Making effective use of curriculum flexibility in primary schools

Interim Report

HM Inspectorate of Education

March 2007

HMIe
improving Scottish education

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Note: A Bibliography and list of schools visited specific to this task will be provided in the final task report to be issued before summer 2007.

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Foreword

5-14 Structure and Balance of the Curriculum[1] allocated primary schools 20% flexibility time over each session to allow staff to make decisions about how best to meet pupils' learning needs. The principles underpinning *Curriculum for Excellence*[2] place greater emphasis on the learning outcomes achieved by pupils. *Progress and Proposals*[3] raised the issue of whether greater responsibility should be given to school staff to use available time to deliver high quality learning experiences for pupils. In this context, the standards of attainment and the wider achievement of pupils and their development as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors become the important tests of whether time is used well–rather than the time spent on a curriculum area or aspect.

In order to inform education authorities (EAs), headteachers and teachers of successful practice in using curriculum flexibility, and to take account of emerging innovative practice as schools begin to address *Curriculum for Excellence*, HMIE engaged with EAs and with schools over session 2006-07 in a focused task. This report aims to share good practice with authorities and schools and to help them to reflect on their own practice.

The task team is still in the process of completing fieldwork and in finalising a report. The intention is that a report will be published prior to the summer of 2007 and that this will be followed up by a national conference to consider issues, reflect on successful innovation and promote good practice. HMIE is aware that the use of curriculum flexibility is a matter of current interest and discussion in EAs and schools. It seems appropriate to share this interim report on outcomes of the task, features of good practice to inform and impact on current discussions and developments. We hope that schools and authorities will find it a useful backcloth to their engagement with *Curriculum for Excellence*.

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[1] *5-14 Structure and Balance of the Curriculum*, Learning and Teaching Scotland (2000)
[2] *A Curriculum for Excellence*, Scottish Executive (2004)
[3] *A Curriculum for Excellence: Progress and Proposals*, Scottish Executive (2006)

Making effective use of curriculum flexibility in primary schools

1.   INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Over the last 15 years, most primary schools have organised their curriculum through a series of curriculum areas, taking advice from '*5-14 Structure and balance of the curriculum'*. This approach was helpful in ensuring that pupils' learning progressed from stage to stage, building on what they had learned before. As the curriculum has developed to take fuller account of modern life, it is now beginning to include more emphasis on aspects such as health promotion, enterprise, creativity, sustainability and citizenship. In addition curriculum design principles have placed greater emphasis on challenge and enjoyment, depth, relevance and choice in learning, links between different aspects of learning, and on the quality of learning and teaching approaches.

Six years ago, SEED Circular 3/2001 set out the rationale for innovation within the primary curriculum, whilst emphasising the need to retain continuity and progression in pupils' learning. This circular offered the opportunity for school staff to think creatively about how best to meet both the common and the different needs of school communities across Scotland.

Local authorities in their improvement plans and schools in their development plans will have to address how they will achieve the highest possible standards against all of the national priority areas. For their particular local circumstances, they may have an approach to offer which does not follow the detail of curriculum guidelines.
           Paragraph 11: Circular 3/2001 Guidance on Flexibility in the Curriculum, SEED

The review of the Scottish curriculum taking place following the publication of *A Curriculum for Excellence* puts the child and his/her needs at the centre of the school's work. The purposes of the curriculum are defined more broadly in terms of what the curriculum is designed to help pupils become: successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens – the '*four capacities.'* Schools have now been asked to develop their curriculum to guide their pupils' learning towards these outcomes. To achieve this, schools need to ensure that the curriculum delivers appropriate learning experiences, to develop knowledge and understanding as well as relevant skills and attitudes for its pupils.

Scotland is not alone in reviewing its curriculum in the light of changing needs. For example, subject integration and creativity are being promoted in forthcoming changes to the Northern Ireland Curriculum.   In England, recommendations from the Department of Education and Skills for creative, flexible approaches are aimed at enabling children to experience the joy of discovery and problem solving.

