One of A4LE UK’s executive directors, Terry White, recently visited a school in South London that has proved that occupying an old Victorian Board School is no barrier to creating fantastically creative and supportive spaces in which large groups of students gather together to learn. The school was granted Teaching School Status by the National College in 2014. Here he explains what he saw there and details what he feels was important in making their vision a reality.
We believe children can consistently surprise us… but only if we let them,” explained deputy Head Teacher, Karen Dugan. West Thornton is a primary school rated by OFSTED as ‘outstanding’ that has been on an evolutionary journey for many years: it has seen the impact of promoting independent and pupil-led learning in the school and of promoting this as an alternative to more traditional models. The school, as a learning community, believes in offering learners an environment in which they can direct and control their own learning.
Vision

“We are a learning community which creates chances for dreamers, idea-makers and innovators to connect, thrive and outperform,” boosts their website confidently, before continuing, “we empower our children to use their skills as divergent thinkers, responsible role models and leaders, to carve out their own futures and become extraordinary citizens.” There’s no denying that West Thornton has ensured that this vision has become a reality and that the vision is made explicit and translated into all aspects of the life and work of the school, for pupils, staff, parents, carers and the wider community.
Learning outcomes shared
In achieving their learning outcomes (and in order to achieve them), pupils are fully engaged in their own learning and develop the skills and personal qualities that they will need in an ever changing world. Head Teacher Di Pumphrey makes this explicit, saying, “If you look at the skills our children need, it’s collaboration, teamwork, independent learning, time management, rising to the challenge – it’s all here; that’s what they all do every day.” It was very clear to Di and the leadership team that the pedagogy which would best enable this learning to happen, and would promote successful, self-motivated, life-long learners, would not be facilitated in their existing, Victorian classrooms.

Open learning spaces
So a new design, with more open, dynamic learning spaces, was developed, to enable year groups of pupils to work together with a team of staff. A great deal of thought and evidence-based planning went into the design of the open learning spaces: it

More opportunities
More time to talk about learning
More helpful comments on marking
Less directing
More choice
More responsibility
More collaboration
More access to the best resources, including ICT.
was important to ensure that more independent learning, choice, self-responsibility and collaborative activity, could be developed. Di expressed one element of this as “we haven’t abandoned whole class teaching; we just can’t think of many situations where that is the best way to learn.” The first Year Four learning space was created by knocking down the walls of the three classrooms, establishing a mezzanine floor, creating space for tiered seating and providing spaces for a range of group and individual work areas. The design and development of the Year Four space was so successful that similar spaces for Years Five and Six have been established. The interior design of all these learning spaces is creative and imaginative, reflecting the strong ethos of striving for success, individual responsibility and continuous self-improvement.
It's not how good you are,
It's how good you want to be
Organisation of learning
The teachers and support staff now work as a team with 90 pupils in the Learning Spaces. The pedagogy, desired learning outcomes and pupil experiences, have been central to the design of the spaces: small group work can be seen taking place alongside independent work, and pupils carrying out their own investigations and research – all are working on achieving their own learning objectives. Pupils can be seen making choices as to where and how to learn within the learning space as well as in selecting appropriate resources for their learning. Those who are challenged are fully supported by staff in small groups or as individuals, in the most appropriate places, suited to their learning at that time. As an example, children who are struggling can choose to go to the “pit” as a physical representation of some of the challenges for individuals in the learning process. Di describes spaces as “designed to make the children work harder than the adults. The teachers plan the children’s objectives for the week. You can’t predict how children will learn; it’s not linear. We constantly review where we are so we can push children who are flying along and help those who are stuck.”
Showcase – School designs

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**Learning journey for teachers**

“Teachers are hardwired to be at the front of the class,” acknowledged Di, “but you can’t do that when there is no ‘front’. Removing this space forces you to change your behaviour: it’s about the adult being supportive, not the font of knowledge. Everyone is learning in this space and that makes it okay to not know; ‘how do we find out?’ is where the learning happens.”

It was evident in talking with all staff that the collaborative approach to learning and that the design of the new spaces had facilitated both improved the morale of staff and the quality of the learning outcomes that they were achieving with the pupils. Teachers felt liberated from being alone in one classroom to working within a learning team and were now able to fully share ideas and best practice real time on a day-to-day basis.

And there was a strong feeling of both individual and collective responsibility for learning but more than that a profound sense of stewardship for all of the learners and the learning environment in which the team were working. The learning space becomes a learning community in itself which is self-supporting and can organize and plan according to the learning needs of pupils. Di could not remember the last time that supply staff were booked for a day’s cover!

**Pupils, parents and the community**

The vision for learning at West Thornton is to be seen in the day-to-day learning experiences of the pupils and staff. Standards and academic achievement matter to the school and are met for the pupils. The local learning needs of pupils and families are equally important and are addressed with a strong emphasis on developing confident, purposeful, enquiring and resilient learners. The vision has become systemic and pupils can be seen using “their skills as divergent thinkers, responsible role models and leaders carving out their futures” with staff “working with them, not doing to them”.

Learning is made personal and pupils are offered choice on where and how to learn within the framework and learning goals that they need to achieve. The design and use of the learning tower, the use of the maker space, the choice of moving into a created group work space or creating a more impromptu working space adjacent to the main learning area can be seen throughout the school. The use of technology to support the learning is a key part of the learning choices that pupils make.

The school has a calm and purposeful atmosphere and pupils are keen to share their work and learning experiences with all adults. Pupils are
What can you find out about Hampton Court?
engaged and involved in reviewing their work and writing and sharing their reports as part of the process of assessment. There is strong and supportive parental feedback too, describing how their children are so motivated to learn that they get home and simply carry on. This environment blurs the boundaries between school and home because the learning has become engaging and relevant to the pupil, so why would that enquiry stop?

The vision for learning at West Thornton is made a reality because the children see learning as exciting, a worthwhile activity, and constrained neither by time nor location. The school has created a motivational and inspirational environment for learning. The explicit visual statements to support learning and the use of artefacts and objects to stimulate and inspire enquiry can be seen throughout the school. This approach reminds me of similar effective practice in other schools around the world but especially so in Finland where the importance of creativity and a vibrant, relevant and motivational space to learn is central to the interior design of learning spaces. Mindful of the words of Karen, I am sure that the pupils of West Thornton will continue to "surprise us" and I look forward to returning again soon.

All of West Thornton’s designs were specified in house by Di and her senior leadership team.

Terry will be featuring and reporting on Schools Finland in our next edition of Learning Spaces magazine.