

Learning and Teaching Scotland

Report on primary thinking groups

Draft V3 - 9 June 2008

Introduction

A series of meetings was held with primary headteachers and senior managers in Glasgow, Perth, Shetland and Edinburgh during May 2008 to gather information on changing practice and to harness ideas for future innovation. A wide range of schools was represented including city, rural and island establishments. Some schools had a nursery on site and also received children from other pre-school centres, while others were 3-16 schools. Some had provision for children with additional support needs, or shared a campus with an establishment with such provision, and one shared a campus with its associated secondary school.

Examples of changing practice, described by participants, highlighted areas primary schools have chosen to focus upon in taking forward Curriculum for Excellence. In all cases, schools placed a high value on the relationship between CPD and learning and teaching and the subsequent impact on the children.

As in the secondary thinking groups, discussion around the transition between primary and secondary demonstrated that steps have been taken to develop current practice further. However, particular attention is being paid to the transition from nursery to P1 in response to the new Early Level. Many of the participants described joint planning and CPD within clusters.

The headings below indicate the main areas of discussion which arose from the starter questions provided in advance. Where points under each heading were mentioned more than once, these have been summarised in one bullet point. In other cases, the example provided applies to one school. Some of the points could apply to more than one heading, which perhaps demonstrates the connected manner in which those present viewed and interpreted the curriculum.

Draft experiences and outcomes

- have examined science and numeracy and matched into current practice
- have begun to consider all draft experiences and outcomes and are putting them into the school improvement plan for 2008-09
- using science in term three, involving pupils in the planning with a focus on experiential learning
- using social subjects for different stages, with a Scottish theme
- using money line of development from maths
- all staff have looked at some of the draft experiences and outcomes
- trialling literacy draft experiences and outcomes
- using science along with cross-curricular themes
- trialling science and technology
- have cluster plan for numeracy draft experiences and outcomes
- staff have looked at the draft experiences and outcomes and can't believe some of the choices are theirs
- one teacher in each school within the cluster is concentrating on numeracy

- “I can ...” wall in nursery. Each child has a week featured on the wall
- have begun to match topics to draft experiences and outcomes
- planning now with the draft experiences and outcomes and next session will look at progression and continuity of learning.
- P7 children and S1 pupils worked together on a maths project. This involved managing a budget for an excursion. Trialling numeracy outcomes so used this real life context to explore them

The four capacities

- started by using the four capacities for confidence building with staff
- addressing the capacities by children leading cross-curricular themes
- worked with the EA enterprise officer to produce a “Curriculum for Excellence Passport”. Discussed the skills and attributes with the children who bring their examples to assemblies and present to the school
- staff analysed each of the bullet points under the capacities during their activity time
- encouraging pupils, playground staff, auxiliaries and parents to think in terms of the capacities
- using active learning stories to illustrate the capacities in nursery and carrying on this approach into P1
- started three years ago with points about the capacities displayed on classroom walls and in corridors
- have assemblies and awards saying why pupils have shown they are successful learners etc.
- pupils in upper primary using learning logs under the four capacities
- planning for social subjects P4-7 led to an exhibition on the four capacities
- have done lots of work on the capacities - good news books linked to 4 capacities/ highlighted in assemblies & individual classes/ school aims linked to four capacities
- have been looking at their planning, making it more explicit in relation to the four capacities.

Pedagogy

- in the new session, much of the curriculum in P1 and P2, and perhaps parts of P3, will be delivered through play
- using softstart for all children every morning
- AIFL and enterprise now embedded in school
- have introduced games-based learning
- P3 pupils have personal projects which they research according to their learning styles. They have a choice of how to present their project.
- active learning in maths throughout the school
- learning walls
- adopted a child-led, skills focused approach, with content led more by the children
- primary/secondary cluster working group on learning and teaching approaches
- using cooperative learning approaches, particularly for collaborative and independent learning

- using learning logs for homework
- focusing on quality questioning
- personalisation through approach to skills development. Pupils given a choice to do one of four tasks at home for four weeks. They became so motivated that most completed all the tasks.
- using Storyline and Big Tasks
- P1 SMILE file (share my impressive learning experiences)
- active literacy and purposeful play
- active learning has increased from one hour per day to all day
- all staff involved in active learning including learning assistants, playground staff and janitor
- using storytellers in residence to promote leaning in context
- visiting artists promote cultural diversity
- senior pupils involved in Learning to Learn
- using Joyning the Learning
- integrated approaches which culminate in some kind of pupil presentation
- more outdoor learning. Children go outside every day e.g. look at shadows to learn about height
- Dragon's Den technology challenge
- using drama specialist to support pupils' presentations
- thinking skills in P6
- critical skills approach employed
- outdoor learning environment enhanced with sensory garden. Have open route to nursery. Children have been involved in the planning with the architect
- strong emphasis on Scottish culture
- use Arran Outdoor Centre as a resource
- have adopted a new approach with phonics
- have explored the Scottish dimension more with pupils involved in curriculum planning e.g. history, geography of Scotland
- pupils run Fair Trade café and will give a presentation to parents on what they have learned about Fair Trade
- personalisation and choice became evident through approach to skills development. Teachers set learning intentions and pupils decide how to take these forward
- using digital cameras more
- interactive boards in use from nursery to P7
- using ICT for personalisation
- Smart boards in classes with children with ASN
- PTA has a more focused role in funding ICT to support a science project with Dundee University
- ICT is embedded in learning activities
- P7 cluster project on Malawi with an expressive arts focus. Will be displayed on transition days
- Link with a Syrian school. Pupils sending sonic postcards.
- The Reading Bus in Aberdeen has encouraged the use of Doric as well as creating opportunities for pupils to work with other professionals i.e. author-in-residence, artists, animators and local radio (broadcasting live and recorded).