A stimulating and effective primary curriculum lays an important foundation for successful learning. Pupils who enjoy what and how they are learning are likely to become active, responsible and eager learners. Enjoyment and success in learning experiences throughout primary school years build confidence and self-esteem and lay the foundations for further participation and achievement, and a positive attitude to life-long learning. The interrelationships between what and how children learn are well established, and are reflected in the interdependence of the four capacities set out in *Curriculum for Excellence*.

The visits for this report explored the links between innovative approaches to the organisation of learning and high standards of pupil achievement. The report reflects on the recent progress primary schools have made in their use of curricular flexibility to promote quality. It also takes account of the increasing emphasis on cross-curricular work.

To explore the impact of flexibility in the curriculum, HM Inspectors asked the following questions:

1. How have recent changes in emphasis on curricular flexibility influenced the work of schools?
2. How effective have schools been in streamlining the curriculum to focus more clearly on developing the four capacities?
3. How successfully are schools using flexibility in the curriculum to engage reluctant learners?
4. How effectively do schools enable pupils to experience an appropriate level of challenge across the curriculum?
5. What steps are taken to evaluate the effectiveness of schools' flexible approaches to the curriculum?

To obtain a picture of emerging curriculum changes, HM Inspectors contacted all education authorities, studied published inspection reports and visited a range of schools to focus on the use of curriculum flexibility.

2.   THE EFFECT OF RECENT CHANGES

Advice to schools from EAs

Education authorities had taken significant initial steps to support schools' development of the curriculum. Almost all had appointed an officer to lead and monitor developments in the primary curriculum. A few had created cluster working parties aimed at streamlining the curriculum and creating smoother transitions for pupils from pre-school into P1, and from P7 to S1. Most authorities offered advice through meetings with headteachers and discussion during visits by quality improvement officers. Most local authorities had linked the approaches described in *Curriculum for Excellence* to other recent developments in education, for example *Assessment is for Learning* (*AifL*), citizenship, *Determined to Succeed*, sustainability, thinking skills or critical skills. Many had issued a version of the Starter Kit[4] to schools and had asked them to introduce *Curriculum for Excellence* into their priorities for development planning.

Several education authorities had offered schools the opportunity to engage with leading thinkers who encourage different approaches to learning. As a result, a number of schools were introducing approaches such as collaborative learning, cross-curricular themed work, creativity or critical skills. These were aimed at enabling pupils to develop generic or lifelong learning skills, to make links between different subject areas or aspects of learning and to take a greater measure of responsibility for their own learning. These schools tended to adjust curricular time allocations to create specific time for pupils to learn and practice these techniques. These were in the early stages, but inspection evidence suggested that, in some schools, they were enabling pupils to take a more active part in their learning and improve their group discussion skills. There was a growing trend for pupils to make decisions and choices about how they went about learning or presenting a topic. Many pupils were able to engage intelligently and responsibly in dialogue about their own learning or how they might best approach a task.

One primary school had approached the principles of Curriculum for Excellence by planning 'Focus Fridays', during which a small number of curricular areas were studied using a particular focus, for example on health education or enterprise. The whole school took part in these events, working in mixed-age groups. Activities were planned and monitored carefully to ensure all pupils had appropriately challenging learning experiences. Pupils were eagerly engaged in learning in a wide variety of ways. The energy and enthusiasm for learning demonstrated by pupils was remarkable. Pupils and staff reported improved confidence, particularly in oral skills. The Curriculum for Excellence principle of challenge and enjoyment of learning was evident.

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[4] *Towards a Curriculum for Excellence: Starter Kit*, Scottish Executive (2004)

Use of 'Flexibility time'

Most schools visited, often on the advice of their local authority, devoted additional teaching time to raising attainment in English language and mathematics because high attainment in basic skills is crucial to building pupils' confidence as successful learners. Several education authorities had helped schools use additional time to introduce more varied teaching and learning approaches in these areas, for example, the use of critical skills approaches in one council or collaborative learning strategies in another. In these instances, time was productively devoted to teaching pupils different ways to learn. These techniques were subsequently used by pupils to help them make connections in learning, to understand better how they learned and to relate better to other learners. While it was too early to evaluate the effect on attainment, staff reported improved engagement in learning by many pupils.

