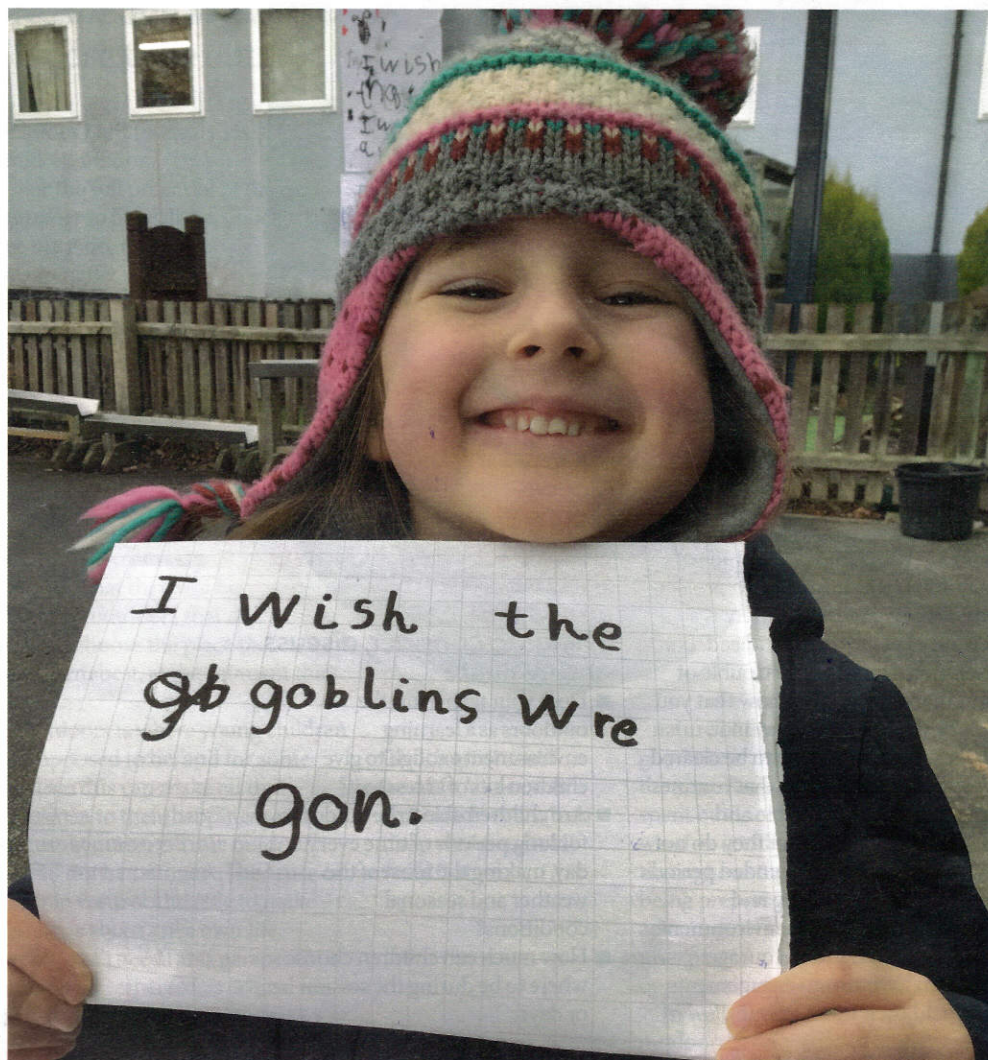
**T**he turning point of my career was a study tour to Reggio Emilia in 2010. What I saw and heard in Italy made me reflect

on my practice as an early years leading teacher for my local authority and my philosophy of education. This inspirational experience, coupled with my degree in psychology and my interest in child development, gave me the confidence to take my educational practice in a new direction.

I was inspired by the action research that the practitioners in Reggio Emilia were involved in; their belief in children as competent learners and their desire to understand learning, improving practice as a result. I had gone to Italy thinking that I put children at the centre of my practice. However, after five days of visiting schools and attending lectures, I realised my practice had a long way to go. So, when I returned to England, I reflected on the teaching and learning in my classroom. I started to listen more, lead less and open my eyes to new approaches. It was scary and exciting.

