

Creating a professional learning community through thinking skills

National Teacher Research Panel
engaging teacher expertise



This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2006, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research. All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

Aim of the project

The aim of the study was to examine the development and impact of teaching strategies and techniques that have been used within the Geography Department at All Saints High School since September 2003.

Dimensions of the study

All Saints Catholic High School is a mixed 11 – 18, nine form entry, Catholic comprehensive school situated in Kirkby on the outskirts of Liverpool, Merseyside. It is an improving school (54% A* - C) in an economically and socially challenging area of the country. All the research took place in the Geography department, which consists of 4 full time Geographers and a Humanities teacher responsible for delivering History and Geography to SEN pupils. The research focused mainly on the impact that the introduction of thinking skills had on all KS3 pupils who receive 2 lessons of Geography per week. Pupils are taught in mixed ability classes in Year 7 and set by ability in Year 8 and Year 9.

Summary of main findings

Current Situation

- This study is still in progress. It has a projected completion date of April 2006.
- It is hoped that the findings from this study will justify taking the research to the next stage to examine pupils' thoughts about the use of thinking skills learning techniques and strategies.

Findings from the study to date show that staff:

- regularly used thinking skills activities to deliver the aims and objectives of their lessons;
- were more focused on facilitating learning;
- regularly used a variety of kinaesthetic and visual activities in their classrooms;
- created a range of resources to effectively deliver a three-part lesson;
- started to focus on teaching literacy skills through Geography;
- created a secure learning environment for pupils;
- identified a direct impact of the strategies on their KS4 teaching; and
- enjoyed working in a department that was centred round teaching and learning.

Background and context

In September 2003 the Geography department at All Saints was in a unique situation due to a variety of circumstances: the academic year began with two NQTs; a History teacher was brought in to teach Geography and there was also a new Head of Department who had only been teaching for four

years. Added into the equation was a total lack of any schemes of work or up-to-date resources. However, the department did benefit from a very experienced and dedicated local authority foundation consultant.

This situation provided an ideal opportunity to change the historic structure and organisation of the department, and so we began with an audit of the department's resources, teachers' skills and what was or was not already being facilitated in terms of the expectations of the National Curriculum, Assessment for Learning Strategy and Foundation Strategy.

The audit established a distinct lack of teachers' knowledge of thinking skills or the skills to deliver them in the classroom. There was little continuity across the department was also identified due to a lack of schemes of work at all Key Stages. There were also too few resources other than recently purchased Geography textbooks and teachers' books.

Teaching processes and strategies

Initially with guidance from the Foundation Consultant, the Head of Department wrote schemes of work that related to the Geog. series of books through geography. The schemes of work focused on the aims and objectives for each lesson, and the geographical knowledge, skills and understanding required by the National Curriculum. These schemes of work were written a half-term in advance and immediately established a basis of continuity in the department through shared objective-led teaching.

Once a shared set of objectives had been established and was being used by teachers on a daily basis, the Foundation Consultant organised a twilight training session on starters and plenary debriefing sessions, which was attended by all staff in the department. This session gave staff the opportunity to take part in a variety of activities, and they received a booklet of suggested activities. Staff were then tasked with including a starter activity in every lesson they taught and recording it, so it could be included in the revised schemes of work at the end of the year. Immediately staff began to share resources and ideas both formally, through department meetings and informally, on a daily basis.

The organisation and structure of department meetings then changed, and became a forum for sharing ideas and good practice, and discussing teaching and learning. It was at these meetings that it became clear that all staff wanted to work in a department which was flexible in its approaches to teaching geographical knowledge, skills and understanding, as well as in one which provided pupils with an opportunity to express what they had learned.

At this point the Foundation Consultant began to work with the two NQTs on how to teach using thinking skills activities. This was achieved through team teaching with a particular class over a period of a half term. The staff then shared what they had learned with the more experienced staff in the department, again on a formal and informal basis. At the same time, the Foundation Consultant used available funding to purchase 'Thinking Through Geography' and 'More Thinking Through Geography' for all staff in the department so that they could begin to read about thinking skills for themselves, and try some of the ideas in the books as and when appropriate. As a result, learning became more dynamic and provided pupils with an opportunity to review. It also empowered teachers to plan for pupil improvement.