In primary schools across Scotland, the development of literacy and numeracy across the curriculum varied in its extent and effectiveness. In the highest achieving schools, English language skills were developed in a wide range of relevant contexts. For example, pupils gave lively and interesting presentations on subjects of their choosing, debated subjects of current interest with local politicians, applied research skills in environmental studies or set their poems to music. Pupils wrote regularly for a wide variety of purposes. This included, for example, writing clear, concise reports on science experiments, imaginative accounts of visits to historical buildings or sensitive poetry about the Holocaust. In mathematics, pupils carried out surveys of their friends' eating habits in their study of health promotion, or used sampling in market research for their enterprise topic. They projected profit margins and monitored their cash flow, meanwhile learning about databases, spreadsheets and aspects of information handling. Overall, however, numeracy was less extensively or imaginatively developed than literacy across the curriculum. Too often, cross-curricular work was not challenging enough. Teachers sometimes set low level tasks or accepted mediocre written work about, for example, health promotion or religious and moral education where pupils had proved themselves capable of producing work of a much higher standard.

Much school-based evaluation of the use of curricular flexibility was informal. Many initiatives were at an early stage. In many schools, teachers' confidence in their own skills was growing, but had yet to develop to a point where they felt ready to move beyond carefully structured programmes of study. In developing effective change, dynamic leadership at all levels was vital. Where teachers saw themselves as curriculum leaders, they were often able to explain the purposes of change and clearly explain the intended benefits for pupils.

Most EAs had linked *Curriculum for Excellence* to *Determined to Succeed* and *AifL* approaches, to create a holistic view of learning which was shared between teachers, pupils and parents. Although a clearer idea about the inter-relatedness of aspects of learning was being disseminated to schools, few authorities had issued guidance on how to use curricular flexibility to achieve desired outcomes. One EA offered very clear, detailed advice and support to schools, including exemplars, to encourage the permeation of *Curriculum for Excellence* principles across all areas of school planning.

3.   USING CURRICULUM FLEXIBILITY TO DEVELOP THE FOUR CAPACITIES

Balance of time

Almost all schools visited used *5-14 Structure and Balance of the Curriculum* as a broad framework for curricular organisation. Headteachers saw this as providing support to ensure appropriate balance, continuity and progression in pupils' learning and many were cautious about removing this structure. However, there was also a growing eagerness among headteachers and school staff to use teaching time more flexibly. Many perceived ways of tailoring the curriculum more closely to the needs of individuals and groups of pupils and to adapt it to take greater account of local circumstances. Many schools approached this by organising blocks of teaching time to allow for deeper study of a topic or to take advantage of pupils' enthusiasm for learning about a particular subject. A topic or thematic approach was often effective in integrating pupils' learning across two or more curriculum areas. For this to promote pupils' learning effectively, teachers had to have a clear idea of the intended learning and the level of challenge needed in ideas and tasks at the outset of the project. Learning was more effective where the learning aims were shared with and understood by pupils.

Over the last three years one primary school has used time flexibly to improve attainment in mathematics. During a recent session, additional time had also been allocated to Personal Learning Planning and to pupils' private study. Pupils were fully involved in the development of their learning plans and had ownership of their targets. They chose to use their private study time to revise French vocabulary, review key facts in mathematics or improve their spelling. Staff planned the curriculum in 6-8 week blocks and regularly reviewed timetables to ensure appropriate balance over the year. They reviewed the curriculum against the four capacities, and decided that pupils needed more emphasis on life skills. A café project resulted from this review. This cross-curricular work culminated in pupils setting up and running a cafe which families and members of the community were able to visit. Pupils had developed their mathematical and scientific skills in costing and preparing food. Aspects of listening and talking were addressed through the group discussions necessary for organising advertising, running and reviewing the operation of the café. In dealing with the public, pupils learned the value of developing good presentation and interpersonal skills. Staff reviews of learning, in which pupils participated, were very positive.

