

Changes in teaching and learning promoted by the Aiming for Excellence programme

2004-05



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi dros Addysg
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Changes in teaching and learning promoted by the Aiming for Excellence programme:

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1. Introduction

1.1 Estyn's remit for 2004-05 included a request from the Welsh Assembly Government for information on changes in teaching and learning in schools, promoted by the 'Aiming for Excellence' programme.

1.2 In 2002, working with the Welsh Assembly Government and ACCAC, Estyn published 'Aiming for Excellence in Key Stage 3'. This was the first in a series of publications to help local education authorities (LEAs) and schools raise standards by making the work in Year 7 build more effectively on what pupils had done in primary school. In 2004, in 'Moving on ... Effective Transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3' and 'Moving on ... Improving Learning', we identified the improvements in transition arrangements and the quality of learning that had taken place since 2002.

1.3 This position paper:

- provides information on further developments in teaching and learning in 2004-05;
- summarises the main findings from visits to schools and LEAs;
- draws on evidence from LEAs' education strategic plans and from school inspection reports; and
- makes recommendations for further action.

2. Main findings

2.1 The majority of LEAs and schools have learning as a priority for improvement. Many LEAs and quite a few individual schools have engaged national experts to introduce well-planned learning initiatives that are improving how pupils learn and reinvigorating teaching, particularly at key stage 3.

2.2 The management and leadership of learning initiatives, and of transition in particular, are improving. More consortia or families of primary and secondary schools are working effectively together to meet pupils' needs better. Visits to each others' schools, the development of bridging units and the joint moderation of teachers' assessments by groups of primary and secondary teachers have had a significant impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

2.3 There has been a marked improvement in the quantity and quality of information about pupils' achievements that primary schools pass on to secondary schools. Overall, schools use information about pupils' prior achievements better, but some secondary school teachers still do not know enough about the learning needs of pupils in their classes to be able to pitch teaching at the right level, particularly for low-achieving pupils and very able pupils. Teachers use information particularly well to plan appropriate teaching for pupils with special educational needs (SEN).

2.4 At key stage 2, and increasingly at key stage 3, teachers are doing better at developing and applying literacy and numeracy skills in subjects across the curriculum, but there is still much to do, despite improvements. Few schools track pupils' progress in key skills or have a framework to plan for progression.

2.5 A few schools have made exceptional progress in improving teachers' and pupils' information and communication technology (ICT) and learning skills by embedding the use of ICT in lessons across the curriculum. However, pupils in many secondary schools do not have the same ease of access to computers for learning that they had in primary schools.

2.6 In the last year, more primary and secondary schools have begun to teach thinking skills to show pupils how to deal with new and difficult ideas and how to set about solving problems. This work is helping pupils to see learning as a process of making connections. Developing pupils' thinking skills is improving pupils' language and vocabulary, making them more independent in their thinking and helping them to think more rigorously and logically, as well as improving their understanding.

2.7 Many secondary schools are teaching techniques that require pupils to think about how they learn, as well as what they learn. They are trying to accelerate learning, by using teaching approaches that help pupils use the learning style that suits them best, for example using visual images, sound patterns and 'hands-on' experience. Early evidence shows that pupils enjoy being stimulated to think about their learning in this way and it increases their motivation. However, few schools have given enough consideration to how they will evaluate the long term impact of these initiatives.

2.8. Some of the more recent learning initiatives in secondary schools, whilst enthusing teachers and pupils about learning, are being developed without reference to key stage 2. The most effective work is part of a joint primary-secondary initiative so that pupils benefit from continuity and consistency in how they learn.

2.9 There has been slow progress in improving how schools use assessment. In a few of them, pupils evaluate their own work on the basis of a good understanding of assessment criteria. However, too many pupils do not understand assessment criteria and what they need to learn next in order to improve.

