

# Learning curve

How one setting adapted its Independent Learning Time for parents evenings to give them a better understanding of their children's development. By **Elizabeth Powell**

**J**ust 20 years ago, the internet was relatively new, goods came only from high street shops, and it was common to travel miles for face-to-face work meetings. Now, big data, the 'cloud', online shopping, robots, automation and collaboration platforms are transforming the way we work and live. So what will be the jobs of tomorrow, and how should our education system respond?

Andreas Schleicher, head of the education division at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), is pushing for the design and development of a new PISA test as we prepare for a world permeated by the presence of artificial intelligence (AI). These include tests focusing on problem-solving, collaborative problem-solving and 'global competencies', such as open-mindedness and the desire to make the world a better place.

There is a well-known saying in education – you treasure what you measure – and in my 23 years of teaching, this has proven to be true. However, what we are able to measure is also easy to automate. 'The advent of AI should push us to think harder of what makes us human,' Schleicher said, adding that if we are not careful, the world will be educating 'second-class robots and not first-class humans'.



## INDEPENDENT LEARNING TIME

'First class' humans have strong Characteristics of Effective Learning and a sense of self-worth. In order to develop this at Horsforth Newlaithes Primary School, we put aside time – Independent Learning Time (ILT) – each day where children lead their own learning, choosing a project to work on.

During ILT sessions, children in early years and Key Stage 1 choose projects that are intrinsically motivating, supported by adults who carefully guide and question. Working within what Vygotsky

**'I think it made me realise that I need to challenge myself more'**

referred to as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), children plan challenging projects. At school, we refer to this challenge zone as the Goldilocks zone; the challenge is 'just right' – not too hard or too easy. In seeking new learning, children develop resilience. They learn to think critically and divergently to reach a successful conclusion independently or collaboratively. Through problem-solving and perseverance, they achieve success and a deep sense of pride.

Pre-pandemic, we had always involved parents in our curriculum design through a variety of forums and parents' evenings. As we ventured back to normality, we hosted our first parents' ILT evening. Primarily we wanted to support our parents in understanding ILT more fully so that they would be able to support their child's ILT choices and so that they would witness first-hand the value of ILT, understanding how they could support the development of the Characteristics

## Characteristics of Effective Learning

- playing and exploring – investigate and experience things, and 'have a go'
- active learning – concentrate and keep on trying if you encounter

- difficulties, and enjoy achievements
- creating and thinking critically – to have and develop your own ideas, make links between ideas, and develop strategies for doing things.



of Effective Learning and self-worth at home.

We chose to invite Reception and Year 1 parents initially, and limited the number of places to 20. After a short talk on the purpose and role of ILT, we shared the ILT process from conception to successful outcome. Adults chose a task, which got them into the Goldilocks zone and worked on these for an hour. We provided the same 'intelligent' resources the children access, ones that have myriad possibilities.

Supported by trained school staff, parents worked through the learning line, sharing their thoughts and feelings on the ILT process and their own learning competencies. Activities ranged from trying to get a moving hula-hoop from one arm to the other to observational drawings of dinosaur models.

## DAUNTED BY FEEDBACK

It was clear in the session that working on challenging projects was a different process for the adults compared with the children. Finding something challenging to do, and particularly finding something out of one's comfort zone, was difficult. Our Inspiration Book, which lists a range of projects created with the children, was supportive – but a few parents later said they could have challenged themselves more.

Seeking and giving feedback were also areas where parents felt challenged. One parent later wrote, 'I think it made me realise that I need to challenge myself more, and request feedback in order to develop more'. They added, 'Giving feedback was difficult, as I think it has become a bit ingrained that any form of constructive feedback is perceived negatively in my job. So I tend not to give it unless I have to. It became easier throughout the session once I actively thought about it.'

Supporting parents in actively thinking

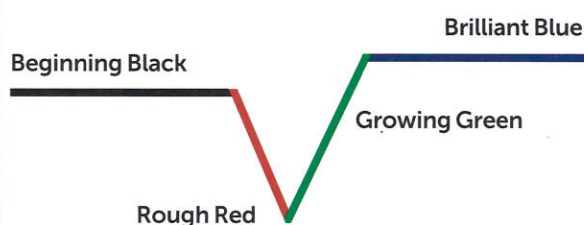
about their learning was a success. Another parent reflected on the evening saying, 'I chose a physical activity for the parent ILT session as it was the farthest thing from my comfort zone, especially as it also involved co-ordination. All my life I've been told I'm not good at physical things, which I obviously then repeated to myself, so I was pleased I did it. I got better much quicker than I thought, and even that hour as an adult of seeking challenge and persevering has made me reconsider that attitude, and I've tried other physical things since that I thought I'd never be able to do.'

## USING CoEL AT WORK

The majority of the parents spoke about how they use the Characteristics of Effective Learning in their work lives, supporting the importance of developing these skills at school. One parent wrote, 'My role is to develop new services in the NHS (sexual health, HIV treatment and prevention); so, in developing these I am always looking for better ways of doing things, challenging myself and others to understand what might work, plus being resilient, as nothing is ever straightforward or simple.'

