It’s not just the children who learn at our school

ALISON PEACOCK

OUR MOST recent full Ofsted inspection took place in May 2013, during Sat’s week. At the end of the first day, having visited all the classrooms, the lead inspector remarked on the irresistible “sparkle” quality of our Year 1 teacher. She reflected that she had enjoyed the lesson so much, she had been reluctant to leave. Of course, as headteacher, I took great pride in hearing that my teaching colleagues had impressed Ofsted.

In the case of this teacher, there was additional pleasure, as during my headship Sarah had transferred from a role in the kitchen to being a teaching assistant studying for a degree and subsequently trained as a teacher as part of our teaching school.

Sarah’s journey from mature student to becoming an inspirational teacher offering a wonderful learning experience stemmed from an educational culture of opportunity that extends beyond the children to all members of our staff team.

Our school is an example of the new trend of “growing your own”. Five of our seven classes are led by teachers who trained in our school in partnership with the University of Hertfordshire. Three senior staff have master’s degrees, one more is studying for her master’s and another is participating in the national primary maths mastery qualification. Most recently, I was fortunate to be awarded a visiting professorship, following the publication of my research into assessment through “learning without limits”.

The academic strength and pedagogic expertise of our staff team is the result of a leadership policy of nurturing and supporting professional learning. With the backing of the governing body, over the past decade we have chosen to fully fund degree-level and master’s-level study for any colleagues keen to commit the time and energy to improving their knowledge about education.

At no point have we predetermined teachers’ areas of study to align with whole-school development priorities. On some occasions, this has occurred naturally, but we have chosen to value the process of professional learning in and of itself. In addition, we have provided free tuition after school for support staff, parents and former pupils wishing to gain GCSE maths, English or science.

Building a culture of professional learning has given us the confidence to plan a curriculum, teach and assess in a manner that is informed by evidence, and it consequently enables inclusive pedagogy with high levels of achievement and attainment.

Scholarly teachers and support staff, inspired to seek further qualifications, provide a positive example for our pupils. Staff know they are valued and retention is high.

Prior to taking up headship, I visited...
British Columbia as part of a British Council study tour. During that trip I was impressed by the culture of research and enquiry that I encountered.

Teachers gathered each week to read and discuss research and to debate how it could relate to dilemmas or opportunities in their school. These meetings took place after school, and discussions were often over a meal.

I was impressed by these learning communities, and throughout my headship, I have tried my best to build a similar culture of professional opportunity.

I now have the privilege of preparing to take up the role of chief executive of the new Chartered College of Teaching. Although I shall be sad to leave headship, the prospect of working in partnership across our profession to build research-inspired practice in early years settings, schools and colleges feels like a hugely worthwhile step to take.

Dame Alison Peacock, headteacher of the Wroxham School in Hertfordshire, is CEO designate of the new Chartered College of Teaching. Contact her for further details by emailing CEO@CharteredCollegeOfTeaching.ac.uk