2.10 It is difficult to identify any one initiative as being directly responsible for changes in teaching and learning. LEAs and schools use a range of methods to improve teaching and learning. Where LEAs and schools have drawn extensively on the content and recommendations of the Aiming for Excellence programme (as listed in the Appendix) in their plans and guidance for teachers, this has made a significant contribution to improvements in teaching and learning.

3. Recommendations

In order to develop and sustain the impact of the Aiming for Excellence programme:

3.1 Local Education Authorities should:

- continue to focus on learning in their work with schools;
- target efforts and resources where the quality of teaching and learning needs to be improved most;
- support schools in the development of transition plans;
- share information more widely about effective LEA and school initiatives that develop pupils' learning skills;
- ensure that the good-quality whole school training they provide is effectively developed in schools to make a sustainable improvement to learning; and
- identify clear desired outcomes for initiatives and evaluate their success.

3.2 Schools should:

- ensure that all staff plan teaching that builds on pupils' prior achievements, giving particular attention to the learning needs of under-achieving pupils and very able pupils;
- give more attention to how pupils learn and the development of learning skills;
- improve literacy and numeracy skills as an integral part of the learning process;
- ensure that ICT supports good thinking and learning across the curriculum;
- develop initiatives to improve learning and assessment across key stages 2 and 3;
- improve the use of assessment so that pupils know how to improve the standard and quality of their work;
- involve pupils further, and include parents, in discussing ways to improve learning; and
- evaluate rigorously the effectiveness of new initiatives.

3.3 The Welsh Assembly Government should:

- continue to make resources, including funding, available to help schools in their efforts to improve learning, prepare transition plans and develop pupils' skills;
- make sure that the Aiming for Excellence initiative has a high and national profile and that the strategy for improving learning and pupils' skills is understood by all schools and parents; and
- involve LEAs and schools more directly in the strategic planning of the programme.

4. Leadership and management

4.1 The majority of LEAs and schools have improving learning as one of their priorities. Over half of all LEAs, and many schools, have clear plans to improve transition and all have a range of initiatives to improve the quality of learning, particularly at key stage 3. To a very large extent, this work depends on funding from the Better Schools Fund and the Basic Skills Agency (BSA).

4.2 More groups of primary schools and their related secondary school have started to work together systematically to improve transition this year. Amongst the reasons for this are:

- the availability of additional non-pupil days;
- the identification of transition as a priority by the LEA;
- the impact of the Welsh Assembly Government consultation on transition plans; and
- the availability of a range of guidance made available by ACCAC, the BSA, the BBC and Estyn in 2004.

4.3 Some LEAs have produced area development plans to help primary and secondary schools prepare transition plans.

4.4 The leadership and management of transition arrangements are improving. In more LEAs than previously, senior officers take responsibility for improving transition and learning. In more schools, senior managers are responsible for co-ordinating transition arrangements. Overall, LEAs and schools plan new practices well but do not evaluate their impact on standards of work and pupils' progress.

4.5 Some consortia or families of primary and secondary schools have effectively-led, well-established transition programmes with clear objectives, as part of a three year plan. A few are in the last year of their programme and plan to complete their work with the preparation of transition plans. In the best of this work, groups of primary and secondary schools have worked together to:

- plan programmes of work, including bridging units, that span Years 6 and 7;
- assess pupils' work before and after pupils transfer to secondary school;
- share teaching and resources; and
- achieve measurable success in improving pupils' progress in Years 7 and 8.

4.6 Most LEAs and schools have used funding and support provided by the BSA Strategic Intervention Grants and Secondary School Training Initiative to improve the teaching of literacy and numeracy skills. LEAs are targeting resources from the BSA better this year on schools where pupils have poor basic skills.

4.7 Almost every school in Wales now has a literacy and a numeracy co-ordinator. Support and funding from the BSA have improved the planning and teaching of key skills in secondary schools, so as to build on the way that most

primary schools teach these skills. In particular, the BSA seminars on transition have helped middle managers in secondary schools develop literacy and numeracy skills in subjects across the curriculum.