- building bridges initiative from P7 to S2 in different subjects. This had been supported by F.L.A.T. funding.
- Pupils have a learning diary. Twice a year staff meet with pupils to discuss their diary.
- concentrating on developing interdisciplinary projects and studies next session

Transitions

- have adopted nursery's approach to transition at P1
- have collaborative working with secondary on P7/S1 transition e.g. working groups for learning and teaching and the language of maths
- cluster working on active learning in maths has led to more interest in primary methodology e.g. from technical and science teachers
- transition folder, mainly with photos and quotes from pupils. Very much a pupil-centred approach
- Stirling Council's "Continuity Project" involves starting points with significant observations of children's learning for nursery/P1 transition
- nursery teacher moves into P1 and P1 teacher into nursery
- nursery and P1 children share the same topic
- use literacy based project to develop the transition experiences for pre-school children
- children come from eight nurseries and have reciprocal visits. They are all allocated the same tasks in advance. Children are allocated P7 buddies. They compile a social stories book. More visits are being built in for children with ASN and their parents.
- nursery/P1 transition begins in October to provide greater continuity
- planning for similar learning experiences across the cluster
- feedback from secondary schools on first year of progress
- enhanced primary/secondary induction programme
- virtual tour of the school with video conferencing with secondary school
- The P7 pupils write individual books for the P1 pupils, adding a personal welcoming touch to transition.
- At transition secondary and primary staff work collaboratively in art, modern languages, science, PE, social subjects and IT. Have a calendar of events to support transition work and enhance progression.

Organisation

- have activity mornings with pupils in mixed age groups of twelve
- seven primary teachers in Aberdeenshire working in S1 & S2
- have shared topic P1-P3
- P1 room moved next to nursery
- Gaelic medium unit in school
- on Friday afternoons P1-P7 work together on thinking skills and creativity in mixed age groups
- learning week during which pupils bring questions
- maths week focused on money management, using LTS resource, and included enterprise outcomes
- themed weeks

- GP room now converted into an active learning area
- introduced Focus Fridays on aspects such as healthy living and fitness, Scotland and the local environment. Fridays planned around active learning approaches e.g. looking at science with visiting speakers
- P1 and P2 using a team teaching approach
- focus days and focus weeks
- have re-designed the school for active learning in P1-P3 and changed the location of the library
- have changed the learning environment by taking away tables and chairs from the infant department. Have a “together area”, where everyone can sit at the one time
- have freed up time to be creative and create opportunities for experiential learning
- have done a lot of work on creative thinking skills; in some classes this is timetabled in as a teaching slot to develop skills.
- have linked up with other schools and now have P7s together every Friday morning
- have introduced “context weeks” each term e.g. financial education; safe and well; science and technology
- staff work in an integrated team of five staff - class teachers, learning support and nursery staff – with two classes and move around three bases
- all infant classes involved in a Number Week
- have Learning Weeks where pupils bring the questions
- next year P1 will be split 18/ 18 with joint teachers and the room designed with an active play area and a more formal classroom area.
- early stage unit primary school. The nursery opens on to the P1 room via double doord. Four members of staff work with mixed groups. There is free access to the P1 class and cooperative learning is taking place across nursery/P1. This approach enhances transition and will facilitate the sharing of early level outcomes in Curriculum for Excellence

Planning and pupil voice

- using more personalisation and choice e.g. in social subjects children were given the outcome and asked how they would like to achieve it
- teacher plans read as “Children will be able to ...”
- pupils and teachers plan the environmental studies project together in every class. The intention is to do the same for drama next
- allowing staff to take forward planning in their own way
- aiming for children to record their achievements and share with secondary
- have begun to involve pupils in the topic planning processes e.g. used the Time Machine by H.G. Wells to focus on skills such as independent research and primary/secondary sources. Each child chose a different period and led the learning on this for a week
- have learned not to be precious about plans and to be prepared to be flexible when a better idea arises e.g. recent tragedy in Burma
- within planning have a section which focuses on making learning real/experiential
- pupils lead Eco-school, health promotion and other committees