At the start of the following academic year (September 2004), a collective decision at a staff meeting was made to abandon assessing pupils' ability to retain geographical information and to start to determine pupils' level based on a specific thinking skills activity during each unit of work. This was implemented throughout Key Stage 3 by the head of department using thinking skills resources already available in books and on the internet. A formal review process was also implemented to coincide with these changes to build on what we had learnt during the first year of change.

Staff were also tasked with including a plenary activity in all their lessons and recording the activity for use in revised schemes of work. Possible starter activities were also clearly identified in schemes of work. Throughout the 2004-2005 academic year, staff continued to try different thinking skills activities with their classes, and shared their success and failures on a formal and informal basis as and when they felt able and comfortable to do so.

At the beginning of the 2005 – 2006 academic year the Head of Department began to create 'must/should/could' prompt sheets for each thinking skills activity used to assess pupil attainment so that pupils would know exactly what was expected of them if they were to achieve their predicted level of attainment or beyond. Plenary activities and thinking skills activities that can be used as means of achieving the lesson objectives have also been included in schemes of work where appropriate.

Emerging patterns

The research found that staff:

- regularly used thinking skills activities to deliver the aims and objectives of their lessons, as their knowledge and experience of delivering these activities increased;
- were more focused on facilitating learning rather than delivering information;
- regularly used a variety of kinaesthetic and visual activities in their classrooms;
- created a range of resources to effectively deliver a three-part lesson;
- started to focus on teaching literacy skills through Geography in order to improve pupils ability to communicate their geographical findings;
- identified continuity across the department in terms of objective-led learning, assessment, pupil expectation and staff and pupil development;
- were able to implement the rewards and sanctions programme more effectively and efficiently, which, along with improved teaching strategies, created a secure learning environment for pupils;
- identified a direct impact on their KS4 teaching, as their new skills were easily transferable. It also became necessary to appoint a KS4 coordinator in order to establish continuity and skills based learning at KS4; and
- enjoyed working in a department that was centred round teaching and learning.

Although the primary focus of this research was to establish the impact of thinking skills on staff in the department rather than the pupils, analysis of teacher narratives has shown a clear effect on impact on pupils too.

Research methods

Data were collected from two main sources. I analysed Departmental Administration records including:

- department meeting minutes;
- schemes of work;
- personal resource banks; and
- departmental review and target setting documents.

Additional teacher data were collected through:

- reflective narrative; and
- researcher led interviews.

The departmental administration records were an important source of documentary evidence as they were a chronological record of the changes that had happened. They were also factual and did not have an emotional charge to them.

The reflective narrative was important because it gave staff in the department time to reflect and express their feelings as well as their opinion. The question asked was, 'Can you describe the changes that have been influential in the way we teach and facilitate learning in the Geography department at the beginning of the change, at the present time and in terms of your plans for the future?' Staff were asked

to respond under the headings 'the beginning', 'where we are now', and 'the future'.

The headings were especially useful during the analysis phase of the research as they made it easier to analyse the data in chronological order and identify similarities and differences between responses.

The research to inform future developments is ongoing and further interviews with staff are planned for the beginning of March 2006.

Conclusion

Staff have created a department that is centred round teaching and learning; a place where staff and pupils feel secure and therefore are able to face learning challenges with confidence. By making sure that all staff worked with the Foundation Consultant, staff had ownership and control of their own professional development. Alongside a change in the structure and organisation of the department and department meetings, an environment was created that fostered the sharing of good practice and resources on a formal and informal basis.

Suggestions for further reading

Cordingley, P., Bell, M., Rundell, B., Evans, D. (2003) *The impact of collaborative continuing professional development on classroom teaching and learning*. CUREE 2003.

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Leat, David (1998) *Thinking through Geography*. Cambridge.

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MacBeath, J., Demetriou, H., Rudduck, J. and Myers, K. (2003) *Consulting pupils. A toolkit for teachers*. Pearson Publishing.

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