



# **Making effective use of curriculum flexibility in primary schools**

## **Final Report**

**HM Inspectorate of Education**

**November 2007**

# **Making effective use of curriculum flexibility in primary schools**

## **Final Report**

**November 2007**

### **Contents**

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction and context</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The Effect of Recent Changes</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Using Curriculum Flexibility to Develop the Four Capacities</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Cross-Curricular Initiatives</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Wider Achievements</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Engaging Learners</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Evaluating the Success of Changes</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Schools and education authorities visited</b>	<b>24</b>

# **Making effective use of curriculum flexibility in primary schools**

**Final Report: November 2007**

## **FOREWORD**

It is now six years since schools and education authorities were encouraged to review how available time is used to provide all learners with a motivating and challenging experience. Circular 3/2001 *Guidance on Flexibility in the Curriculum* set out the rationale for innovation within the curriculum and the need to think creatively about how best to meet learners' needs. Whilst some primary schools have used the Circular as a catalyst for change, the national picture remains quite limited. More recently, *Curriculum for Excellence* has provided all involved with primary education with a fresh impetus to rethink how they ensure high quality learning for all children in our primary schools.

This report highlights some of the very good practice about effective use of flexibility in the curriculum that is emerging. It describes how staff have engaged in innovative use of time in ways which have given pupils increased motivation to learn and encouraged them to become more independent learners and more effective collaborative workers. The important role of school managers in monitoring the impact of innovations in the curriculum is exemplified. This report also acts as a call to action for schools which still often adhere too rigidly to inflexible programmes of study. There remains a need for more imaginative leadership and further professional development of staff at all levels to ensure that full and appropriate use of the opportunities offered by *Curriculum for Excellence* are realised.

The challenge to all is to reflect upon what has been achieved by some to date and to build on this good practice. We owe it to our young people to ensure that each child's primary school experience is enjoyable, purposeful, relevant and prepares them well for life.

**GRAHAM H C DONALDSON**  
**HM Senior Chief Inspector**

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

*5-14 Structure and Balance of the Curriculum*<sup>1</sup> 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*<sup>2</sup> place greater emphasis on the learning outcomes achieved by pupils. *Progress and Proposals*<sup>3</sup> 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. An interim report was published on the HMIE website in March 2007 to disseminate the findings of the task team at that stage. Thereafter, the task team carried out further field work, in particular engaging with education authority officers. This report builds on the interim report with the aims of sharing good practice with authorities and schools and helping them to reflect on their own practice.

HMIE is aware that the use of curriculum flexibility is a matter of current interest and discussion in EAs and schools. HMIE is presently exploring with Learning and Teaching Scotland how best to follow up this report. This includes the intention to organise a national conference to consider issues, reflect on successful innovation and promote good practice. We hope that schools and authorities will find this report a useful backcloth to their engagement with *Curriculum for Excellence*.

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.

---

<sup>1</sup> *5-14 Structure and Balance of the Curriculum*, Learning and Teaching Scotland (2000)

<sup>2</sup> *A Curriculum for Excellence*, Scottish Executive (2004)

<sup>3</sup> *A Curriculum for Excellence: Progress and Proposals*, Scottish Executive (2006)

*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 *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. The principles for curriculum design set out in this review will help schools identify their aims and give a clearer focus to the learning 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, recent recommendations from the Department of Education and Skills for creative, flexible approaches are aimed at enabling children to experience the joy of learning through discovery and of solving problems.

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 inter-relationships 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 effectively have education authorities led developments in curriculum flexibility in primary schools?
4. How successfully are schools using flexibility in the curriculum to engage reluctant

learners?

5. How effectively do schools enable pupils to experience an appropriate level of challenge across the curriculum?
6. 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 steps to support schools' development of the curriculum. Almost all had appointed an officer to lead and monitor developments in the primary curriculum. Many 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 had grouped together with one or more authorities with similar interests or issues to plan joint conferences and staff development, and to take forward initiatives in partnership. Several education authority partnerships ran joint seminars with input from a wide range of speakers including commercial consultants, Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) and SEED.

