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What can accelerate
progress and
attainment, improve
schools and
transform teaching
and learning?

One answer is 'a residential' - and in a big way. A new study has found that residential experiences, offered in certain ways, can transform learning, teaching and schools. Learning Away, an initiative funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, was set up to explore what it is that makes a 'brilliant residential'. In this first of three articles Chris Loynes explores the impact that the curriculum integration of a residential can have on progress and attainment.

Amongst the many schools that experienced impacts on literacy as a result of outdoor residential experiences two case studies stand out. Both were tackling a problem in years five and six in which pupils, particularly boys, had begun to lose confidence and interest in literacy. Their test scores had plateaued. In both partnerships the approach to planning trips has become organic with staff and pupils suggesting topics and dates often at short notice. Both combined a visit from a creative writer with a residential to great effect.

Learning Away Case Study - SOUTH HETTON PARTNERSHIP

This case study highlights the importance of curriculum integration, the significance of the different approach to teaching and learning developed while away and the impact that pupil leadership can make.

The staff of the three primary schools in the South Hetton partnership have developed a wide range of residential from year one to six and integrated into the curriculum. Costs have been kept down as many of the trips camp locally using the schools' shared equipment.

“I have introduced a range of strategies alongside residential to lift the standards in this school. Standards are rising from a low ebb and this year especially will take a big upward jump. Many things are contributing to this but I feel the residential are a big part of this. They change the way teachers think of the children and teach in the classroom, the way they see the children, the expectations they have of pupils.”

“After four years residential are now embedded in this school. The staff are enthusiastic about them. All staff are involved and promote trips to their pupils and integrate the experiences into their classroom work. Most staff expect to go on trips and many are active in proposing themes and destinations.”
Head teacher.

As part of the year five programme the staff of two schools decided to add literacy as an objective to a three-day excursion to the nearby coastline.

“We put on an extra creative writing residential with a local author. The children read his book and the author came into to school to do readings before going away. On the trip the author joined them and they then wrote their own stories in workshops inspired by the local setting. The children were very enthusiastic and took to the author as he went to school locally, lives locally and they know his books are popular.”
Year 5 teacher.

It thought that social and study skills also contributed to the outcomes of the visit.

“I notice positive changes in pupil resilience, confidence, their team working skills, their independence as learners and in social settings, their determination – after the trips they are more prepared to have a go at new challenges and to stick at things.”
Head teacher.

“Kids would sleep beside each other that you would never ever see play together in school. The child you think is a shy child gets put in with a few others and you really see them come out of themselves. So you think she's not really that shy, she just never gets a chance to speak really. In school they don't really get a choice of where they sit or who they sit with because they sit in their ability groups but when they're away they don't really get an ability set so they can play with who they want.”
Year 5 teacher

The year five pupils from one table group confirmed this. They had below average scores in their literacy tests before the residential. On return two pupils, who had also been identified and trained on residential as leaders in their year group, organised the table. They discussed what they had learned on the trip that had helped them to succeed at challenges and then applied these to their collaborative study in class.

“Because of the trip my table we all have to work together to get these table points and I think it helped with the trip, the trip helped us do that. Because the trip helped us work together, it's helped get more. Our points are going up instead of down because we're working together more and we're actually paying more attention to the teacher and not just messing round drawing stuff.” Year 5 pupil.

“...like our reading was on a 3b before I went to the camp. After it turned out to be a 4a.” Year 5 pupil.

“You want to take part and because I think its learning for the test what we learned from the trip I think that's how my level have gone up.” Year 5 pupil.

This was confirmed by the teaching staff who commented that this improvement took place in just four weeks. The impact was most significant on pupils with below average literacy scores and particularly noticeable amongst boys.

“We've found its enhanced their speaking and listening skills, their vocabulary because its first hand, its not from a book, they've experienced it first hand they can talk about it and their talking leads into their writing.” Year 6 teacher

The positive feedback led to an uptake in interest in English and in exploring curriculum themes using the spoken and written word.

“We should do poems. Because poems its about something we've done, our memories. Because if we went on the camp we would have something to say about it. We could visit a place like Beatrice Potter, someone who's done really good poems.” Year 5 pupil.

An inspiring writer, an exciting place, the interactive pedagogy of learning outdoors and the informal time away on residential all contributed to enhanced group work, collaboration and the knowledge amongst the pupils that they can solve difficult challenges and make progress. All have impacted on classroom progress, skills, motivation and attitudes.





Learning Away Case Study - THE CHRIST CHURCH PARTNERSHIP

A growing and flexible relationship with a nearby outdoor residential centre has meant that the staff and pupils can respond creatively and at short notice to opportunities for Learning Away. The arrival of a creative writer inspired a group of year six boys to suggest that the class should work with her in the 'spooky wood' by the centre. In this low cost, organic context it was no sooner said than done.

Widespread use of projects, themes, small group work, day trips, practical and experiential learning were already embedded across classes, year groups and schools so complimenting these with a programme of year two to six residential was congruent with the approach taken by the partnership.

In this case the knowledge of several residential venues close to the school built up by the pupils over many visits gave them the opportunity to be involved in the planning of their teaching and learning. The teacher, aware of an emerging problem of literacy amongst some of the class and the opportunity of a visiting author, capitalised on this with an overnight visit.

'It's better doing maths and literacy out of doors. We should do it four times a year.'
Year six pupil.

The 'spooky wood', visited by day and by night, stimulated storytellings by the author and the pupils. Word banks created the foundation for written stories to be written back in the classroom.

'Going to (spooky wood) inspired me because I've already started to write me own book.' Year six pupil.

'... (the author) helped us with our vocabulary and that and we wrote part of a book together.'
Year six pupil.

'It's clear that the author inspired year six to write. Every time you ask them to draw, they write!' Year six teacher.

The teacher used other tactics to help make the pupils proud of their new found vocabulary and skills.

We were teaching. Everybody was just watching the board. We taught them how to make little whisper bags. We learned this thing called wonder whispering and we did this. It was hectic! Now I know what Miss ... Feels like! Year six pupil.

The impact could also be seen on the aspirations of the pupils.

It could start your career off, like you could become a mountaineer or someone. Like when we went on the creative writing course one of us could become an author because of that. Year six pupil.

The head teacher commented that

'Classroom teachers notice an improvement in engagement and attainment that is then sustained through the year post trip for a wide range of pupils including those with previously high, middling and poor results. The impact is perhaps most noticeable on low achievers. It is picked up especially in core subjects such as maths and literacy – aural and written.

Behaviour is also associated with these changes. This is both in relation to more supportive attitudes to other pupils, more eagerness to learn and better behaviour in class all impacting on attainment.' Head teacher.

SUMMARY

Both case studies highlight the potential of residential experiences when they are inclusive of all or most pupils in the class, progressive so that regular experience leads to expert residential learners and teachers – and, above all, integrated thoughtfully into the curriculum. The importance of more interactive ways of teaching and learning stands out as a key factor on the enhanced progress of the pupils. ■

For more case studies, resources and information visit www.learningaway.org.uk

The following are links to the case studies.

CHRIST CHURCH: <http://learningaway.org.uk/case-studies/improving-literacy-through-residential-experiences-at-christ-church/>
SOUTH HETTON: <http://learningaway.org.uk/case-studies/improving-literacy-through-residential-experiences-at-south-hetton/>
SOUTH HETTON: <http://learningaway.org.uk/case-studies/residentials-develop-young-leaders-years-2-6/>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Chris Loynes is a researcher with the University of Cumbria and an educational advisor with the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.
Photographs: Learning Away collection