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KYRA CASE STUDY
MONKS ABBEY PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Monks Abbey Primary School,

In January, Monks Abbey Primary school received a letter from Schools Minister, David Laws, to congratulate the school on the level of progress achieved by pupils – particularly the most disadvantaged. The school was, he said, amongst the top 250 schools nationwide in terms of the progress pupils achieved between key stage one and key stage two. The number of free school meals pupils that achieve level 4 or above is above the national average percentage figure for all pupils. This success is something that the school is determined to build upon further.

Ensuring that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are able to overcome their circumstances and access opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable to them has been central to Monks Abbey's vision for many years now. Headteacher, Vicky Johnson, is clear about what makes the greatest difference: "Good teaching matters so much to all children – and even more so to the most disadvantaged – so we have worked to make sure that every pupil in the school has access to high standards of teaching at all times."

The introduction of the pupil premium in 2011 provided the school with an opportunity to further invest in and resource their commitment to overcoming disadvantage. "We had to think very strategically about how we were going to use the funding," says Vicky. "Focusing on enhancing the learning experience for pupil premium children by catering to their individual needs was an important place to start." The school has, for example, invested in the training and deployment of teaching assistants, including using them to lead short group work and one to one sessions with pupil premium children to understand and respond to their learning needs.

"The Sutton trust toolkit doesn't rate the impact of teaching assistants very highly" says Vicky

"but we believe that much of that is down to the fact that schools, historically, have not always used their TAs to best effect. We have been very careful to ensure TAs are well prepared and have a close working relationships with teachers in both the planning and delivery of lessons. For example, teachers and teaching assistants will discuss the particular objectives of each child's learning, plan segments of lessons accordingly and decide when children should be working in small groups and when they would benefit from accessing wider classroom teaching."

Vicky explains that teachers and teaching assistants then work together to review learning outcomes and how that feeds into next steps for that child. Teaching Assistants are, therefore, – because they have such guidance from the teacher – very engaged in the wider learning objectives of each child and understand what exactly it is that they are expected to achieve within the wider learning journey.

This, Vicky says, represents a very different way of working to instances in the past when teaching assistant were assigned to pupils for many hours at a time, often disconnected from the wider classroom and without regular interaction with teachers or other pupils themselves. She explains that it has taken a shift in mindset: "I think many schools – including ourselves – have been challenged in the past about how well we deploy our teaching assistants. We have learnt a lot and that is now having a major impact on pupils' – particularly disadvantaged pupils' – outcomes"

For children who may be living in challenging circumstances, receiving emotional support when they need it is also crucial if they are to be successful learners. Monks Abbey have used some of their pupil premium funding to fund a family support worker who has developed strong relationships with families and the local community in order to understand and help overcome the challenges that disadvantaged pupils face as a barrier to their learning. The school has also funded a 'lunchtime lounge' where vulnerable children can, during the lunchtime period, benefit from a quiet and supportive environment in which to spend their time. Whilst these are whole school approaches, they are predominately used by pupil premium pupils. The impact of both of these approaches is monitored closely using attendance and behaviour data.

Raising aspiration is also a key hallmark of Monks Abbeys approach and the school has ensured that every child has the opportunity to take part in a range of extra curricula activities and trips – including visits to London and a day visiting Hull University to learn about more further education. Pupil Premium children receive subsidies so that there are no barriers to them attending these visits. Vicky says "we are determined that every child's aspirations are raised and that they take part in experiences that will stay with them throughout their whole lives and inspire them to be whatever they want to be."

Vicky is clear about the importance of schools working together to share their strategies for closing the gap. She freely admits that many of the best ideas are often found in other schools first – but adds that "the key thing is to consider how ideas and strategies that have had impact elsewhere fit into the vision for your own school and the needs of your own community. Learning from others is essential, but many of the approaches that have been adopted at Monks Abbey have been subject to long discussion, trial and reflection. Context matters hugely and what works for some schools may not work in others."

Measuring the impact of strategies and considering how they can be improved and refined is something that Monks Abbey is committed to. You can read more about Monks Abbey's approach and the data that underpins this, here: http://www.monksabbey.org.uk/downloads/Pupil_Premium_2014.pdf

Vicky Johnson and the team at Monks Abbey would be delighted to connect with other schools and share strategies for closing the gap.



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