

The Report  
of a review of  
The British School of Chicago  
June 2002

Fieldwork Education

## **Introduction**

The review was carried out by Martin Skelton. Martin has been a teacher and headteacher of a number of schools and is now a director of Fieldwork Education. Fieldwork works with British schools in the UK and overseas and with a large number of other international schools throughout the world. Martin has also been a Registered Inspector in the UK, which means that he has lead inspections of schools on behalf of the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED).

The main purposes of the review were to look at the quality of children's learning and the quality of teaching which contributed to that learning. Where time allowed, Martin was also asked to look at school curriculum documents, policies and anything else which might have an impact on children's learning.

In the two days he spent in the school he observed 10 lessons or parts of lessons. He met with the headmaster and with each member of staff. He had informal discussions with some parents and some of the older children. He looked at the school resources and at various school documents. He also looked at evidence of children's learning displayed around the school.

Most of his time at the school was spent in classrooms where, using the criteria developed for the inspection of schools in the UK, he made four different judgements.

First, he made a judgement about children's levels of attainment. This means the level at which most children were working as defined by the English National Curriculum. In making this judgement he was seeking to find whether children were working at levels appropriate to their age or higher or lower than those levels.

Second, he made judgements about the progress children were making. This means how much new learning (or consolidation of previous learning) was taking place within each lesson.

Third, he made judgements about the quality of teaching. This means how much teachers were actually helping children learn.

Fourth, he made judgements about children's attitudes and behaviour. This means the extent to which children were contributing towards their own learning.

## 1.1 The Background Issues

The judgements in this report – and the criteria used to form those judgements - are supported by a view about schools that has been developed over the past fifteen years as a result of research into both 'effective' and 'improving' schools. This view underpins not only the OFSTED framework for school inspection in the United Kingdom but most approaches to schooling in the western world. There are seven main elements:

### 1 Learning is more important than teaching

The core business of schools is very simple. It is to make sure that children learn - academically, socially, emotionally, physically and, in some school systems, spiritually. This is worth saying at the beginning because schools are often judged inappropriately. Good displays, nice uniforms, smart buildings, pleasant teachers, interested parents, regular consultation evenings and more *are* important but only inasmuch as they impact on children's learning. There are plenty of schools with all of those components present but they can't be called good schools because children's learning isn't good enough.

### 2 Effective learning is about added value, knowledge, skills and understanding and connections

First, learning in better schools is about 'added value'. The best schools help children move from where they are to somewhere further down the line. This is why some schools whose test scores and exam results are not as good as other schools can be properly described as 'better' schools. They have moved their children further forward than other schools that have simply relied on the attributes that their more advantaged children have brought with them.

Second, it is about developing knowledge, skills and understanding. For 'knowledge' we can think of facts, information, of 'knowing that' something is true. For 'skills' we can think of abilities, of 'knowing how' to do something. For 'understanding' we can think of slowly coming to terms with the 'big ideas' contained within subjects, disciplines and areas of learning.

Third, as those who know anything about 'brain-friendly learning' will already be aware, learning is also about making connections, of linking in what is new to us to that which we already know. Children's neural networks need to grow and grow. Learning is not about discrete units of knowledge and skills which sit isolated in children's heads.

Finally, effective learning is learning which has been 'locked' in place so that children and students can access it as easily as possible.

### 3 Judgements about effective learning are made in a variety of ways

Conventionally, tests are the most common way to judge whether learning has taken place. Tests are useful as long as we understand that different kinds of tests are needed to assess knowledge skills and understanding. Used wisely, tests can help to tell us how well children have learned over time and how well their learning compares with other children of their age

But tests, however well constructed, don't tell the whole picture. It's important, too, to watch children learn over single lessons or over a week's worth of work. In good schools, children don't just learn enough to get good test scores. They learn much more than that and, not surprisingly, get good results in the process. So it's important to judge learning over individual lessons and groups of lessons against clearly defined learning targets.

