



Moving towards a more innovative and creative curriculum

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Aims of the project

- To develop a more creative curriculum in foundation subjects and Science across Key Stage 1 and 2
- To create a more personalised curriculum incorporating key life skills that could transfer into life long learning skills
- To improve the use of the local area and increase out of classroom learning experiences

Dimensions of the study

The year-long study took place in a large two-form entry multiracial primary school for children aged 3-11, situated in a deprived area of Birmingham. Attainment on entry to the Nursery is low when matched to national expectation. The majority of children in the school are white, British, whilst the key minority ethnic groups are of Black, Indian, Black British and dual heritage. More pupils are eligible for free school meals than is usually found, and more have learning difficulties with statements of special educational needs. The school is part of an Education Action Zone.

Initially, the teachers of two mixed-ability Year 3 classes trialled a new approach to curriculum planning. The new approach involved creating 'topic' lessons during the afternoon which spanned the foundation subjects, science and key learning skills. Each topic began with an out-of-classroom visit. At the end of the trial period, the whole school took on the new approach.

Summary of main findings

Teacher, parent and pupil feedback about the new cross-curricular 'topic' approach suggested:

- the curriculum had become more creative and exciting;
- pupils were more motivated and interested in learning, and remembered what they had learned;
- pupils were more involved in their learning and took ownership of it; and
- enhanced parental involvement in their children's learning.

Background and context

Teachers in the school have traditionally followed adapted Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) medium-term planning, but we had found that this did not meet the ever-changing needs of the children in the school. Also, QCA units of work assumed that children had received many essential life experiences which, we felt, were missing from our children's lives. We felt too that our adapted planning was not taking enough account of what the children knew already and what they would like to find out. We also felt that the local area and local resources were under used as were out of classroom learning experiences. In addition, we were keen to address the distinct lack of motivation and enjoyment in foundation subjects and Science lessons we had noticed. At the same time, we were keen to find a way of teaching these subjects more frequently than the weekly lessons that were currently timetabled.

Teaching processes and strategies

We began by blocking foundation subjects and science together into short two-to three-week blocks that would be taught in the afternoons as topics. English and Mathematics continued to be taught daily in the morning sessions. The National Curriculum programmes of study were used as our starting point for planning these lessons.

We then started to take on a different approach to out of classroom visits. Rather than plan for a visit towards the end of a topic to consolidate the learning that had taken place, we decided we would plan an 'immersion' visit at the very beginning of a topic. So, for example, if the new topic were Design and Technology – sculpture, for example, we would plan to visit the local art gallery at the very beginning of the topic to enable the children to experience a range of sculptures using different media. Then, following the visit, we would ask the children what they already knew about sculptures and what *they* would like to find out. This approach gave children opportunities to see first hand examples of what their topic was all about. This, in turn, enabled the pupils to reflect on their visit experience, ask questions and decide on what they wanted to find out about even more. The change in approach meant the pupils became much more involved in their learning, as this teacher explained:

"I involve the children much more at every level of topic teaching – so they feel ownership, they are in control. The children have surprised me with some of their ideas and often have interesting ideas they want to investigate. It's great going on a learning journey together, not knowing initially exactly what direction the topic is going to take!"
(Year Three Teacher)

At the same time, the teachers ensured that the national curriculum programmes of study for that particular topic were covered. The teachers took on more of a role of facilitator to enable the children to acquire the learning. Simultaneously, we would highlight two or three key learning skills that the children needed to improve on during the topic. These key skills were key life learning skills, such as:

- communication skills
- application of Mathematics
- Information Technology
- working with others
- improving own learning and performance
- problem-solving

Therefore, each topic focused not only on acquiring new learning, but on improving the children's essential key life skills, which would enable them to acquire knowledge independently. We tried hard in each topic to include the local area where the children lived which immediately engaged the children, as it was relevant to them and their life experiences.

We felt it important to hold a parent workshop to share the new way we were teaching the children. This took place during the autumn term.

The two Year 3 teachers who initially trialled the new approach reported on what they were doing to whole staff, the senior management team and governors through regular staff meetings. In view of their positive experience, it was decided the whole school would adopt the new approach.