Almost all of the curriculum design principles of *Curriculum for Excellence* currently feature in the curriculum of primary schools to some extent. There is however, a more established emphasis on breadth, balance, continuity and progression than on coherence, challenge and enjoyment, or relevance. Very few primary schools currently highlight curricular depth or personalisation and choice in designing their curriculum.

Successful learners

The most successful learners in schools visited had some opportunities to organise aspects of their own learning and to develop their independent learning skills from stage to stage[5]. For example, pupils in one school were asked to 'learn their French words and phrases for next week.' Several chose to work in pairs at odd moments during the week. One chose to work on her own in a study corner in class. Several used listening equipment to review the topic. Others downloaded the vocabulary on to their MP3 players and listened as they walked home. One used the 'look, cover, write check' routine used to learn spelling in English language lessons. All pupils achieved the desired outcome.

Where schools used the curriculum flexibility effectively, subject content to be learned as well as skills to be acquired was clear to teachers and pupils. All schools visited used 5-14 guidelines as benchmarks for pupils' attainment and achievement and to ensure continuity and progression in skills. Where schools did not plan clear learning outcomes, learning quickly became ad hoc and lacking in depth or progression.

Where learning was successful, pupils could:
- understand what they were aiming to learn and why it was important to them;
- make links between what they were learning across a range of subject areas and apply their well developed literacy and numeracy skills in learning across the curriculum;
- link their current learning to their previous knowledge and skills, and to their experience;
- learn at a pace suitable for them, and experience challenge to their thinking;
- comment confidently on the effectiveness of lessons and suggest topics for further study relevant to their lives;
- engage fully and actively in the process of learning; and
- contribute to the assessment of their own learning and understand what they need to do next to improve their learning.

In the words of one teacher: *'Many children made significant efforts outside of school to do their own unprompted research at the library and glean information from parents.'*

Confident individuals

Most schools promoted a healthy and active lifestyle and fostered pupils' sense of wellbeing and self-respect effectively. Almost all schools used a positive school ethos to develop pupils' confidence and self-esteem. Teachers in most schools created a positive learning environment in which a 'wrong answer' was looked upon as an opportunity for learning. Pupils were encouraged to express their thoughts, knowing that they would be valued and considered seriously. Their success as learners supported their confidence as individuals.

Several schools had devoted additional time to developing pupils' emotional intelligence and well-being. In one primary school, staff had used time productively to adopt a programme of restorative practices to create a climate of responsible citizenship. Pupils were successfully taught techniques to resolve instances of conflict and developed the vocabulary of negotiation and feeling. As a result, pupils were relating more confidently and positively to each other.

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[5] *Improving Scottish Education*, HM Inspectorate of Education (2006): 'signposts to improvement' pages 26-27

Whereas almost all schools argued that their approach to developing pupils' confidence permeated all aspects of school life, fewer ensured that pupils had opportunities to participate in decisions about school life and to learn to manage their own learning.

Staff in a school in an area of social deprivation prioritised the development of pupils' confidence through an extensive programme of expressive arts. Class timetables were adjusted to allow each class, each year, to put on an impressive, well planned show. All pupils were heavily involved in script-writing, directing, stagecraft, set design, publicity, performance and review. Aspects of English language, art, music, PE, mathematics and, in particular, personal and social development were very well developed through this approach. Pupils were positive and articulate about what and how they learned. For example, they highlighted memory skills developed in learning complex dance routines or their lines for a play. Inspired by their experiences in school, a high number of pupils had joined drama clubs, orchestras and dance classes in the local community. Several had experienced success in drama and music and could describe how they would continue to develop these interests at secondary school. School staff reported that some pupils had fewer exclusions because of their improved concentration and motivation.