4.8 Many LEAs and schools have learning initiatives that aim to improve pupils' thinking skills and extend the range of learning styles. Performance management has given an impetus to this work. Through a significant increase in lesson observation, senior and middle managers are more aware of the need to remove inconsistencies in the quality of learning.

4.9 In the most effective initiatives:

- a senior member of staff leads a well-planned and co-ordinated programme to improve how pupils learn;
- national 'experts' have provided high quality training for heads, deputies and teachers;
- projects have a sound rationale, have clear objectives and evaluation criteria;
- teachers make visits outside their school and LEA to see nationally acclaimed good practice; and
- newsletters and good practice publications share the outcomes of individual school and subject projects.

4.10 A few LEAs have not given enough attention to transition and improving learning or have not co-ordinated initiatives in such a way as to maximise their potential or share the benefits. Only a few LEAs have targeted efforts and resources on schools where improvement is most needed.

4.11 Some secondary schools do not share outstanding work to improve learning in individual subjects enough for the benefits to be applied consistently across the curriculum. A few schools have not followed up good quality whole-school in-service training well enough for it to make a sustainable improvement to learning.

5. Understanding the needs of learners

5.1 Following the publication of the Welsh Assembly Government's consultation document 'Transition from Primary to Secondary School' in November 2004, more schools are aware of the requirements of the Common Transfer File. Primary schools are providing a better range of information to secondary schools and there is more consistency in what the secondary schools receive.

5.2 Some primary schools pass on pieces of pupils' best work from Year 6. These effectively demonstrate what pupils are capable of doing and provide a useful baseline for monitoring progress in Year 7. However, the majority of primary schools only send information about the levels that pupils attained at the end of key stage 2 to the secondary school, without the benefit of examples of pupils' work.

5.3 Secondary schools are doing better at sharing information from primary

schools with Year 7 teachers. However, there are gaps in the information. Data on performance in the core subjects are sometimes not provided by attainment target. This means that the data cannot be used to full potential to identify particular learning needs in key stage 3, for example, improving boys' writing. Some Year 7 teachers still do not know enough about the abilities of pupils in their classes to plan challenging and interesting work.

5.4 Secondary SEN co-coordinators use the very good range of information that they receive from primary schools about the pupils with SEN to plan appropriate learning for them. However, the needs of very able pupils are not met so well. There is evidence from a considerable number of this year's secondary school inspection reports that tasks for very able pupils often lack appropriate challenge, particularly for boys, and that these pupils coast through Year 7.

5.5 Some groups of primary and secondary schools, usually with the support of their LEA, are moderating teachers' assessments of pupils' work together. This effective practice makes teachers more confident in assessing work and helps them plan better for the next stage of learning. These arrangements also provide better quality information than test marks.

5.6 Very few primary schools pass on information about pupils' key skills or work together with their secondary school to plan for consistency in developing pupils' wider key skills.

5.7 More secondary schools are receiving better information about pupils at risk of falling behind on transfer to the secondary school because they have weak literacy, numeracy or learning skills. Many use the information to provide 'catch-up' or enrichment programmes that measurably improve pupils' skills in key stage 3. However, primary schools are not doing enough to address the identified weaknesses before the pupils move to secondary school.

5.8 Many secondary schools are providing much better support for pupils whose attendance and behaviour problems are known to them before these pupils arrive. Some projects are innovative and involve pre-school or after-school activities and support provided by a range of agencies, including ContinYou, the Education Welfare Service and youth workers. These kinds of initiatives now target more effectively pupils most at risk of disengaging from learning.

5.9 Schools are consulting pupils more. This has given teachers new insights about how pupils learn best. Only a few schools plan similar opportunities to listen to the views of parents. Some parents say that they would like their children's school to consult with them more about how they can best support their children's learning. In particular, it is only after their child has started secondary school that some parents realise the importance of having study space and room for school books at home.