- this year the six classes plan together, with a whole school CfE project in term three
- children invited to planning meetings with teachers and community workers
- P2/3 classes plan topic together
- have begun to use health and wellbeing profiles for children
- pupils involved in choosing and managing resources
- cutting back on the number of topics
- monthly meetings of cluster P5-P7 staff
- planning led by the HT, with staff and pupils working collaboratively. Have adopted a three year planning cycle and plan a term ahead
- children have role as play planners, for both indoor and outdoor play
- use a generic planning sheet for all learning in the school, apart from social studies and maths. Social studies is similar but asks the ‘big questions’
- staff encouraged to focus on the HOW to encourage differentiation, rather than on hours of paperwork that doesn’t impact on pupil experience
- teachers now planning around the skills strategies
- staff have produced weekly planners with learning intentions and include pupils and parents in learning intentions
- have been developing topics through an enterprising approach. P5 took ownership of a project, asking nursery children what they wanted from a learning environment. This was extended to the whole school and resulted in changes such a sensory garden for the nursery
- ASG is looking at planning for CfE – taking account of child led and responsive planning
- all policies, from the current session onwards, are being produced in ‘pupil speak’
- pupil responsibility has been increased – they are involved in committees e.g. ICT where they evaluate and review new resources and present findings to school via assembly
- at transition time staff visit class they will receive next session
- staff plan language and maths in the June of each session as if they will be the teacher in August. This reduces slippage and length of time spent on revision etc. at the start of each new school year
- Planning cycle to include planning in language and maths for August to October term by previous teacher in June

CPD

- peer observation of colleagues has improved professional dialogue
- peer assessment by teachers of active learning in maths
- HT encouraged staff to “take a risk for one hour a week” to help them think creatively. E.g. some planned with the children and some used the time for more enterprise
- HT encouraged staff to focus on learning and teaching rather than on timetables. Some found it liberating, others found it scary
- playgroup leader involved in INSET day
- adopting more ‘organic planning’. Using parts four and five of Journey to Excellence

- focusing on the meaning of excellence by evaluating practice through the 10 dimensions. This will inform the improvement plan
- using QIs to evaluate practice in relation to writing
- Journey to Excellence clips shown to staff. Each set targets and identified activities such as visiting colleagues and other schools
- used cooperative learning approach to Journey to Excellence which led to staff taking three areas forward each and sharing the results at the next INSET day. They applied the same approach to forward planning and have now thrown out two huge folders of paper planning. Instead have small discussion groups for collaborative planning and have a rolling programme of topics
- young teachers were afraid to digress from the book so school has worked on staff development , particularly in structured play and cooperative learning
- have adopted a more flexible planning approach to make the most of opportunities which arise e.g. pupils wanted to do an anti-sectarian project , involving drama workshops and a visit to a mosque
- staff trained in critical skills
- INSET provided by Strathclyde University on planning with the seven principles
- some teachers involved in post graduate ‘looping project’ with Strathclyde University
- P1 staff meet termly with other P1 staff across the cluster to share features of active learning the next step will be P2
- stage partners across cluster schools visit each others’ classrooms to develop AiFL
- collaborative partnerships formed between teachers and classroom assistants
- involved all stakeholders in “Let’s talk learning” during INSET
- Staff have been given responsibility for each of the 8 curriculum areas These have been developed into themes. One theme is being tackled each month e.g. May is active month. CPD for each teacher with each area.
- As part of staff development activity to promote engagement with CfE, primary and secondary staff worked together in mixed groups and were asked to plan collaboratively

Parental involvement

- steps taken to involve parents in nursery/P1 changes
- have set up a parents’ group to discuss the changes
- have examined the parents’ role in the improvement planning process. There has been a lot of consultation, particularly around establishing our school values
- parents invited to open day so that children could share their experiences and what they had learned in writing and creativity
- pupil evaluation of a project included parents in the plenary
- nursery parents’ event had stalls where teachers explained approaches such as active learning
- They produced booklets for nursery parents to explain what the children were doing through play and why they were taking this approach.

For further innovation the following points will require consideration:

- skills ladders
- different ways of planning and reporting
- more cross-sector dialogue
- more ‘rolling teachers’ – early years teams and primary/secondary
- balance between being responsive and ensuring coverage of the curriculum
- structure and balance
- staff across all sectors shadowing each other sharing strategies, pedagogy, organisation and management
- staff planning together across all transitions
- class teachers swapping classes over the last term to get to know learners and vice versa
- quality assurance procedures
- more value placed on transitions
- manageable recording and evidence gathering.
- involving parents and informing them of developments.
- guidance for school improvement plan required on how to ensure continuity as the curriculum moves from 5 – 14 to CfE

Conclusion

While participants spoke about the challenges of planning for the future while awaiting guidance on areas such as assessment, most had already begun to introduce changes to learning and teaching and planning. A review of the ways in which staff work together, both within and across establishments, was seen as a significant factor in future innovation.

Participants very much welcomed the opportunity to meet and share their views and saw this as one of the main benefits of the thinking groups. Follow-up visits will be made to some of the schools to find out about their practice in more detail, with the intention of featuring these as case studies in the near future.