Most authorities offered advice through meetings with headteachers and discussion during visits by Quality Improvement Officers (QIOs). 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<sup>4</sup> to schools and had offered guidance on curriculum flexibility, incorporating some of the emergent thinking on curriculum architecture, for schools to use as they prepared their improvement plans. One authority, taking the view that staff should further develop the four capacities in themselves, had organised a series of in-service courses for staff to develop a range of relevant skills. Some authorities had produced a range of helpful information leaflets for parents. Several had produced attractive, informative posters for display in schools.

*One education authority had given a strong lead in ensuring that headteachers and staff were engaged in Curriculum for Excellence. In February 2007, all schools were sent a copy of an advice document 'A curriculum for excellence: advice about streamlining the curriculum'. The purpose of this document was to prompt schools to think how they could be more responsive to the needs of their pupils and to identify where natural links within different curricular areas could be forged. The document was produced after the authority had asked all schools to produce a position statement on Curriculum for Excellence. In their position statements, schools were asked to set out their understanding of the principles of Curriculum for Excellence and explain how far they had used the principles to develop their practice. The EA used the position statements to draw up the advice document.*

*The advice document focused as much on the 'how' of the curriculum (the learning and teaching approaches) as on 'what' is taught. The education authority stressed that the development of the curriculum and the use of curricular flexibility must be firmly based on improving pedagogy in schools. The EA encouraged schools to develop staff skills in 'linking related aspects of learning'. The appendices to the advice document contained helpful examples of schools which had used streamlined planning formats to focus on the skills and ideas they want pupils to acquire. In addition, the EA had produced effective learning and*

---

<sup>4</sup> *Towards a Curriculum for Excellence: Starter Kit*, Scottish Executive (2004)

*teaching guidelines which were based on the four capacities of Curriculum for Excellence. Extensive staff development in relation to both Assessment is for Learning and Co-operative Learning was enabling staff in schools to develop their thinking about learning and teaching.*

*Monitoring was carried out by QIOs who worked with each head teacher to produce a PIN document (Progress, Impact and Next steps). This outlined how each school was using the advice in the 'Streamlining and the curriculum' document and tracked the effectiveness of these approaches in developing pupils' learning.*

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. Although these approaches were in the early stages, 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.*

Those education authorities which have most successfully engaged schools in dialogue about better use of curriculum flexibility had achieved an appropriate emphasis between 'support' and 'challenge'. They had taken steps to:

- develop understanding of the rationale for curriculum development among their officers, headteachers and teachers;
- assist staff to explore the principles of *Curriculum for Excellence*;
- lead staff in understanding how these principles could be applied in individual schools and clusters, emphasising the importance of high attainment and clear progression in pupils' learning;
- offer models and examples of good practice;
- support schools as they developed the confidence in making decisions about curricular approaches; and



- advise schools about monitoring the effectiveness of the changes they had made and involve EA officers in evaluating changes.

They combined this advice and support with rigorous internal self-evaluation procedures to ensure a consistently high level of learning across schools.

## 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.

A number of education authorities offered clear guidance on the identification of learning outcomes at the planning stage of a cross-curricular project. Crucial to the success of learning were the systems identified for managers to monitor pupils’ attainment in basic skills, as well as the value added to their learning by the project. Several headteachers stated that the identification of which curricular areas were *not* to be taught was as important as identifying what was to be included in the project. Several headteachers commented on the need for increased rigour in monitoring pupils’ learning when the familiar structures were relaxed.

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. The need for pupils to use literacy and numeracy skills in a range of contexts lay at the heart of many cross-curricular projects. Some aimed to develop particular skills such as reading for information, in order to enable pupils to use a wider range of learning approaches in learning independently.