Responsible citizens

Many schools were effectively developing pupils' skills in citizenship and respect for others. Pupils often took an active part in the school's social and cultural life, engaged in environmental issues and proved themselves capable of making informed decisions.

Most schools had integrated education for citizenship into programmes for social subjects, religious and moral education and personal and social development. However, this was frequently restricted to individual projects in enterprise or Eco School Scotland activities. Few schools developed pupils' awareness of Scotland's place in the world or their ability to engage in political and economic life. Pupils' development of informed, ethical views about issues, and their knowledge about rights and responsibilities was often limited.

Several schools had chosen to develop approaches to learning about global citizenship, often consequent on fund-raising ventures for charity or investigation of Fair Trade goods through enterprise education. Increasingly, pupils were able to:

- take part in groups and lead consultation;
- demonstrate an understanding of local and global citizenship;
- show care and concern for others; and
- accept responsibility for their contribution to the society they would wish to live in.

One school had responded to the growing global influence of China by allocating additional time to the introduction of Chinese at P7. In order to raise pupils' awareness of Chinese culture, a cross-curricular project covered aspects of English and Chinese languages, geography, history, culture and global citizenship. In planning the project, staff related all outcomes to the four capacities. Pupils investigated the historical use of masks in Chinese drama. They decorated porcelain masks and explored the symbolism of colours used in Chinese and western cultures. The activity was filmed by pupils at P7 . Pupils explored the effect on health of Tai Chi and Qi Gong. Staff and pupils discussed pupils' skills in terms of the four capacities.

Effective contributors

Most schools visited were making effective use of initiatives such as *Determined to Succeed* to develop enterprising attitudes in pupils. Many schools used curricular flexibility effectively to embed enterprise education across a range of curricular areas and to allow some depth of study. Pupils were learning to communicate in different ways, work in partnership and in teams and solve problems. They had good opportunities to show initiative, lead, create and develop a plan. Among the successful outcomes of enterprise education, teachers highlighted pupils' self reliance, resilience and application of critical thinking in new contexts.

Pupils at all stages were involved in organising and running a successful Highland games event. Each class took responsibility for different aspects and worked to clear remits. Pupils worked cooperatively in groups to organise appropriate sporting events for different age groups. They took responsibility for all aspects of the organisation including publicity, refreshments and arranging for a local dignitary to open the event. This provided pupils with opportunities to develop skills in English language and mathematics as they contacted local businesses to request their support and sponsorship. They were assisted by school staff, professionals in the community and parents. Pupils worked with a drama specialist to choreograph a dramatic highland skirmish and P6 pupils recorded the event on video. They spoke enthusiastically about the issues involved in planning and organising this aspect of the project. A senior pupil at the associated secondary school had provided training and guidance in editing the video. In discussion, pupils were able to identify ways in which this project had provided them with opportunities to develop skills in the four capacities.

4. CROSS CURRICULAR INITIATIVES

Schools were making increasing use of cross-curricular approaches to link learning and teaching in a range of curricular areas. This commonly included aspects of English language, religious and moral education, social subjects and personal, social and health education. Many teachers used drama effectively to explore issues, develop pupils' confidence and involve lower-achieving pupils in developing important social skills. In social subjects, work was carried out on mock elections, rights and responsibilities, learning about the developing world and sustainability education. All offered valuable contexts for learning about citizenship, studying the impact of global economics, and sharpening pupils' skills in negotiation and presentation.

In one primary school, the principles of cross curricular working and contextualised learning were well established. Cross curricular working was evident in enterprise activities at all stages which incorporated a wide range of curricular areas. In order to ensure effective cross curricular working the school held a number of focus weeks throughout the session, during which there was an emphasis on learning through expressive arts. During the French week, nursery children learned basic vocabulary through singing sessions. Pupils worked well collaboratively to develop drama presentations on the theme of a French café, using mime very well to depict the roles of those involved. As an enterprise project, senior pupils organised a French cafe which was visited by pupils from other classes. At P5, pupils had carried out a successful 'Whacky Science' enterprise project. This involved presenting science concepts to peers and parents through song, poetry and active learning. Pupils were developing the four capacities in contextualised learning and were eager to describe their learning. Leadership was clearly focused on learning and staff spoke enthusiastically about leading developments in modern languages, health, ICT, enterprise, and global citizenship. Attainment in the school was very high. There was evidence of strong outcomes for pupils in terms of the four capacities.