The English National Curriculum is particularly helpful in this as it provides an array of learning targets to help define what should be going on in the classroom. (For this visit I set out to make a judgement about where children were against the expectations identified by the National Curriculum *and* to make a judgement about how much learning was taking place in each lesson.)

#### 4 Effective teaching can be described

Quite simply, effective teaching is teaching which enables children to learn academically, socially, emotionally, physically and, sometimes, spiritually. This means that there isn't one perfect form or style of teaching but a number. Good teaching adapts to the children and students rather than expecting the students to adapt to the teacher. As with most things, there is more than one way to skin the cat of teaching and learning.

The UK inspection framework - 'OFSTED' in teachers' jargon - is helpful in outlining the elements that are implicit in teaching. Each of these elements can be done well or badly, but each of them counts. For OFSTED these elements are:

- The *methods and strategies* teachers use to help children learn. Classroom activities can help or hinder individual children and groups of children.
- The *expectations* of teachers. Teachers set the standards that apply in the classroom. Good teachers ask children to extend their reach, improve their knowledge skills and understanding and encourage hard work. Poor teachers don't.
- The *planning* of lessons. Good teachers come into the classroom knowing what they want children and students to learn, what they and their children are going to do, how the learning links with what has already been learned and how they are going to help students anchor their learning.
- The *assessment* of learning. Good teachers don't rely on tests. In each lesson they are continually monitoring and assessing what is happening so that they can provide the right input for each student and make sure that the next lesson builds upon what has happened. Good teachers also make notes - often informal - of the strengths and weaknesses of their children's learning.
- The *homework* children are given. Homework is only useful if it helps children learn. Good teachers set homework which either builds on what children have learned or helps them consolidate what they have learned through appropriate practice.
- The use of *time and resources*. Influencing the amount of time children and students are on task, choosing the right amount of time so that they stay motivated and interested and using the right resources from all those available all have a significant impact on the amount of learning that takes place.
- The *management of children and students*. Good teachers create classrooms where there is a sense of order, tolerance and mutual respect. They also create the conditions under which children and students can use their own initiative at appropriate moments so that they both develop responsibility and free the teacher from continually dealing with low-level issues.
- *Secure subject knowledge*. Good teachers know what they are talking about. Their knowledge, skills and understanding are significantly greater than those of the students they teach.

#### 5 The quality of teaching can be judged

The performance of all teachers in each of the elements described above exists on a continuum from very poor to excellent. In the very best lessons teachers are working at the positive end of the continuum in each of the elements. In the worst lessons, the

opposite is true. OFSTED has suggested in the past that judgements are made against a seven-point scale: excellent, very good, good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory, poor, very poor.

In carrying out reviews of schools, we interpret 'very good' to mean that the lesson is technically as good as it gets. In other words, it is very hard to suggest ways of improving what has been seen.

A 'satisfactory' lesson is one in which the children or students have moved their learning on in some way but the teaching and learning could be improved in some or all areas.

An 'unsatisfactory' lesson is, for the most part, one in which children don't learn. The teacher may have done some things well but they have haven't resulted in student learning.

(An 'excellent' lesson has one additional element above and beyond a 'very good' one - an indefinable 'wow' factor that makes the hairs on the back of the neck stand up. Something very special has happened in an excellent lesson.)

## 6 Children's and students' contribution to their own learning can be judged

A good teacher has a huge impact on the attitudes to learning, behaviour and ability to get on with classmates of all the children she teaches. A less good teacher has less of an impact. A poor teacher actually creates negative attitudes in her class in all of these areas.

But children are also responsible for their own learning and must increasingly be so the older they become. That's why children's and students' own responses to learning are also judged in the classroom - and against the same seven-point scale as teachers' own teaching and the quality of learning.

OFSTED identifies a number of aspects that affect children's contribution to their own learning. The framework says that children should:

- show interest
- sustain concentration
- behave well
- work collaboratively
- show initiative
- respect property
- be trustworthy
- be capable of personal study
- form constructive relationships
- have respect for the feelings and values of others
- work at a good pace and
- be capable of taking responsibility.