*One education authority had developed a strategy to improve library services for pupils and to support a range of initiatives to extend learning in primary, secondary and special schools. The aim of this project was to develop pupils’ literacy skills across a wider range of curricular areas, and to widen the impact of literacy in their lives. Teachers and librarians developed an Information Literacy Toolkit to develop pupils’ literacy skills and promote reading for pleasure. They then worked in schools, libraries and other venues with pupils and parents to help pupils research topics of interest to them. Particularly effective approaches included:*

- *supported study sessions held in public libraries based upon Information Literacy and Research skills;*
- *developing links between schools and public libraries;*

- *using 'Homework Collections' within the public libraries and the Education Resource Service Web site and topic pages;*
- *visits by librarians to develop pupils' research skills, for example by working on environmental studies topics in the classroom;*
- *after-school sessions within library branches serving regeneration areas;*
- *organising a Homework Club on the Council's Gypsy/Traveller Site;*
- *developing 'Junior Book Groups' in regeneration areas to support literacy, including visits to the Edinburgh Book Festival;*
- *parent/child workshops in the public library, for example making puppets and writing a play which was then published as a book; and*
- *using online resources such as Booksp@ce which provides a forum for the Children's Librarians to promote interactive reading and writing.*

*Recent inspection evidence highlights pupils' positive approaches to reading for pleasure and the consequent broadening of their experiences in reading. Feedback from parents and pupils stressed their enjoyment of reading for such a wide range of purposes and their appreciation of the improved progress pupils were making in all aspects of literacy.*

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 understand fully the purposes of change and clearly explain the intended benefits for pupils.

*One suburban school organised a six week cross-curricular project on the Scottish Wars of Independence for P5 pupils. The aim of the project was to enhance pupils' learning by making appropriate curricular links, creating a relevant context for pupils' learning in a range of subject areas and hence improving pupils' attainment in these areas. Before starting the project, the HT planned the expected outcomes, related closely to 5-14 strands and levels, along with the class teachers of the two P5 classes. Progression of skills development was addressed at this stage. There was a rigorous approach to ensuring that pupils were appropriately challenged in all relevant curricular areas and this was closely monitored by the headteacher at all stages. Key curricular areas included:*

- *people in the past – research using archives, history reference books, the Internet, visits to a range of Scottish castles (Stirling, Edinburgh, Mugdock). A display of falconry added to their understanding of life in a Scottish castle in late medieval times;*
- *people in place – land use in the middle ages, and study of how a castle developed into a town, with particular reference to Stirling;*
- *English language – reading for information, writing descriptions and instructions, for example how to use a mangonel effectively, how a knight should put on his armour. Pupils wrote letters to invite a knight to their celebration. Much listening and talking, particularly group discussion skills, was developed through group work in planning and organising the project. Pupils gave oral and written presentations, using ICT, about different aspects of what they had learned; and*
- *drama – battles and historical scenes were re-enacted. A ‘talking heads ‘ approach was used. Music and art were incorporated into the presentations. (Outcomes for pupils were clearly identified with reference to the school’s progressive programme in expressive arts.)*

*Pupils were directly involved in planning their learning. In mixed groups, they organised the order, timescales and approaches to their tasks. The project concluded with a Learning Festival, to which parents were invited. Pupils gave presentations. Dramatic and musical performances added to the sense of occasion. Parental feedback was very positive, many taking the time to write letters of congratulation to the school. For example, parents comments included the following:*

**“What a lot of hard work, but it all paid off ! The primary 5 historians were a wonderful example of active learning. Well done !” ( P5 parent )**

**“What a great evening and thanks to the staff and helpers. I enjoyed history at school 50 years ago, but this evening brought history to life.” ( Grandmother )**

**“Please continue to create and stimulate in such a fantastic way.” ( parents of a P5 pupil )**

### **Review**

*Pupils, staff and school managers evaluated the project to be very successful, particularly in the following areas:*

- *increased motivation to learn;*
- *pupils’ enjoyment of their learning;*
- *broadened approaches to learning; and*
- *pupil’ attainment, particularly in extended writing, social subjects expressive arts, and personal search within religious and moral education, in a relevant context.*

Most education authorities 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, a growing number of authorities had issued guidance on how to use curricular flexibility to achieve desired outcomes. One authority 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.