'The workplace needs 'first class' humans, and 'unless we focus on teaching the skills that are uniquely human (independent thinking, teamwork, and caring for others), kids don't stand a chance' – Jack Ma, former head of Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba.

## the Goldilocks zone



## A BETTER UNDERSTANDING

The parent ILT evening was a success in many ways. Parents spoke of how this evening has affected their understanding of the curriculum, their ability to support their child and even their parenting style. One parent said, 'Since the ILT evening, I've felt more confident in supporting ideas that she comes up with, and letting her do more of it at home. The session will help with my daughter's work, I think. I feel like, in participating, I'm able to come at it in a more empathetic way. I'm always proud of what she manages, but I think we will be able to work better with feedback now.'

Another parent wrote, '[I] reinforce this process at home. Equally, by familiarising myself with the variety of activities allowed in ILT gave me some good ideas to foster learning moments at home and use the feedback to guide learning. As an example, we have been practising skipping together and increasing the difficulty by introducing different techniques. This is super-fun and the use of the language facilitates verbalisation of challenges faced and ways to overcome these challenges.'

**Making observational drawings of dinosaur models (left) and shooting basket balls (below)**







One of the parents engages in the hula-hoop activity

The parents commented on how their interactions with their child have developed since the evening.

One parent said, 'It has made me realise that I need to be prepared to make mistakes and have the confidence to try new things without fear of humiliation/failure, because this is how we learn.'

This evening has enabled our parents to gain a better understanding of our curriculum, and this will have positive repercussions for years to come.

As one parent noted, 'I had quite a traditional view on education prior to Newlaithes and ILT. To see the amazing approaches to challenges being played out by [child's name] is fantastic.'

## IMPLICATIONS

At Newlaithes, we will continue to develop our curriculum and guide our children towards becoming 'first class' humans. Working with parents is crucial, as a holistic and collaborative approach to education will foster the best results.

In the new academic year, we plan to host further parents' ILT evenings to engage more parents and continue to develop an understanding of our curriculum. We will also bring back our parent forums.

In these sessions, parents discuss how they can develop the Characteristics of Effective Learning and self-worth at home. Teachers support as needed, but the flow of

conversation is ideally parent-to-parent.

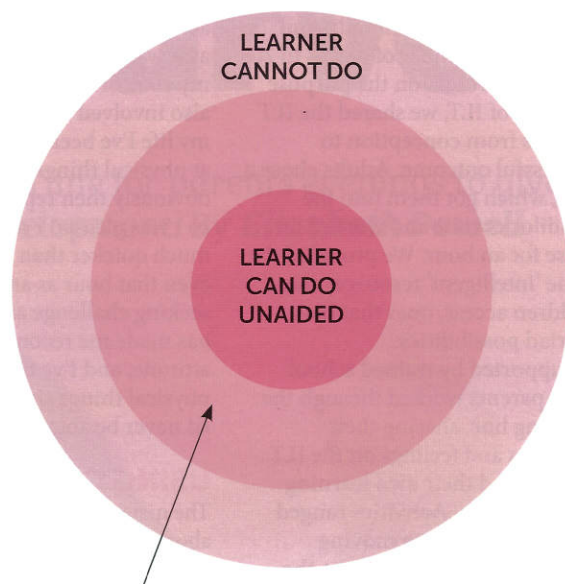
We also plan to host some joint child/parent ILT sessions where family groups work collaboratively on projects, moving through the learning line together, seeking and using feedback.

## FURTHER AFIELD

Learning does not stop simply because we have left school, and self-improvement is always a possibility. Over many years, I have heard people comment on how adults they work with could do with ILT and that we all need to develop our Characteristics of Effective Learning. So I began to look into developing training for adults in the workplace using ILT as a basis.

Charlton Morris (a recruitment company) interviewed me for its podcast, HR Hustle,

## Zone of Proximal Development



ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT (LEARNER CAN DO WITH GUIDANCE)

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development is based on the notion that human potential is theoretically limitless, but dependent upon quality social interactions and environment. The zone is 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'. In theory, so long as a person has access to a more capable peer, any problem can be solved.

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on this topic. You can listen to this at: <https://open.spotify.com/show/73VJn58vYjbg1SZr3GIcps>.

I have also been in conversation with a number of parents and governors about using the ILT approach in the workplace. This is something we will be looking at more in the future. ■

## what parents had to say

- 'It has confirmed in my mind the importance of embracing the ILT process and in particular genuinely seeking out a challenge and feedback.'
- 'I think it's easier now to spot situations where we can involve the learning line and guide/reassure the children.'
- 'It has made me realise that encouraging and allowing my child to not always get into brilliant blue straight away is ok and that it is sometimes a good thing to have a go

and not get it right straight away. I am hoping we will get to do some ILT projects during school holidays.'

- 'Since the ILT evening, I've felt more confident in supporting ideas that my daughter comes up with, and letting her do more of it at home.'
- 'I learnt that a positive outcome is not always the exercise, but the learning is on the way. I did learn from others too, how to accept or give feedback constructively.'

