



**Equity Case Studies**

# **Ilfracombe Junior School: Connecting Curriculum to Place**

## Ilfracombe Junior School: Connecting Curriculum to Place

### Building belonging, identity and pride through local community



#### At a glance

**Phase:** Primary (7–11)

**Context:** Coastal Church of England junior school in Ilfracombe, North Devon, 371 pupils

**Equity focus:** Strengthening pupils' sense of belonging, identity and aspiration through a place-based curriculum

**Key strategy:** Embedding local history and community partnerships into the taught curriculum

**Who led it:** Teaching, Learning and Curriculum Lead, supported by the History Lead and Headteacher

**What changed:** Stronger pupil voice, deeper connection to place, increased pride in local identity



#### The challenge we were trying to solve

Ilfracombe Junior School serves a community experiencing deep and persistent disadvantage. Around 34 per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals, 35 per cent receive SEND support, and 7 per cent have an Education, Health and Care Plan. A significant number of families are subject to Child Protection or Child in Need plans.

On entry to Year 3, many pupils arrive with low starting points. Average Star Reader standardised scores are below national expectations, with around one third of pupils scoring below 84. Similar patterns are evident in maths. Nearly half of Year 3 pupils require targeted phonics intervention.

The wider community context compounds these challenges. Compared with other parts of Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, Ilfracombe has the lowest life expectancy, high levels of household deprivation, long-term unemployment, insecure housing and child poverty. Seasonal employment and limited transport links restrict access to wider opportunities.

For some pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, this has led to a fragile sense of belonging. A number of families live in temporary accommodation, including families placed in the area from elsewhere, contributing to instability and weak attachment to place.

Leaders were concerned that pupils were absorbing a narrative that opportunity exists “somewhere else”, rather than seeing value, possibility and pride in their own town.



#### What we did

The school set out to reframe Ilfracombe as an asset, not a deficit, by embedding the town's history, culture and global connections into the curriculum.

As part of the school's history curriculum, leaders developed a unit focused on the Ilfracombe railway, a pivotal feature of the town's Victorian growth, trade and connection to the wider world. The railway was chosen deliberately: it offered a concrete way to explore how Ilfracombe had once been a place of opportunity, innovation and connection.

The unit consisted of:

- Six taught history sessions, embedded within the school's trivium history curriculum
- A visit to the local museum, where volunteers provided an immersive experience
- Visits and assemblies led by community members, including people with family links to the railway
- Contributions from Telling Our Stories/Finding Our Roots (TOS/FOR), who supported research, timelines and storytelling

The work culminated in a final outcome designed to help pupils articulate not just what the railway was, but why it mattered to the people of Ilfracombe.

## Why this mattered for equity

For pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, curriculum content that feels distant or abstract can reinforce disengagement. This project took a different approach: it treated place-based knowledge as a source of dignity, identity and motivation.

By rooting learning in pupils' own town, the school aimed to:

- Strengthen pupils' sense of belonging
- Counter deficit narratives about Ilfracombe
- Help pupils see their community as shaped by history, agency and global connections
- Equity here was not about remediation alone, but about recognition and value

## What made it work

A clear moral purpose. The work was explicitly linked to the school's commitment to inclusion and equity, informed by the book *Equity in Education* and wider research.

Strong community partnerships. Collaboration with TOS/FOR, the local museum and community volunteers transformed what would otherwise have been a textbook unit into a lived experience.

Curriculum leadership. The History Lead took responsibility for sequencing learning, sourcing materials and coordinating partners, ensuring coherence rather than add-ons.

Willingness to adapt. After the first year, leaders recognised that pupils could recall facts but struggled to explain impact. The final outcome was redesigned to foreground why the railway mattered to local people.

## Barriers and challenges

Limited online research material about the Ilfracombe railway

Difficulty identifying people with first-hand or inherited knowledge, given the railway closed over 50 years ago

Time needed to build effective external partnerships

These challenges were addressed gradually through relationship-building with TOS/FOR and local volunteers.

## What changed

Staff observed that pupils spoke more confidently about Ilfracombe, its history and its place in the wider world – not only in history lessons, but across the curriculum.

Pupils demonstrated greater pride in their town and greater willingness to talk about their community positively. This was particularly noticeable among pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds who had previously expressed ambivalence or negativity about where they lived.

## How impact was measured

Pupil voice, capturing changes in how pupils described Ilfracombe and their relationship to it.

Pupil outcomes, including differentiated final products demonstrating depth of understanding.

Feedback from TOS/FOR, triangulating school observations with external perspectives.

## Project sustainability

The project was initially funded through National Lottery funding via TOS/FOR. Ongoing sustainability is supported through:

PTFA fundraising

Allocation from the school's curriculum budget

## What we'd do differently/advice to others

Start with a local story that genuinely matters to the community.

Expect to revise outcomes once pupils' understanding deepens.

Invest time in partnerships – they are central, not peripheral.

Treat place-based curriculum as an equity strategy, not enrichment.