*One education authority had concerns about pupils' underachievement in the early stages of primary school. Officers tackled this in an integrated way. They developed a very clear, detailed and well-planned approach to introducing schools to Curriculum for Excellence and supporting them in their development, taking the following steps:*

- 1. Initial meetings were held to raise awareness of Curriculum for Excellence among primary headteachers in 2005.*
- 2. QIOs had expressed concern about low achievement in P1 and the over-use of paper-based learning. To address this, the EA organised an introductory training day on active learning, followed by 3 up-dates. The aim was to raise attainment in English language and mathematics by the end of P2. Two staff tutors were appointed to develop purposeful play in schools. This was carried on into P2 the following year. Headteachers requested planners, to highlight aspects of the curriculum which could be delivered through play. Every P1 class teacher was visited by staff tutors in her/his own classroom. Staff found this sharing of expertise very helpful. Initial reactions of staff overall to Curriculum for Excellence was not positive. Teachers had become dependent on schemes of work. Curriculum for Excellence was presented as delivering the 5-14 curriculum in an enterprising, enjoyable way. Scribed 'Talking and Thinking books' about moving to primary school, begun in the last term of a child's pre-school year and carried into P1, were particularly effective. Additional resources, including a range of software, were given to schools to develop play and library facilities.*
- 3. Staff tutors gave staged twilight courses for all class teachers on the principles of Curriculum for Excellence, and developing cross-curricular work. There was a particular focus on challenge and enjoyment, and personalisation and choice.*
- 4. Two days 'Conference for Excellence' led by engagement staff for headteachers. All schools named a Curriculum for Excellence co-ordinator and featured curriculum flexibility on establishment improvement plans.*
- 5. An external speaker gave a day's talk on leadership for Curriculum for Excellence to all curriculum leaders.*

*The identification of clear learning outcomes was addressed at the initial planning stage. The results of this clear leadership on the part of the education authority were beginning to be evident in pupils' attainment. Schools were confident about making decisions to alter the balance of curriculum to meet better the needs of their pupils and to allow for a deeper study of certain topics.*

### 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 café 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<sup>5</sup>. 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.

Many schools focused their approaches to developing flexibility in the curriculum clearly on improving learning and teaching. The national *Assessment is for Learning* initiative had increased the dialogue between pupils and teachers about learning, leading to improved ownership of their learning on the part of pupils. Where *AifL* was well developed, teachers listened closely to pupils’ views and spoke very positively about the effectiveness of allowing pupils a greater say in the organisation of their learning. Several schools united this more responsive approach to learning with enterprise projects. Where such projects were well organised, these enabled pupils more effectively to develop skills and understanding outlined in *Determined to Succeed* and allowed much effective learning to take place within a less structured framework than had been usual.

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.

---

<sup>5</sup> *Improving Scottish Education*, HM Inspectorate of Education (2006): ‘signposts to improvement’ pp 26-27

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.

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, physical education, 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 those at P6 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, information and communications technology, 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."*

This 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 residential experiences 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. They experienced 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 education authority 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 and incorporating movement into aspects of the school day.

## 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 authorities were beginning to adapt their existing initiatives to develop the four capacities more fully. A number of schools have taken a fresh look at work already underway and adjusted the rationale or added a dimension to address the four capacities more fully. For example, in one education authority, the well-established programme for teaching philosophy to primary pupils has been used to incorporate aspects of other curricular areas, notably listening and talking. Teachers were clear about the overall aim of lessons, and pupils in schools using this approach well were able to use their enquiry skills in other curricular areas with confidence. Many schools and EAs were sensibly cautious 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.

While some education authorities had devolved decisions about the curriculum to individual schools, retaining only a monitoring brief, many had taken a strong lead in ensuring that school staff understood the possibilities offered by *Curriculum for Excellence* for improving the learning experiences, attainment and achievement of pupils. Growing numbers of schools were working towards a more appropriate, less prescriptive but no less rigorous curriculum for their pupils.

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.