This is a fine and worthy list but we need to try to bear two things in mind when looking at children and students in classrooms. First, the evidence for these attributes differs with the age of the children we are looking at. Second, it is unusual to find such fully formed children in many schools. These qualities represent more of the end product teachers are hoping to help produce.

## 7 Consistency is important to effective learning

Good learning in a school is the result of all the factors discussed above. But one other factor is also important – the consistency with which this good practice is applied throughout the school. The very best schools have a degree of consistency that whilst not eliminating individuality amongst teachers, ensures that the best aspects of teaching are put into place in all classrooms.

The importance of documentation to a school is that it should work towards helping children receive best practice irrespective of the particular class teacher's class they are in.

### 1.2 The British School of Chicago

The British School of Chicago is a new school and my inspection took place towards the end of its first year.

The school is situated in a building previously used by a local school.

The parts of the building in use by the British school have been refurbished and there is an extensive programme of refurbishment soon to get under way to accommodate the next phase of the school's expansion next year and beyond. The classrooms are of a good size for the recommended maximum class size of twenty and the school has done a very good job so far in utilising the available space. Play space is small but the current group of mixed age children use it well. Plans have been put in place to use a nearby larger play area next year for the older children.

The number of children at the school is still small, although it is due to double in number from forty to eighty next year. Class sizes vary significantly. The smallest class had two children in it. There are significantly more children in the younger classes than in the older classes.

The numbers of children in the classes affects the quality of some of the judgements I have made, but not others. For example, the levels of attainment can be significantly affected if a few more children join each class. So it is unwise to view some of these judgements as true of the school as a whole. But the small numbers make very little difference to the quality of judgements about learning, teaching or children's attitudes.

## 2.1 Children's attainment

In the lessons I observed, all of the children in the school were working at a level which was at least appropriate to or, as in half of the lessons I observed, better than that expected of them for their age by the National Curriculum.

In the very youngest class, for example, all of the children could talk about things which interested them and were able to listen to each other and respond appropriately. Most of the children were already able to use their simple knowledge of letter sounds to read words. In their design and technology lesson they were able to think of ideas related to different buildings and to say which tools they might use to build them. In the reception class children could use their knowledge of living things in science to describe the basic conditions plants and animals need to survive. In the Year 1 and 2 class children in an art lesson were able to identify why some materials were more suited to their use than others. They could also provide helpful comments on each other's work. In a mixed physical education class of the older children they showed their growing understanding of tactics by varying how they responded in a game situation.

All of these are examples of children working at a level appropriate to the National Curriculum.

There were other examples of children working at levels which exceeded those expected of them.

In the reception class children were already able to use their improved knowledge of the relationship between letters and sounds to read words and establish meaning. These children already understood the idea of a character in stories and respond appropriately.

In a Year 1 and 2 maths lesson children could count confidently in tens and use mathematical language to explain what they were doing. They could mentally add and subtract numbers up to 20 and could formally add and subtract two digit numbers.

In a music class, some of the older children could talk about the relationship between sounds and how they help to convey the intention of the composer. They could also keep their own part going when making music with others. In a literacy lesson the same children showed how they were working considerably above national expectations. During this lesson these children were able to talk, listen and respond to each other with considerable maturity. Their vocabulary choices were often adventurous and they were clearly able to use words for effect in both their speaking and writing.

## 2.2 Children's progress

'Progress' is the most important judgement that can be made about a school. It is a better judgement of a school than 'attainment' because children's attainment can be put down to a wide range of factors including the innate ability they bring from home. Their progress, on the other hand, is directly related to how well the school is organised and to what teachers are doing in the classroom. (Also, children can have high attainment – due to their innate ability – without making much progress as a result of their schooling. A school is responsible for the progress of children of all abilities, not for those abilities themselves.)