6. Improving learning

Curriculum continuity

6.1 More primary and secondary teachers are visiting each others' schools. This is proving to be very effective as the starting point of joint work on curriculum plans and teaching methods. Joint working by Year 6 and Year 7 teachers, in particular, helps to make teaching more challenging and less repetitious.

6.2 More schools are using bridging units to improve the continuity of learning. These units tend to fall into three categories:

- an LEA unit of work that catchments of schools adopt or tailor to their own needs, for example, based on a historical or literary theme, on a scientific investigation or on an aspect of numeracy such as using algebra;
- an LEA cross-curricular unit of work, based on a theme that develops key and creative skills and involves other agencies such as the school library service and theatre in education teams; and
- catchment based projects that a group of schools develop together, often with LEA support.

6.3 Last year, bridging units tended to focus on what was taught rather than on improving progression but their quality is improving.

6.4 The best bridging units:

- provide a sequence of increasingly challenging tasks;
- enable pupils to make progress in what they know, understand and can do;
- support consistency in the quality of teaching;
- teach key skills as a part of the work; and
- enable pupils to assess how well they are doing and what they have to do to improve.

6.5 At key stage 2, and increasingly at key stage 3, teachers are doing better at developing and applying literacy and numeracy skills in subjects across the curriculum. The BSA seminars for secondary teachers of foundation subjects have helped to share effective practice but there is still much to do at key stage 3, despite improvements. In particular, secondary teachers need to do more to help pupils with poor basic skills do better in subjects across the curriculum. Overall, secondary schools have been more successful in developing literacy skills than numeracy skills.

6.6 A few schools are making exceptional progress in improving pupils' ICT skills. These schools have succeeded because they have highly committed school leadership teams who have created a learning culture that fully integrates ICT as part of learning. Staff use innovative multimedia materials, including electronic whiteboards, as a normal part of lessons. Outcomes include higher levels of interest, motivation and behaviour by pupils in lessons that use ICT and higher levels of ICT

skills among pupils of all abilities.

6.7 Many schools have a long way to go in using ICT effectively to help pupils think and learn better. Many schools still lack the necessary resources to enable pupils to have easy access to ICT for classroom learning.

6.8 In the last year, more primary and secondary schools have begun to teach thinking skills in order to improve pupils' learning. Some LEAs and quite a few individual schools have provided high quality in-service training for teachers from national experts on thinking skills. This training is having a significant impact on improving the way in which teachers show pupils how to think about new and difficult ideas and how to set about solving problems.

6.9 Initiatives to develop thinking skills are improving the quality of learning. Pupils who learn in this way become more enthusiastic, curious and questioning. They also tend to use their new skills in other lessons. These approaches also improve pupils' language and vocabulary, enable them to be more independent in their thinking and help them to think more rigorously and logically. Pupils are able to work better on their own and also as part of a team. There is a marked improvement in behaviour, self-esteem and confidence.

6.10 Some schools develop thinking skills better than other schools. The most effective work is in schools where the senior management team is committed to developing thinking skills and has made it a strand in a whole school plan to improve learning.

Learning styles

6.11 Many schools have given attention this year to thinking about how pupils learn and their preferred learning styles. There has been a significant amount of training for staff on visual, aural and kinaesthetic learning. Other initiatives include accelerated learning techniques such as brain gym and mind-mapping. These are approaches that involve tasks that require pupils to talk about thinking and to visualise concepts and ideas. All of these initiatives have stimulated teachers to think about learning and to review how they teach.

6.12 The most effective developments to improve learning are part of a long-term improvement programme with clearly defined desired outcomes. Few schools have given enough consideration to how they will evaluate the mid-term and long term impact of improvement programmes on the quality of learning and standards.

