

A Curriculum for Excellence: Active Learning in the Early Years

Introduction

A Curriculum for Excellence establishes, for the first time, an early level which encompasses the pre-school sector and the early years of primary school.

Schools should be evaluating the provision in the early stages to look at what they are doing now and what can be done to improve curriculum delivery to include more active learning. When inspecting schools, HMIe focus on child centred approaches to learning and teaching in Primary 1 and Primary 2 and if the school has a nursery the early years inspector makes observations in these classes. All stakeholders should be involved in putting together a clear plan for the way ahead over the coming session. Schools should not wait until the learning outcomes are published to move forward.

Management

Leadership is key in taking this forward and *Building the Curriculum 2* identifies the following aspects of the management role:

- Leading and supporting colleagues in identifying good practice and building on existing strengths
- Providing opportunities for staff to develop their methodology in relation to active learning
- Building confidence that changes to learning and teaching will be in the best interests of the children
- Evaluating practice and identifying how it might be improved
- Ensuring appropriate resources are available and used in the best way
- Planning systematically for change and managing it at an appropriate pace

Teachers

Staff in nursery and early stages of the primary should:

- Be familiar with the document *Building the Curriculum 2: Active Learning in the Early Years* as this clearly explains the pedagogy of early years and focuses on how what we know about active learning can be applied to a slightly different curriculum
- Be familiar with the values, principles and purposes of *A Curriculum for Excellence*
- Be aware of what is meant by active learning
- Build more effectively on children's pre-school experiences and learning
- Go on to the following websites for some good information and ideas from practice in other areas:

www.ltscotland.org.uk/earlyyears/sharingpractice

www.curriculumforexcellencescotland.gov.uk

www.hvllc.org.uk (links to the learning and teaching toolkit, *A Curriculum for Excellence* and the literacy project include information on active learning)

Active Learning

Active learning is learning which engages and challenges children's thinking using real-life or imaginary situations. Using this methodology will mean that staff take advantage of opportunities for learning presented by:

- Spontaneous play
- Planned, purposeful play
- Investigation and exploration
- Events and life experiences
- Focused learning and teaching

Quality active learning builds on children's previous experiences and provides differentiation and challenge. It allows for different learning styles and children's independence but is supported by adults who structure the environment and intervene sensitively to extend the children's learning. Play in Primary 1 is not the same play as is happening in the nursery.

Practical Points

As staff reflect on current practice and plan for improvement they may wish to implement changes gradually by looking at one aspect of the provision at a time and asking, 'what is the best way to do this for both staff and children?'

The following are some practical suggestions of what might be considered:

1. The Learning Environment

- Is the layout of the room appropriate for active learning?
- What is the purpose of each of the areas of the room and what potential for learning does each space have? The focus should be on the learning rather than on provision of activities.
- It might be useful to think of learning bays/stations for areas of the curriculum or purposes such as exploring and investigating and these can be developed gradually
- Is it necessary to have a desk/table designated for each individual child?
- How often are areas of the room changed?
- Can resources be shared within the early years of primary and the nursery?
- Are you using less worksheets and colouring-in sheets?
- Are the resources high quality, open-ended and interesting in order to encourage curiosity, challenge, investigation and creativity across all levels of development?
- Are the children involved in planning the environment? It might be useful to work with the children on mind maps looking at some aspects of the provision.
- Is good use made of the outdoor learning environment? This is a particular focus in pre-school and should be built on in early years of the primary school.

2. The Structure of the Day

- Is there a balance between direct teaching and opportunities for children to practise skills independently?
- Is there a smooth transition between the structure of the nursery day and that of the Primary 1 class? Could there be more similarity e.g. start of the session as in nursery with a together time/registration time and discussion of the day ahead or the Highscope model of 'plan, do, review'?
- Are there opportunities for children to work co-operatively? Have you considered the Storyline Approach to exploring topics as this does promote children's own

choices, problem solving skills, etc/ Information on this is available through the LTS website.

- Is there time for children to engage in their own play and deepen and extend their learning through creative thinking?
- Are there opportunities for children to develop a range of skills and knowledge through well planned, purposeful play?
- Is there time built in for reflection?
- Are learning opportunities planned to support the learning intentions?
- Is there any co-operation between P1 and nursery on planning and assessment?
- Is the role of the adult clear in observing, assessing, teaching, modelling, interacting, etc?
- In what ways are the staff keeping parents informed? E.g. four capacities up on the wall for parents to see with photos or text about the children's learning, newsletters to include items on what is happening in the school and what parents can do at home, meet the teacher evenings, etc

Ensuring the Continuum

Effective use of the seven principles of curriculum design will ensure that children's needs are being met at every stage and schools and nurseries need to look at transitions for children. Transition from pre-school to Primary 1 should be more seamless using *A Curriculum for Excellence* as there should not be a fresh start approach to P1 but opportunities for real continuity between stages and clear progression. This will involve appropriate experiences for children in pre-school who require further challenge and also for children in P1 who are not ready for a more formal setting. Communication across the stages is important and this needs to encompass information about experiences, methodology, learning styles, achievement, etc. Staff need to review the ways in which children's learning is documented and recorded as part of ongoing AifL.

Head teachers will be observing and evaluating approaches to learning and teaching in the early years as part of their formal monitoring programme and it is important that there is time for professional discussion with colleagues as well as joint CPD.

Summary

In Primary 1 the curriculum will continue to be based on the development of crucial skills and attitudes. It should be both excitingly different for children but also reassuringly familiar.

Primary 2 teachers will need to build on children's earlier experiences and review the balance between direct teaching and children's independent and active learning.