

Developing the four capacities through social subjects: focusing on successful learners in primary schools

Introduction

Following on from the *Improving Scottish Education* (ISE) report, published in February 2006, a sample of primary schools across Scottish education authorities was involved in a task to evaluate attainment in social subjects, physical education and modern European languages. Inspections took place between May 2006 and June 2007. A sample of schools was visited midway through the generational cycle of the general inspection programme. The sample classes included pupils at the early, middle and upper stages of each school. Schools benefited from constructive oral feedback and pointers for improvement during the one day inspection.

The evaluations of pupils' attainment in social subjects, physical education and modern European languages were carried out in the context of primary school staff giving increased consideration to the principles of *Curriculum for Excellence*. By stimulating debate about attainment and learning and teaching, the visits and this report aim to challenge those involved in teaching social subjects in Scotland to review the extent to which current practice is successfully promoting the four capacities in young learners.

Evidence gathered from the sample schools has been collated and presented in the form of brief reports on the HMIE Good Practice website as part of a broader set of information related to *Improving Scottish Education*. The outcomes will inform national developments. The main findings of each of the three reports should be used by staff in schools and local authorities to help bring about improvements in practice.

This task focused on primary pupils' attainment in social subjects. Inspectors observed lessons and assessed pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding in this area of the curriculum. Teachers' plans were examined. Inspectors discussed learning and teaching in social subjects with pupils and teachers.

Social subjects and Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)

How can social subjects help to develop successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors?

Teachers in primary schools are increasingly recognising the potential of CfE to improve learners' achievements. The range of experiences within a quality programme in social subjects offers a strong platform on which to build future learning. Learning experiences in social subjects help pupils to become aware of their community and heritage and to grow confident in themselves, their beliefs and values and their place in the world. The nature of knowledge which deals with human activities and focuses on decisions and choices and their effects encourages the development of young people as responsible citizens. Discussions in social subjects lessons should help learners to work collaboratively as well as use evidence to come to conclusions and justify opinions. In the schools visited for this report, pupils enjoyed activities and experiences in social subjects lessons. High quality

experiences often encouraged pupils to become effective contributors, individually and in groups and to develop knowledge, understanding and skills across a range of experiences. There is a particular focus in this report on the extent to which pupils are becoming successful learners in the context of social subjects in primary schools.

Attainment in Social Subjects: what do we do well to develop successful learners?

“Through social subjects, pupils develop their understanding of the world by learning about other people and their values in different times, in different places and circumstances, and how their environment has been shaped” (Curriculum for Excellence, draft experiences and outcomes, social studies; p1). As successful learners, children and young people need to develop the capacity to learn both independently and as part of small groups. This is central to the teaching approaches in social subjects in effective primary schools. Learners are often successful and make good progress when social subjects’ programmes are set within real or relevant contexts.

In social subjects, most pupils at the **early stages (P1-3)** in the schools inspected:

- were able to understand the sequence of time through learning about the seasons and weather;
- could handle non-fiction books with confidence and demonstrate how to find simple information;
- were able to make accurate observations of similarities and differences between old and new everyday objects and changes over time in their local area;
- had a very good awareness of how to keep safe and healthy;
- understood the need for rules and their right to expect fair treatment; and
- were developing effective enquiry skills through regular group work.

In social subjects, most pupils at the **middle stages (P4-5)** in the schools inspected:

- demonstrated sound knowledge and understanding about key features of their local environment, such as important geographical and built landmarks;
- used computers effectively to locate information about people in time and place;
- could describe changes being made in their local community and regularly learned from other people such as local visitors and experts;
- could investigate and present findings to one another working effectively in groups; and
- used related vocabulary appropriately.

In social subjects, most pupils at the **upper stages (P6-7)** in the schools inspected:

- were able to use Ordnance Survey maps to locate simple features such as beaches, woodland and tracks, and to follow orienteering trails;
- could gather information from a range of primary and secondary sources of evidence and were able to give reasoned opinions about their research findings

(for example, they could analyse and describe change and demonstrate very good awareness of environmental and conservation issues);

- used an appropriate variety of ways to find information and could present their research evidence in a range of formats (they especially valued being able to interview family members and local people to find out about the past);
- were able to describe in detail the impact of advances in communications and technology on life in the present day and in the past;
- demonstrated a good understanding of the role of government and local councils when discussing how to meet the needs of people;
- were very clear about the rights and roles of responsible citizens and the need for law and order; and
- were alert to the reliability (or otherwise) of newspaper articles for sourcing information.

Key strengths in social subjects in the schools inspected included the following.

- Effective use of visitors and the local and wider environment to develop pupils' awareness of "people in the past" and "people and place".
- Pupils worked effectively and collaboratively together on research and enquiry tasks which helped them see links across aspects of the curriculum.
- Across all stages, pupils demonstrated a clear understanding of the Scottish dimension within "people in the past" and "people in society".
- The development of enterprise and citizenship activities within social subjects which provided increased opportunities for pupils to develop self-awareness, creativity skills and values which had a positive impact on engaging pupils in social subjects.

Aspects for improvement

The ISE report highlighted the need to build on the strengths in Scottish education to meet the needs of learners for the challenges of a global society. It also stressed the need to improve learners' achievements. The section of the report devoted to primary education noted that pupils were developing an understanding of their rights and responsibilities within the context of active citizenship. It also stated that, "While pupils are developing a range of skills in areas such as citizenship and enterprise there is still substantial room for further improvement. As yet, their opportunities to contribute to discussions about learning and teaching were too limited." (Improving Scottish Education, HMIE, 2006, p26). Whilst a number of strengths have been identified in this report, the following areas require further improvement.

- Greater variety in teaching methodology and more of a focus on active learning. Too many teachers presented social subject topics as whole class lessons which did not provide sufficient support and challenge to ensure that the needs of all pupils were met appropriately.
- The use of real or relevant contexts for learning in social subjects by teachers at the early stages of primary schools.

- A greater focus on assessment and recording which is challenging and involves pupils in reviewing their own learning. In recording and assessing pupils' knowledge and skills, teachers relied too much on low level activities, such as the completion of worksheets, which were not challenging or which were inappropriately time consuming. Only a few schools made very good use of assessment to judge pupils' present knowledge and understanding before beginning a new social subjects topic.
- Better liaison and transfer of information from primary to secondary schools in order to ensure greater continuity and progression in pupils' learning.
- Greater use of information and communications technology to support learning and develop enquiry skills.
- A stronger focus on developing pupils' spatial awareness of their local environment and their knowledge and understanding of Scotland's physical and urban landscapes.
- Developing pupils' mapping skills more systematically across the stages.
- Planning to ensure breadth and balance across the three main outcomes (people in the past, people and place and people and society) of the curriculum for social subjects.
- Making effective links between the work related to environmental issues, sustainable development and Eco Schools Scotland and social subjects.

Curriculum for Excellence: draft Social Studies experiences and outcomes

The draft experiences and outcomes for Social Studies are available on the LTS website. Drawing on best practice, they build on the strength of previous documents including A Curriculum Framework from 3 to 5 and 5-14 Environmental Studies. The experiences and outcomes reflect a significant streamlining of content to allow greater opportunity for personalisation and choice, depth and reflection. Teachers are provided with questions for reflection and response as well as feedback questions which will help the curriculum writers in refining the draft Social Studies experiences and outcomes.