6.13 The focus on learning has the potential to improve pupils' wider key skills. Many schools now have arrangements for peer-mentoring by pupils. In these schools, many teachers have been surprised by pupils' competence and confidence in accepting responsibilities and how these roles help pupils to understand the process of learning and to take more responsibility for themselves. Thinking skills help pupils to become better at problem-solving, working with others and improving the quality of their own work. These are very real achievements but few schools

have a framework for ensuring progression in key skills or for assessing pupils' wider key skills.

6.14 Some of the new learning strategies that secondary schools are introducing build effectively on how pupils learn in their primary schools. However, some initiatives, whilst enthusing teachers and pupils about learning, are being developed without reference to key stage 2. The most effective work is part of a joint primary-secondary initiative so that pupils benefit from continuity and consistency in how they learn. Schools need to ensure that learning in key stage 3 progresses as seamlessly as possible from key stage 2.

Assessment for learning

6.15 All schools set targets for pupils that teachers use at the end of a key stage to measure how well performance matches expectation. However, schools do not always properly identify, and act on, reasons for under performance.

6.16 Schools are increasingly using assessment information to improve teaching and learning as well as for reporting to parents. Important features of those schools which do this effectively are:

- all departments consistently apply a well understood, whole school assessment and marking policy that is often linked to a teaching and learning policy;
- pupils understand what they are learning to do, why they are taught it and how well they are doing it; and
- teachers give regular oral and written feedback to learners about how to improve.

6.17 A few secondary schools and subject departments have pioneered effective new approaches to assessment to improve learning, including peer assessment. In these schools, teachers:

- comment on pupils' work, using clear criteria based on national curriculum level or examination grade descriptions. rather than simply marking the work;
- teach pupils how to comment on each other's work sensitively and constructively; and
- break down national curriculum levels so that it is easier for pupils to discriminate between levels and measure progress within them.

As a result, pupils understand better the progress they are making and pay more attention to what they need to learn next rather than to the mark they have had for their work.

6.18 Overall, the use of assessment in planning and improving learning is not as effective as it should be in key stage 3. In a significant number of secondary schools inspected in 2004-05, pupils do not fully understand assessment criteria and what they need to do to improve.

7. The impact of the Aiming for Excellence programme

7.1 The purpose of the Aiming for Excellence programme is to help pupils build more effectively in key stage 3 on what they have learned in key stage 2. To do this, we have stressed the importance of improving continuity in teaching and learning between primary and secondary schools. The programme's key publications and the support provided by the Basic Skills Agency are listed in the Appendix.

7.2 It is difficult to demonstrate that the Aiming for Excellence programme has been specifically responsible for the changes in teaching and learning that this paper describes. Each LEA and school visited has used a range of approaches, including guidance from sources other than the Aiming for Excellence programme, in order to improve learning.

7.3 It has taken some time for the Aiming for Excellence publications to reach teachers. However, almost all LEAs and schools have drawn on the content and recommendations of the Aiming for Excellence publications in their strategic and development plans and in their guidance for teachers. In that respect, the programme has significantly promoted improvements in teaching and learning throughout Wales.

Appendix

Publications in the Aiming for Excellence programme

Aiming for Excellence in Key Stage 3
Estyn/ACCAC/Welsh Assembly Government, 2002

Raising Standards in Literacy and Numeracy
BBC Wales/Welsh Assembly Government/Estyn/ACCAC, 2003

Moving on ...Effective Transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3
Estyn/ACCAC/Welsh Assembly Government, 2004

Raising Standards in ICT
BBC Wales/Welsh Assembly Government/Estyn/ACCAC, 2004

Moving on...Improving Learning
Estyn/ACCAC/Welsh Assembly Government, 2004

Bridging the Gap
ACCAC/Estyn/Welsh Assembly Government, 2004

Transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3
BBC Wales/ Welsh Assembly Government/ACCAC/Estyn 2004

Consultation

Transition from Primary to Secondary School
Welsh Assembly Government, 2004

Basis Skills Agency initiatives

Strategic Intervention Grants

Secondary School Training Initiative