



Engaging primary school learners through a creative curriculum

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Aims of the project

At Wheatfield we wanted to tackle the underachievement of our more able children by reorganising our curriculum to motivate all learners and create opportunities for more challenge.

Dimensions of the study

Wheatfield Primary School is a relatively new school of 420 pupils in a new town community which has little to offer young people. Many of our parents are educated to degree level and a high proportion are white collar workers. One of our six new themes, 'Sharing the Planet' was a completely fresh idea to all staff, so we set about creating a definitive set of aims for this strand, and ways of measuring its impact upon the children's learning and attitudes. A trial of materials took place with the Year 2 children during the spring, with greater investigations taking place with the learners in Year 1, 4 and 5 during the summer term. All year groups have parallel classes, within each of which we identified five children who were not on track to make their target grades (L3 in Year 2 and L5 in Year 6).

Summary of main findings

We discovered that giving our learners greater choice:

- raised children's motivation levels, in particular for home learning;
- helped children become more engaged with their learning in lessons; and
- enhanced teachers' motivation by encouraging them to get to grips with completely new 'topics'.

Background and context

As the school has grown, our curriculum has developed. The literacy and numeracy strategies arrived as we opened – and were welcomed – closely followed by QCA's schemes of work. We adapted all the new curriculum material to meet the needs of both

teaching staff (relatively inexperienced) and learners and adopted a thematic approach to the curriculum. However, little seemed to change and the curriculum became something which was delivered to learners rather than something with which learners could fully engage. Teaching was good, but it was a struggle to tweak the learning to improve standards further.

Much of the childrens' learning was organised into themes which were repeated each year, and staff had worked hard on their own learning about the ways in which children learn, but we wanted to determine the impact of introducing a more structured creativity programme – *Building Learning Power*. Another factor was that our children, generally, were perceived by us to be very materialistic and self-centred. To help broaden their horizons we chose as the context for the new programme learning about the world and our place within it; we placed particular emphasis on environmental awareness from a local to global scale.

Involvement in a variety of LA projects allowed staff to fully engage with learning themselves. This provided the Deputy Head and our AST a basis to build on in order to inject a fresher, more creative approach into the curriculum which would engage all learners and particularly challenge our faster learners.

Teaching processes and strategies

The new curriculum

The new curriculum is organised into six different strands – Who we are, Living in the Past, Sharing the Planet, The World Around Us, Keeping Fit and Healthy, and How the World Works. Each year group has its allocated aspects of the National Curriculum Programmes of Study, which the teachers use to design creative learning experiences, which offer pupils a range of different learning opportunities. For example Year 4's project on the 'Iron Woman' culminated in a full scale fashion show of outfits made from recycled materials; Year 3 made links with an inner city Bristol school and held their own version of the St Paul's Carnival; the use of home learning was developed into open ended projects. We decided to use rubrics (a rubric is a scoring guide which describes the qualities to be assessed in pupils' work or performances). The rubrics contained outcomes and as children met the various criteria they built up marks. Using PowerPoint, a poster and a model, offered children greater choice about how to show their learning.

Two INSET days were dedicated to discussing what each theme might look like in each year group and how to incorporate strategies from Building Learning Power into our themes. For the purposes of this project, we chose the 'Sharing the Planet' theme. We aimed to develop more 'worldly wise' attitudes among the pupils and to encourage a less materialistic view of fundraising to help those less fortunate than themselves. At the same time, we wanted to motivate and challenge our learners, especially those more able children who were becoming disengaged.