In three-quarters of the lessons I observed children were making good progress. In the remaining lessons the children were making satisfactory progress. (Remember that 'satisfactory' means, within the language of inspection, that some progress has been made.) In other words some sort of progress was being made in all lessons and considerable progress was being made in most lessons. This is a very positive judgement about the school.

In the Nursery class, for example, children consolidated their existing knowledge of simple letter sounds as well as their knowledge of materials. In the reception class children made significant progress in their understanding of the growth stages of a plant and began to know about the differences between different kinds of beans. In another lesson, the same children learned simple rules about sentence construction and how to use a full stop.

In the Year 1 and 2 class, the children made good progress in maths when they began to see how to add two or three numbers together by looking for the easiest combinations first. The same children made satisfactory progress in an art lesson where they began the process of making and designing thumb pots.

In a Year 3 and 4 literacy class the children made excellent progress in their ability to use language for persuasive purposes. They brought various elements together of work they had done previously - such as alliteration and puns - and used them to develop advertising slogans and to think about structuring the whole advertisement. In another lesson the same children made good progress as they refined their ability to interpret a work of art and to create sounds to match images.

Almost all children make progress over longer periods of time, even in not very good schools. What these examples show is that at the British School of Chicago there are many occasions when children make progress in individual lessons too.

### **2.3 Teaching**

The majority of teaching I observed in the school was either good or very good. I also saw one excellent lesson taught.

In the excellent lesson the teaching allowed the children to make real progress in the pace of just forty-five minutes. During this literacy lesson the teacher used a range of methods and strategies to capture the children's interest. For example, instead of just telling children that they were going to 'write an advertisement' he had prepared a letter from a pen company which helped the children see the task as a 'real' one rather than just something to do in the classroom. The planning of the lesson was equally effective. A range of appropriate differentiated activities allowed children of different ages and abilities to carry out the task at an appropriate level. The teacher's expectations of the children were very high. Almost every answer that a child gave was followed by a supplementary question that challenged them to think further. Wherever possible, the teacher linked the children's ideas to work that had been done previously; in doing so, he helped them to see the importance of that work but also helped them revise it.

The teacher communicated both the importance and the excitement of the work through his own responses. He was lively, dynamic and excited by what the children were doing. His feedback helped the children refine their ideas and make real progress. This high-level assessment was also reflected in the marking of work in the children's books. He asked questions of the children to make them think - 'I have circled two capital letters. Should they be there?' and also made notes so that he could gauge the progress of children through the year - 'xxx carried on in the style of the poem and chose rhyming couplets independently.' Not only was the teaching in this lesson as technically good as possible but the heightened sense of involvement meant that the children showed a real desire to take part.

By far the majority of lessons I saw were taught in a way that was very similar to this lesson outlined above.

In the nursery class the teacher made good use of time and resources by making sure that the children had appropriate equipment for their design and technology lesson, were given sufficient time to 'finish' their models before showing them and had the opportunity at the end of the lesson to talk about them. In another lesson in the same class the teacher had effectively organised these young children into groups so that she and the learning assistant could give them maximum contact time.

In a science lesson in the reception class the teachers methods and strategies were particularly good. In focussing on the conditions plants need to grow she introduced the lesson with an appropriate story, she encouraged the children to curl up and physically grow like a bean, she used challenging language such as 'prediction' and encouraged the children to behave like scientists. On a number of occasions she was particularly successful in getting the children to talk quietly to each other about the work they were doing. With children of this age, this is much harder to do than it might seem and it says much about how the classroom has been managed throughout the year. In another lesson, this teacher used open-ended questions to challenge her children and make them think, such as 'Your giant is scary. Tell me how it is scary.'

More very good teaching was seen in the Year 1 and 2 class. In the mathematics lesson the teacher was able to combine a fast and lively pace with controlled learning. This meant that while the children were lively they were always on task. Her expectations of the children were similarly high. She began the lesson by referring the children to a very specific learning target and she discussed it with them first, making sure that they understood what it was they were supposed to be learning.