Once a programme or project captured the interest of teachers, it often provided a positive starting point as their enthusiasm was communicated to pupils. In a number of projects teachers did not draw up a prescriptive plan in advance, but exposed the children to a stimulus such as a story or a visit and listened carefully to their pupils' thoughts and ideas. Planning was then undertaken to be responsive and allow learning to develop more flexibility according to pupils' interest. Listening to the children prior to planning was commented upon by one of the teachers as follows:

"This really opened my eyes. Children asked questions that I wasn't sure how to answer. I was surprised by the depth of children's thinking and their ability to question ideas."

The less formal, but no less demanding and accountable approach to planning, stimulated and motivated pupils' ownership of the project. It also encouraged thinking and enquiry skills.

5.   WIDER ACHIEVEMENTS

Curriculum for Excellence includes opportunities for personal achievement as an important strand of the curriculum. Across the country, schools and education authorities were strongly committed to extending pupils' wider achievements and gave support by organising clubs and activities outwith the school day. Many were based on sport, drama or music and allowed pupils to experience success in a wider variety of activities and contexts. Most authorities organised a residential outdoor experience for senior pupils in primary schools. Some school partnerships had organised a residential experience for pupils from a number of associated primary schools, prior to pupils transferring to secondary school. These helped pupils to form relationships and get to know their future schoolmates in a pleasant social setting. In discussions with inspectors, pupils were very positive about the opportunities they had through residential experiences to widen their horizons and to develop their confidence and independence. Many pupils took part in dramatic and musical performances of a high standard, often performing before a large audience, sometimes in a large theatre or concert hall, and to experience the tensions and exhilarations involved in public performance.

Almost all schools emphasised the importance of lunchtime and after-school clubs in extending pupils' learning, developing teamwork and promoting wider achievement. The quality and range of activities varied considerably, but observation and interviews with those who participated frequently indicated that they gained confidence, expertise and enjoyment in the process. However, many of these activities were aimed principally at senior pupils. Younger pupils did not participate frequently enough in activities outwith the school day.

Several authorities with many small rural schools effectively organised partnerships to enable pupils to relate to each other in larger groups and to develop their experience of cooperation and healthy competition. Many projects took advantage of local facilities and partnerships. For example, pupils in one EA had the opportunity to become a *Pict for a Day* in partnership with a local museum. Active schools coordinators featured prominently in promoting wider achievements.

6. ENGAGING LEARNERS

As a result of cross-curricular projects and opportunities for personal achievement, staff commented on increased motivation of pupils who were sometimes difficult to engage in learning. The range of practical tasks in, for example, creating a garden or organising a school fair offered a wider choice of ways to engage in learning. Many teachers claimed improved levels of achievement and increasing levels of literacy and numeracy as a result. Weaknesses in evaluation meant that such improvements were difficult to confirm.

A few schools had begun to develop thematic approaches combining clear learning outcomes from a small number of curriculum areas with a set of defined skills in English language or mathematics. These often engaged learners very effectively. Two examples are described below.

A small, island school had organised its curriculum around the four capacities. Staff interacted very effectively with pupils to direct their learning through dialogue. Pupils were developing a very high degree of responsibility for aspects of their own learning. They cooperated very well with each other, for example in paired reading and environmental projects. Regular reviews of learning, by staff who knew the small number of pupils very well ensured that each pupil made very good progress.