I gradually became more thoughtful as a practitioner; I began to own the methods I used as opposed to teaching in the ways someone else had shown me. In the decade since my visit, I have honed my practice, adapting it to meet the needs of new curricula and new initiatives, but never bending from the central tenet of my philosophy – the rights of children to have an education that is meaningful to them, which puts them at the centre.

As Albert Einstein once said, 'The only thing that prevents me from learning is my education.' I believe many children and young people feel the same way today. The question we need to ask ourselves is what is the purpose of education



today? The answer to this will guide your educational philosophy and ultimately your practice.

## DEVELOPING PRACTICE

Eleven years on from visiting Italy, I am now responsible for the infant part of our school. When I was first appointed, the school had been a junior school. Setting up the infant part took three years, and in this time I moved through with the children, developing practice alongside them and their parents.

**One of the aims of the school's approach is for children to 'feel the buzz' of learning**

Parents in Reggio Emilia are heavily involved in their children's education, and their understanding of practice is crucial as the child is educated within a community. This involvement made a lot of sense because we know a parent is a child's most enduring educator. We involved parents regularly in the set-up of our infant department and conducted frequent parent forums to share and shape our approach.

We also recruited practitioners who would be able to work with our



approach – practitioners with the same philosophy of education, who were prepared to be open-minded and see that education is a long game and not a quest for data.

## OUR APPROACH

It is important to say that we do not 'do' Reggio. It was clear when I was in Italy that the practice in Reggio Emilia is specific to that place, that culture and those practitioners. My quest on returning was to find my own practice with the children, families and practitioners I was working with and within the educational climate of England.

It is also important to point out that inspiration has come from many places, including Sir Ken Robinson, Lev Vygotsky and even the Bronte sisters. But mostly our practice has developed from working with the children and their families, conducting our own action research as well as research with a local university.

One of the key aspects of our approach in early years is a dedicated time of the day we call Independent Learning Time (ILT). This is a time for children to lead their own learning, choosing an intrinsically motivating project to work on. The expectation is high, and with rigorous questioning, feedback and sensitive support, the children work through chosen challenges to reach successful outcomes.

We use a learning line model in ILT:

- We refer to a challenge as being in the 'rough red'.
- Children then work on their challenge and we refer to this as 'growing green'.
- When they are successful they reach 'brilliant blue'.
- If children are not challenging themselves, we refer to this as 'beginning black'; this part of the learning line represents what they can already do independently.

Essentially, the gap between beginning black and brilliant blue is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. The amount of time it takes for a child to move through this learning line varies, and some at the age of four can work on a challenge for days and even weeks.

## MONITORING PROGRESS

We monitor each child's journey. Children and parents receive half-termly progress reports on their

child's ILT work and Characteristics of Effective Learning, including ways that the development of these can be supported at home. The vocabulary used by all parties is sophisticated and children talk about how they have persevered to solve a problem and been resilient in the face of challenge. They talk about being inspired by others and about the need for feedback to develop their chosen skills.

Children's evidence folders provide discussion points for the class and each child is supported to discuss their own learning skills as well as those of their peers. No children are selected during ILT to do other tasks. It is a precious and protected time where children learn to become independent learners and valuable and respected members of the school community.

Every year we are blown away by the children's capabilities, and visiting practitioners are astounded by what the children achieve, how independent they are and how well they can talk about their own learning. This learning continues at home too. Recently, a parent reported that her four-year-old daughter was trying to make a train track go around her Christmas tree. She was finding it tricky so she went to ask her mum for help but stopped herself, jumped up and down with excitement and said, 'It's OK. I am going to get into the rough red!'

## OUR PHILOSOPHY

The curriculum we have written for early years reflects our philosophy of education. It focuses on developing a

**We can conceive of an education which raises standards and meets the needs of the individual**

love of learning and an understanding of the child's role in their own education. It also focuses on the key role we have in educating our families so that they too can see how to develop lifelong learners.

We equip our children with a plethora of opportunities to be successful and to find learning fun and meaningful. The new EYFS, coupled with the new Ofsted framework, has given us new freedoms to plan what we want to teach our children and when. This is based on what we know of our families and children.

