

# Historical vignettes: 25 years of Fieldwork Education

*2009 marks the 25th anniversary of Fieldwork Education, co-founder and managing director, Martin Skelton writes about the impact of ECIS and the growth of international schools on the company during this period.*

## **Getting started**

Some things change and others stay the same. 25 years ago David Playfoot and I were younger (obviously), but we were incredibly passionate about learning, and eager to make a difference... We'd just completed five headships between us and were keen to take a new path based on our own experiences in those five schools. Our change of direction was inspired in large part by what we saw as the sometimes limited support that we had received as Heads when it came to school improvement; particularly when it came to the improvement of children's learning.

We started with a virtually clean diary, a couple of spare bedrooms and a small contract for school improvement work from Bromley Local Authority. We continued our involvement in the writing of various published schemes including the UK's then best selling primary science scheme. Though we didn't realise it at the time, this was to be our springboard into international schools.

## **Going international**

It came in 1990 from Kuwait. We were asked to support a group of international schools in some joint in-service provision - something that was very forward-thinking for its time. It was a great opportunity for us to learn more about the needs of international schools. We could immediately see the differences as well as recognize some similarities with UK national schools. One of these similarities was the need to focus more explicitly on children's learning, rather than to simply rely on good teaching, to ensure that learning was happening.

More international work followed Kuwait; enough for us to identify a distinct need - just as we'd felt as Headteachers - for realistic, practical support and for effective, purposeful leadership.

## **The impact of ECIS**

Working with that first group of schools in those early days came with a dawning awareness that, to make any serious steps into international education, we needed to be a part of ECIS and that the ECIS annual conferences were the places we had to attend. That remains very true to this day. They proved crucial for us as a shop window to show what we could do to help schools and a vital

learning environment too. They were immeasurably powerful; generating many work opportunities and teaching us many things that we needed to know.

It wasn't just the events but the people of ECIS who made a big impact on us. During his time as Executive Director, Mike Maybury was extremely encouraging of what we were doing, giving us a huge amount of critical, no-holds-barred advice and support. Dixie McKay and many others did the same in later years. I can't say enough about the tremendous support that we got and have continued to receive from ECIS and some of its key individuals.

### **International-mindedness**

Within only a few years we were working with a large number of international schools, several of which were aspiring to be 'international' throughout their whole-school approach. Most international schools, though, were still teaching a national curriculum and still reflecting a national philosophy even if their children came from many different backgrounds. As for the national schools we were working with, some were beginning to recognise that they were part of one global community but wanted support as they worked to help their children understand this. So it wasn't long before our passion for learning became coupled with a passion for developing international-mindedness, a combination which has continued to this day and which resulted in the creation of the international primary curriculum (IPC).

### **The IPC**

The IPC began with our work with Shell schools. We started supporting the Shell conferences and that led to work introducing the UK National Curriculum to their English-speaking schools, and then to the educational management of these schools. By the middle of the 1990s Shell was adopting a much more international workforce and that inspired a need for a more international curriculum. Our colleague, Graham Reeves, was given the enviable job of travelling the globe to find the best curriculum solution but was unable to find anything that fully met the learning-focused, internationally-minded, engaging and skills-based criteria that we had set. So, along with many colleagues in Shell schools and elsewhere, we began the development of the Shell Schools Primary Curriculum Project. Once word got out, many schools outside of Shell expressed an interest in what we were doing and, as a result, relatively soon after, the IPC was born and Fieldwork Education took full responsibility for its growth and development. Mike Maybury became chair of the IPC's first advisory board, a position that later passed, on Mike's retirement, to Professor Jeff Thomson of Bath University. So the link with ECIS continued to get stronger and stronger, although it goes without saying that ECIS could not, as an organisation, endorse one curriculum over another.

Once the new curriculum had been introduced into the Shell schools and word started to spread, it became obvious that the IPC was going to have an impact way beyond its initial intention. One of the most memorable events throughout our 25 year history was the first public presentation of the IPC when it became available to all schools, which took place at the ECIS conference in 2000. Just eight years on from that launch, the IPC is now being used by more than 600 schools in 51 countries around the world.