Overall, there has been considerable drive and focus on developing *Curriculum for Excellence* across the country. Most schools and education authorities have addressed the curriculum with renewed enthusiasm and vigour and have stressed their encouragement of innovation and flexibility. The decision of so many to develop the four capacities by focusing on high quality learning and teaching is encouraging. The challenge now will be to ensure consistency in the quality of pupils' learning in terms of content and skills.

Over the last year, many education authorities have taken further steps to encourage schools and clusters to engage in developing *Curriculum for Excellence* and to enable a change in thinking to take place. These, while variable in extent and quality, have been instrumental in developing teachers' understanding of the principles of *Curriculum for Excellence* and in supporting a number of related initiatives and approaches. Several authorities and authority partnerships had opted to develop a *Rich Task* approach, based on Queensland State Education's New Basics Project<sup>6</sup>. A number of officers had travelled to Queensland, studying at first hand the effectiveness of *Rich Tasks* and adapting these approaches to the needs of pupils in Scotland. Following professional development on the rationale underpinning *Rich Tasks*, these officers then worked with selected schools to develop planning, delivery, assessment and evaluation procedures for cross curricular projects culminating in, for example, a celebratory event or a travel itinerary. Structures and approaches were then disseminated across the authority to support schools to achieve the best possible outcomes in terms of teachers' confidence and pupils' learning.

Many schools had carried out a *Rich Task* with substantial support from the education authority or from private enterprises. Several headteachers reported that staff confidence had improved with this support and teachers were now able to plan and deliver their own *Rich Tasks* based on topics relevant to their pupils.

*Two island authorities joined forces to explore methods of improving continuity and raising achievement at transitions and in the early stages of secondary school. Key to the success of this initiative was the development of cross-sectoral continuous professional development to 'grow our own leaders' and develop stronger curricular links between sectors, for example transition units such as a P7-S1 topic to develop mapping skills. Increasingly, nursery and early stages teachers visited each other's classes and worked together to develop pupils' experiences of learning through play as they progressed from nursery through the early stages of primary school. Outcomes of this collaboration included support packs for teachers on planning for Curriculum for Excellence and on supporting pupils with dyslexia. Significant to the success of this project was the development of learning and teaching through Assessment is for Learning techniques to support and challenge pupils in their learning. Schools reported improvements in pupils' learning, principally through more active learning and improved motivation. Enjoyment of learning, by teachers and pupils alike, became an important factor in the success of these projects.*

Although many schools reported that staff understood and supported the *Rich Task* approach, many teachers welcomed the structures and supports offered by the authority. Many schools and authorities reported success in developing more focused learning. Pupils were able to

---

<sup>6</sup> New Basics. The Why, What, How and When of *Rich Tasks*. Queensland State Education : October 2001.

develop and display their understanding, knowledge and skills through performance on cross-curricular activities that had an obvious connection to the wider world. The subsequent challenge, reported by several headteachers, was the conceptual leap which teachers then needed to make to create their own Rich Tasks, to address in a more focused fashion the learning needs of their own pupils. This leap was proving difficult for a profession used to adhering more or less rigidly to prescribed programmes of study. Even where schools and authorities had opted to deliver aspects of the curriculum in creative, cross-curricular ways, staff retained the benchmarking offered by 5-14 national guidance. Headteachers reported that the increasing emphasis on their monitoring of pupils' progress required the progressive levels offered by 5-14 to underpin their tracking of pupils' progress. All schools visited had retained 5-14 national assessments to support their assessment and tracking of pupils' attainment. Without this 'safety net', there were real risks that pupils' progress in basic skills, for example writing, might be allowed to slip as other priorities took centre stage. Clear guidance to teachers about pupils' expected learning outcomes required to be highlighted and regularly revisited.