The strategy

We decided to work together to produce a clear set of aims, which provided more detail for teachers to plan with. Agreeing to a common set of aims was essential, with time for teachers to plan around these aims and with the deputy head available as mentor. Many of the aims had their origins in QCA's objectives for global learning, such as 'recognise our responsibilities to each other, and link learning with taking responsible action'. From these, teachers planned their 'topic' for the term. The deputy highlighted target pupils within each year group, and then developed a PowerPoint of stimulating, thought provoking photographs with a global theme, which was shown to all classes involved in the project. We recorded the children's thoughts, comments and questions in order to gain an understanding of their knowledge and values. Open-ended questioning was a feature of this initial input. Teachers were given extra time to plan this strand of the curriculum to focus on creating 'compelling learning experiences'. Home learning was also developed, to allow greater opportunity for the children to develop their own ideas within project work.

The theme 'Sharing the Planet' was also promoted visually throughout the school, using display – the 'Friends of the School' (our PTA committee), also provided each class with a brand new globe!

The findings

Of the four year groups studied closely, three became more motivated in their learning during the project. Evidence from talking to the children showed that they were completely taken over by their topics and the learning opportunities which they had been presented with. They were highly motivated, and their engagement meant that learning was something they took part in rather than something which was done to them. "This project was a good idea" said AS, "...it made you think about the environment". The approach to teaching and the subject matter in particular, increased motivation. "I like doing big projects...you have lots of time, its fun...I like standing up at the end and presenting all my work... it's good listening to other presentations".

Over the period of the project standards went up, especially in writing, with most of the target learners making between six and eight points progress in the year five group. In most cases, the children's understanding of global issues and their abilities to discuss and think more philosophically improved. They developed more positive attitudes to global issues and staff noticed their learners becoming caring, reasoning citizens of the world, with the ability to collaborate and empathise. "What I found out was really shocking... I learned it's not just black and white". EP's thinking in particular became more profound, "I think back and realise just how much bad stuff is going on. People should have reflected back on this years ago and done something about it, then the world might be a different place".

One of the most interesting findings was the increased engagement in home learning. By linking the home learning to school learning, through open ended thematic projects with clear guidelines, all

children increased the home learning element of their work. Use of project work over several weeks as a home learning exercise was itself key to the success of the theme. The children got a 'buzz' from presenting their projects to each other, and felt they learned a great deal from listening to each other.



Teachers' learning was stimulated by the new planning required. They could not rely on planning from previous years, which 'freed them up' to think creatively about learning opportunities and how to include the children's own ideas in their planning. An important part of achieving this was to give teachers the time to develop their own knowledge and understanding and so feel confident when with their class.

Research methods

Baseline evidence was obtained by observing the children and recording their thoughts in response to a selection of photographs with a global theme. This was then analysed for evidence of children's values and attitudes, and measured against the 'learning muscles' of resilience, resourcefulness, reciprocity and reflectiveness, which feature in *Building Learning Power*. This process was repeated at the end of each year group's themed work to gain an idea of how the children's thinking and learning had moved on. Interviews between the 'target' learners and the deputy head took place throughout the project. The use of our well established tracking process meant that we were able to gauge standards before and after the teaching and learning took place.

A visit by the School Improvement Partner (SIP) was also used to gain evidence about staff perceptions of the project. Our mid-year SIP visit provided further evidence about the impact of our new curriculum and the focus on the features of a global dimension.

Conclusions

This project has shown the importance of raising teacher confidence in engaging learners. Having the time to really think through and plan learning for the theme, as well as having a mentor or coach to support them in developing their thinking, was key to enthusing our teachers and making them feel confident about what they were going to teach. We found offering our children an element of choice in both content and methods of presentation of their learning, played a core part in raising their motivation levels. It was useful to have a very broad stimulus, such as a range of photographs, to launch a topic and promote a wide range of thinking when trying to gain an idea of children's values as well as their knowledge. We also saw confirmation that children appreciate home learning which links to themes (rather than specific literacy or numeracy homework) and which was project based. They preferred to have a choice about how to present their learning and they found presenting their learning to each other very satisfying in a reciprocal way. We now need to

think of ways to overcome parental anxiety about this approach to home learning. We would also like to consider how to develop our themes further to broaden children's values and morals.

References for further reading

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