It feels like we have been respected as practitioners to shape our own curriculum and to focus on the most important aspects of working with young children – the interactions between practitioners and children, fostering new learning and a passion to know and understand more. This needs to be embraced.

## MOVING ON

The challenges in Key Stage 1 are far greater and there has been a need to be more creative to ensure we maintain our philosophy of education but also adhere to the statutory requirements of the National Curriculum. We continue to value the children's right to have some control over their learning and so our Key Stage 1 children also have dedicated time each day for ILT. The time is less than in Reception, but the importance is as high. All adults ➤

**Learning is meaningful and fun for the children at Horsforth**





# best practice: shaping a curriculum

support the children in this time and children's learning is explicit and measured.

A few years ago, as part of a parent forum, we developed a way to measure a child's progress in ILT. Each term, parents are informed of their child's ILT level and their next steps. Children are also aware of their ILT level as all children have the ability to reach the top levels regardless of their academic ability. Practitioners support children within to reach the next level. As children move through levels, we see many transformations, most notably in their self-esteem.

Our aim is for children to feel the buzz that comes from learning, the pride in achievement and the love of growing as a person. We have recently started a case study approach to monitor more closely the impact that the development of learning skills has on other aspects of development, including academic output. We have long known that children who progress through the ILT levels also progress more holistically, and we are now looking for a more formalised method to document this progress.

## MEANINGFUL LEARNING

A big issue for us in moving our approach into Key Stage 1 was how to ensure children see learning as useful and meaningful. How could we maintain the intrinsic motivation for learning when the curriculum was much more compartmentalised?

Inspired by the Bronte sisters' childhood, and some writing training I had attended, I developed an imaginary community approach. The children establish a community each year which they are characters



within. This community is then used to establish reasons for learning in most curriculum areas. The communities give the learning purpose and context. For example, a watery community would lend purpose to designing and making boats or studying the water village, Kampong Ayer in Brunei.

The community is a launch pad and what we have discovered is that, unlike topics where content can be muddled and poorly embedded, the community approach facilitates embedding learning. Learning about the real world leads back into the community to solve a problem and thus the learning is useful and exciting. The children are passionate about the place they have created and their care for it and interest in it supports a depth of learning.

I am passionate about education being meaningful to the individual

and ensuring that within the current educational climate we make the most of every opportunity to ensure children and young people feel invested in. Education is about so much more than data and hitting targets. That approach misses the individual completely and educational establishments become factories, churning out cohorts who have made the grade (if they are lucky) but who have little interest in or knowledge of learning – their learning did not survive their education. Children shouldn't 'survive' their education, they should be at the heart of it.

So it is time for a rethink and I believe we can conceive of an education for children and young people which raises standards and which meets the needs of the individual. It will take time, effort and creativity, but it is possible. ■

*Horsforth  
Newlaithes  
Primary School is  
located in Horsforth,  
Leeds: [www.newlaithes.co.uk](http://www.newlaithes.co.uk)*

## long-term impact

Our approach has been developing throughout the past ten years and the first children who we worked with are now at secondary school in Year 10. I remain in contact with many of the families from this year group, and when I see them they comment on the impact that their child's first three years in education is still having on them.

All of the parents talk about their child's excellent learning skills. One parent reported, 'I can 100 per cent say that he has a good attitude to learning because of the approach in his early years. He was turned on to, rather than

turned off [learning]... he takes responsibility for his own learning. Today he arranged with the English teacher to sit an assessment at home, but he asked her to copy me in too so I could be an extra reminder.' Another parent reported that his child 'is always looking to improve himself in everything he does... he thinks big and is a natural explorer.'

Another key area where these children are very successful is their social development, and in particular their value of others. One child from this year group commented on the

relationships between the children in this cohort, saying, 'They are supportive of each other.' One mum commented that, 'They don't even question roles for men and women as they didn't pigeonhole each other early on.'

As our approach is tailored to the individual and every child is valued, special educational needs are naturally catered for and so children and families feel supported. A mother of a child with a specific need commented, 'I would say that the approach helped him hugely to form good relationships and help others to be kinder to differences.'