National developments aimed at improving learning and teaching were beginning to have an impact in classroom practice. In particular, the *Assessment is for Learning* initiative, in encouraging improved dialogue between teachers and pupils, had increased teachers' awareness of how pupils' learning needs evolved. As their confidence grew, they reported a growing readiness to adapting their delivery of the curriculum to develop the principles of *Curriculum for Excellence*. Where this dialogue was effectively developed, pupils were increasingly able to take an active part in their learning, making choices about how best to learn a topic or develop a skill. The level of challenge to pupils became higher and pupils set increasingly demanding learning targets for themselves. A structured approach to collaborative learning, adopted and developed to varying degrees throughout the country, was beginning to accelerate learning for some pupils as they learned to take a greater measure of responsibility for their own learning.

Overall, many interesting and exciting developments in curriculum delivery were taking place across the country. However, whilst there was evidence of good practice emerging from some schools and authorities, there remained significant headroom for improvement. Some education authorities had grasped the opportunity offered to lead developments in curriculum flexibility. However, several were unsure about how to take this forward. Occasionally schools had developed diverse approaches without the full knowledge of, or sufficiently rigorous monitoring by, the education authority. In too many schools the potential for creative approaches to curriculum delivery had yet to be fully appreciated. Schools still often adhered too rigidly to inflexible programmes of study and commercial schemes.

Further professional development of staff at all levels is still needed to ensure that schools make full and appropriate use of the opportunities for flexibility in curriculum delivery offered by *Curriculum for Excellence*. Schools need to employ a range of formal and informal measures for evaluating outcomes for pupils to ensure that progression is clear and learning maximised. Only then will pupils benefit fully from the exciting and engaging developments in learning rendered possible by *Curriculum for Excellence*.



## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Curriculum Flexibility* (How Good is our School? Guides to self-evaluation.) HM Inspectorate of Education, 2003, available online from [www.hmie.gov.uk](http://www.hmie.gov.uk)

*5-14 National Guidance on the Structure and Balance of the Curriculum*, Learning and Teaching Scotland (2000)

*A Curriculum for Excellence*, Scottish Executive (2004)

*Determined to Succeed: A review of Enterprise in Education*, Scottish Executive 2002.

*Determined to Succeed: Enterprise in Education- the Scottish Executive Response*, Scottish Executive 2002.

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

*A Curriculum for Excellence: Progress and Proposals*, Scottish Executive (2006)

*Circular 3/2001 Guidance on Flexibility in the Curriculum*, SEED 16 August 2001

## Appendix 1: **SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION AUTHORITIES VISITED**

HMIE is grateful for the co-operation and support offered by the following schools in making this report possible:

<b>School</b>	<b>Council</b>
Aberhill PS	Fife
Auchinleck PS	East Ayrshire
Caerlaverock PS	Dumfries & Galloway
Carmondean PS	West Lothian
Castleview PS	Edinburgh City
Cleish PS	Perth and Kinross
Galston PS	East Ayrshire
Forthill PS	Dundee City
Forthview PS	Edinburgh City
Hayocks PS	East Ayrshire
Hobkirk PS	Scottish Borders
Holytown PS	North Lanarkshire
Inchinnan PS	Renfrewshire
Juniper Green PS	Edinburgh City
Kirkhope PS	Scottish Borders
Kirklandneuk PS	Renfrewshire
Lainshaw PS	East Ayrshire
Langcraigs PS	Renfrewshire
Laxdale PS	Western Isles
Lethnot	Angus
Linlithgow Bridge PS	West Lothian
Lochgelly West PS	Fife
Oakbank PS	Perth & Kinross
Ralston PS	Renfrewshire
St Andrew's PS	East Dunbartonshire
St Bridget's PS	North Ayrshire
St Kessog's PS	West Dunbartonshire
Seaview PS	Angus
Tarfside PS	Angus
Tollbrae PS	North Lanarkshire
Towerbank PS	Edinburgh
Uyeasound PS	Shetland Islands
West Kilbride PS	North Ayrshire
Woodhill PS	East Dunbartonshire

HMIE express its thanks to the following education authorities where staff engaged with HM Inspectors to consider curricular flexibility in primary schools.

Angus Council  
Argyll and Bute Council  
North Ayrshire Council  
Orkney Islands Council

Shetland Islands Council  
West Dunbartonshire Council  
West Lothian Council