These examples of teaching were typical of most of what I saw in the school. Taken together, they suggest a number of things. First, that teachers in the school are generally focussed on children's learning. Second, that the teachers are prepared to go further than the norm to create activities and atmospheres that challenge children. Most of these lessons would have been perfectly competent with much less work on the part of the teachers. It was their extra work and sharpened focus which changed many of the lessons I saw from the competent to the good or very good. It also explains, in no small measure, why I was able to observe children making progress in individual lessons.

## **2.4 Children's attitudes and behaviour**

In almost every lesson I saw the children made their own contribution to the learning that took place. Throughout the school the children were friendly to and cooperative with each other. This was true socially during break times (where the joint play between the oldest and the youngest children was particularly noteworthy) but also in the classroom where children let each other work individually when they had to but where they were also able to work together on collaborative tasks their teachers had designed. For the most part, children showed a keen interest in their work. They were eager to learn, to offer ideas and to take part. They responded well to the open-ended questions asked by their teachers and were able to take responsibility for their own learning at levels appropriate to their age.

## **2.5 Other issues**

There were a number of other issues I was able to observe in the spaces around and in-between my two days of class visits and I offer some comments on them here.

First, the school is clearly providing children with a broad curriculum. Although mathematics and literacy rightfully take centre stage evidence on display around the school shows that children are given the opportunity to learn in a number of other subjects. Children's work in art was particularly

effective. The Year 1 and 2 children, for example, had used sponge painting, paint scraping and collage to produce a group sunflower collage and a sea-scene in the style of Van Gogh. Children throughout the school had done work on patterns and shapes that showed how they had each responded to different challenges. Children in Art Club had produced some very good work, particularly in the style of Matisse. The very oldest children in the school had used a software paint program to produce Matisse-inspired work as well. There were also some very good close observational drawings of fruit that focussed on colour and tone. But there was also evidence of history work in the form of a project on the Titanic; geography work through a study of Chicago, a wide range of writing including stories, diaries, fact sheets and haiku poems, many of which had been produced on computer.

Second, the school has achieved high levels of organisation in a relatively short space of time. This is in part a tribute to the collective work that has been undertaken by everyone since the school opened. There is a real feeling of a team at work throughout the school and one that the current staff are determined to maintain when new colleagues join them in September.

It is also indicative of the approach taken by the school's headmaster. He has seen it as important to put into place a number of important structures and systems whilst the school is small. Although these will no doubt be amended as the school grows they nevertheless form an important organisational foundation on which the school can now build.

For example, the school's current improvement plan begins with the statement that 'the focus of a good school is effective learning.' This shows how the school understands the positions which were laid out at the beginning of this report. Other policies reinforce this. A marking and presentation policy sets out basic information about how children's work should be marked. Teachers' plans are seen regularly by the headmaster. A 'target-setting policy' defines the school's recently introduced and excellent approach to setting targets for both groups of children and individuals. Targets will be set for children at the end of both Key Stage 1 (seven year-olds) and Key Stage 2 (eleven year-olds.) Annual achievement targets will be set in English, mathematics and science and short-term achievable targets were introduced into the school during the term in which my visit took place. Each of these initiatives helps to focus the school on its core business.

As the school continues to develop over the next couple of years, much of the documentation can be further refined to increase its focus on learning. By the standards of most schools at the end of the first year, the school is excellently led and organised indeed.

## **Conclusion**

This was my first visit to The British School of Chicago. In its short life it has already become a place where children are interested in and excited by their work and where all of the staff put an enormous amount of effort into making sure that children learn rather than just 'do' things. In all cases, these efforts have been successful, recognised as such by the parents to whom I spoke. The British School of Chicago is one in which the quality of teaching is very good and the quality of children's learning very high. The management and leadership within the school is also excellent and this provides much reassurance that as the school grows over the next few years that this very good beginning will be translated into solid achievement for all the children who attend.