A project, led by an artist in residence, involved children in creating an installation with stained glass in a derelict croft. A site visit encouraged exploration of colours, textures and materials. Groups of pupils researched the building's history, took window measurements, made site drawings and recorded the visit with still and video cameras. Teachers and pupils created, and then compared, mind maps of the work required for the project. From this, they produced together a mind map as a plan with proposed learning outcomes. Peer and self assessment approaches were built in as they created their success criteria. Following research on crofting life in days gone by, aided by local residents, children composed still life paintings of objects related to life in a local croft. These were translated into designs for stained glass windows, to be installed in the window spaces of the building. A community celebration of the work is planned to take place on completion. The planning of pupils' learning was carefully organised in partnership with all concerned. Giving the children first hand experiences enhanced their learning, and created very good opportunities for developing key skills.

7. EVALUATING THE SUCCESS OF CHANGES.

Many of the benefits of curricular flexibility reported by teachers and headteachers such as increased motivation of pupils or improved engagement in learning were difficult to measure. Evaluation of the effect of curricular changes was often informal, mainly based on observation and interaction with pupils. Many schools reported improved achievement in terms of a product such as a successful show or an Eco School Scotland green flag. Where schools had included clear success criteria for curriculum innovation, the evaluation of success was clearer.

The headteacher had ensured that all staff were familiar with Curriculum for Excellence, through collaborative working and effective staff development. Staff had good opportunities to take responsibility for developments in the school. One of the main ways in which staff in this school had used flexibility to meet the needs of a specific group was by revising the curriculum at the early stages. The large intake of 48 pupils last session included 12 children with additional support needs. Staff had 'chunked' learning into small periods of time which were increased during the course of the year. More opportunities were provided for multi-sensory learning with a focus on music, rhyme, rhythm and learning through play. A much increased emphasis was placed on the development of oral language. At the same time a nurture class was created through re- allocation of staff.

Monitoring by the headteacher resulted in initiatives being adjusted in response to pupil need. For example, the issue of children moving too freely in and out of the nurture class was raised at the weekly team meeting. This was followed up by the management team and consultation with external agencies was then built into the process, resulting in improved stability for children. The strong emphasis on meeting the needs of individuals and taking account of social, emotional and behavioural factors, combined with rigorous monitoring of expected outcomes, had had a positive impact of attainment and achievement

8.   CONCLUSIONS

As an outcome of these visits, inspectors found a growing confidence in headteachers to look closely at pupils' learning needs and adjust their curriculum. As headteachers and teachers engaged with the principles and values in *Curriculum for Excellence*, they were beginning to consider innovation more actively.

Many schools and EAs were sensibly caution about re-organising the curriculum radically. Many asked for further guidance and exemplars of successful practice. Many headteachers and teachers were still developing their awareness of the possibilities presented by a less prescriptive approach to curriculum design.

A number of headteachers used the *Heads Together* virtual community very successfully to exchange ideas and experiences in their approaches to the curriculum. This proved a valuable source of mutual support and helped build confidence. The exemplification of good practice contained in this report aims to encourage others to look closely at the learning needs of their pupils and consider ways to meet these needs more effectively.

Primary schools which had begun to use curriculum flexibility effectively exhibited the following features.

- Schools had a clear rationale for the use of additional time, including procedures for supporting the effectiveness of initiatives.

- Planning for learning outcomes for pupils was clear.

- Parents and the local community were involved in projects and in celebrating pupils' successes.

- The use of time was closely monitored in terms of outcomes for pupils.

- Positive relationships, often including the use of humour, were strong within the class and school.

- All pupils, including those with additional support needs, were included in initiatives.

- Pupils were encouraged to make links between different areas of learning.

Invitation to education authorities

Building on this interim report, HMIE will publish, in 2007, a report on making effective use of curriculum flexibility in primary schools. HMIE will be pleased to learn of any recent developments / different approaches in the use of flexibility time in primary schools and invites education authorities to submit details. Please contact the task manager: Anne McGachey HMI, HMIE, 1st Floor Europa Building, 450 Argyle Street, Glasgow G2 8LG.