The IPC was one significant and very tangible leap for Fieldwork Education. The other was joining with British Schools of America in 2002 to form the World Class Learning Group (WCL) which resulted in the ownership and operation of a small group of schools in the United States and the Middle East - the British Schools of America and Compass Schools. These schools have helped us to keep our feet firmly on the ground, because every bit of advice we share with other schools around the world is based on our own efforts in our own schools. And what we are constantly trying to do there is to raise our game by keeping our focus on learning and to ensure that we - the children, the teachers, the administrators, the leaders and the parents - are having fun while we're doing it.

### **25 years of change**

So how have international schools changed since our early days 25 years ago? From my point of view it's threefold:

- 1) they have grown incredibly in number;
- 2) for many, their embodiment of the word 'international' has become much deeper and more inter-cultural; and
- 3) many international schools have become much more serious; much more focused about learning.

We're also seeing an increasing number of good quality educators being attracted to international schools. The question is: are these educators the cause of the increased focus on learning, or is the learning focus that the international schools are taking attracting an increasing number of high quality teachers? Whatever it is, many international schools are now developing a reputation for the quality of the learning and the learning-focused management and leadership they are now providing.

One thing that has changed beyond comparison in the past 25 years of Fieldwork Education, has been communication technology. In the 1980s our contact with schools around the globe was via letter, telephone and fax - with good and bad results. Today communication options are far wider and far more sophisticated. Yes, the ease of communication is better than 25 years ago but has the *quality* of communication improved? In our opinion, nothing compares with

being face-to-face, especially when you're working together on such a complex issue as learning and many schools agree, evidenced in the continued increase in long-term contracts we have with schools where most of our time is spent working *in situ* with them.

It has been through this close dialogue with the schools we work with that, over the years, we have witnessed more and more of them facing up to the challenges of developing great learning, great teaching and great fun. Our response to these aspiring schools has been to support their learning in four distinct ways: through our school management services, through our curriculum, through professional development including the international leadership and management program, and through evaluation and assessment including the looking for learning toolkit and our new assessment for learning toolkit. The one thing all these tools have at their core is learning and the message this says - which I believe is the crucial message for every school - is link everything you do to learning. 'Less is more' couldn't be more true to this aim. What we're trying to do in our own schools and what we're suggesting to the schools we manage and advise is, keep things simple; have fewer initiatives and more purpose. Make your initiative that of improving learning and instead of doing a dozen different things in a bid for improvement, focus on that one initiative in a dozen different strands; through curriculum, through assessment, through leading, and so on. What we see this doing, from our own experiences, is that it takes the emphasis away from the minutiae of managing a school and places it firmly on raising the learning game in a way that remains constant, encompasses the entire school community, and allows everyone to have fun while they're doing it.

### **And what of the future?**

What do I predict for the next 25 years? I think learning will become the real core of education. It will become the heart of good schools and, as a result it will change the way schools are built, are managed and are led. It's the focus we're seeing and encouraging in many of the schools we manage and advise. It is a focus we're trying to achieve ourselves within our own schools.

My hopes? That the development of international-mindedness becomes the bedrock for a more peaceful and interdependent world. It will of course not ensure a peaceful world, but I believe it can be the foundation for one. I also hope that we, as educators, own up to our responsibility for preparing children for the future, not the past. And I hope that as schools we learn to manage effectively and function dynamically becoming the vibrant, transforming, stimulating places for our children to learn, wherever we may be in the world.

***Martin Skelton** was founding director of the international primary curriculum (IPC). Through Fieldwork Education he directs and provides consultancy and training to schools in issues of international education, including international-mindedness, learning and the development of understanding. In recent years he has been involved in brain research and its implications for classroom practice. For more information about Fieldwork Education go to: [www.fieldworkeducation.co.uk](http://www.fieldworkeducation.co.uk)*