The findings

Staff, parents and pupils commented on a number of changes they noticed arising from the new 'topic' approach. They reported that the children:

- seemed more excited about their learning;
- were talking about their learning more at home; and
- were starting to bring in resources from home to support their learning.

They commented, for example,

"My children are soaking up their learning like a sponge!"
(Year Five Teacher)

"I love going home and researching about my topic learning. Topic has made me more interested in learning about Geography and stuff like that. Before, when we had Geography once a week I always forgot what we were learning about, but now we do it every afternoon. I'm more excited and never forget what our topic learning is about! I think I behave better too!"
(Year Six pupil)

"Adam has never talked very much about his learning at home, but now he tells me about lots of different things and as soon as he gets home he is searching for more information or resources to take into school the next day!"
(Parent)

Most of the teachers (9 out of 10) reported on the excitement *they* had started to feel about both teaching the new curriculum and the children's improved attitude to learning. They commented, for example:



"Using the topic approach has brought my teaching alive and I'm teaching in a more creative and exciting way again! I feel just as excited about my teaching as the children do about their learning now!"
(Year Two Teacher)

"The children's enthusiasm has increased my own enthusiasm about teaching these subject areas. The approach has also made me more aware of what the children already know."
(Newly Qualified Teacher, Year One)

All the teachers felt that blocking lessons together helped the children learn more about the foundation subjects and that the new topic approach enabled the children to take ownership of their learning. Most (8 out of 10) felt that topics made learning more relevant to the children. All the teachers felt that the quality of the children's questioning had improved and just over half (6 out of 10) felt that both the standard and quantity of the children's written work did had improved.

Feedback from senior management was positive too:

"I'm noticing that children's work in Science is really improving and our recent one day Ofsted inspection focusing on Science was very positive and they liked what we were trying to do with our curriculum."

(Head teacher)

Although the approach was successful, staff also identified several areas that they felt they needed to develop:

- Several (3 out of 10) felt they needed to develop their own subject knowledge
- Many (8 out of 10) reported that they found it difficult to raise awareness of Key Skills with their class along with other important ongoing curricular targets
- Others (3 out of 10) expressed concerns about how they could be sure they had covered a topic adequately and one expressed concern about assessment

Research methods

Reflections, insights and ideas recorded in a diary were used to guide the development of semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were then carried out with teaching staff from Year One to Year Six. Self-completion questionnaires were distributed to 10 teachers and 60 children from Years One to Six

to find out about their views of the topic approach to learning. The questionnaire was piloted to ensure that the questions asked were unambiguous, clear and simple.

Conclusion

- This project has challenged our thinking and practice. As a result of this study we have planned the following:
- To meet with Senior Management Team and propose that we concentrate on one key skill per half term for the whole school, to make it more manageable for staff to incorporate and share with their class
- To provide each class teacher with a 'topic folder' that will include blank planning sheets, a whole school overview of what topics each year group are covering, copies of the national curriculum broken into subject areas for teachers to highlight as they cover them, copies of key skills, and information on local visits to support the different topic areas
- To plan time to release staff out of the classroom in order to support them further with key skills implementation
- To continue with school based research by asking for regular feedback from both teachers and pupils, scrutinize books and monitoring of classroom environments
- To continue monitoring pupil progress, in particular, the exploratory cohort who will be taking Key Stage 2 national tests in May 2010

Suggestions for further reading

QCA Futures, Promoting Innovation, www.qca.org.uk/qca

Every Child Matters, Change for children, www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/

Excellence and enjoyment: A strategy for primary schools, www.standards.dfes.gov.uk

Lifting the lid on a creative curriculum, National College for School Leadership. www.ncsl.org.uk

Brighter Futures www.bgfl.org

Key skills for an excellent and enjoyable curriculum. Chris Quigley. www.focus-education.co.uk



Author's contact details

Should you wish to find out more about how we are developing a more creative curriculum in our school, please do not hesitate to contact:

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This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2008, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research.

All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

This publication has been supported by the DCSF Gender Agenda.

To find out more please email: research.summaries@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk