

Building an Early Years curriculum that matches children's needs.

Background context

Montgomery School is situated in the Hohne garrison which is located near to the village of Bergen. The school serves the families of troops attached to 7th Armoured Brigade, The Desert Rats. We are one of six schools that make up the Hohne Consortium.

The school is situated close to quartering area with the remainder of our children being brought in by bus from Bergen. We also take in the children from Officer's families housed just outside the camp. Currently we have a school population of 245 children from FS2 to Year 6 with 30 children being catered for in our Nursery which is situated on the top floor of a barrack block some three kilometres from the school.

The building was erected in the late fifties along the standard design of a central hall and two adjacent corridors. Extension work was completed sometime in the past resulting in an additional full size hall being added. We have extensive grounds including ample hard and grass surfaces. The school is surrounded by trees which provide an attractive setting. We have a number of play areas for the children including two well equipped outdoor classrooms for our youngest children. As with most SCE schools, we are well equipped particularly in terms of available IT hardware.



The outside classroom Nature and scope of project activity

In September 2005 we took the bold step of reorganising the class structure in FS2 and Year 1. We replaced the traditional single year group model with three (four being required for this year) parallel FS2/Year 1 classes. At the same time we introduced a revised curriculum framework based on the six areas of learning identified in the document "*Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*". This new framework now operates across the whole of the phase including Year 2 and structures learning under the headings Personal and Social Development, Communication, Language and Literacy, Mathematical Development, Knowledge & Understanding of the World, Physical Development and Creative Development. During the drafting of the curriculum framework care was taken to ensure that full coverage of the National Curriculum was built in. Key learning objectives have been carefully identified to ensure both continuity and progression through the year groups & into KS2.

Project outcomes

To date, our work has resulted in a number of key outcomes:

- A draft curriculum map for the Early Years Phase is developing (refinements are continually being made).
- The curriculum identifies progressive learning intentions under the six areas of learning structure.
- Teaching Assistant staff have been empowered and now play a key teaching role in this phase of the school.
- The children arriving in September as FS2 quickly settle into the school and are well supported by their Year 1 peers.
- Thus far there is no evidence that standards have fallen. Last year's achievement data for Year 1 children was very encouraging.
- Children now have well focused teaching sessions and are grouped according to ability and need.
- All of the children have access to learning environments beyond their normal classroom including the outdoor learning area.
- The children experience a balance of teacher led and pupil initiated learning opportunities.
- The level of independence shown by the children has increased.
- We believe that the children's needs are now being more fully met, especially those of many boys. Our children tend to be below average on entry particularly in terms of personal & social development, linguistic ability and physical development. This broader, more balanced, creative and relevant curriculum, caters better for the needs of our young children whilst still allowing for regular, focused teaching in the core areas.
- As a part of our TLR proposal, we created the new position Assistant Phase Leader (Early Years) whose primary role is to lead practice in FS1 and 2.

Future challenges and lessons learnt:

- It became clear in the early days of the change over that the day was too fragmented for the youngest children and there was insufficient time for children to be with their class teacher.
- Some parents were very sceptical at the outset and took a lot of 'winning over'. This said, we did not have a single query at the start of this year about how we are working and parental response to date has been very positive.
- The issue of Teaching Assistant capability and competence was, and still is, something we have to monitor. Replacing outgoing staff from this area of the school can be difficult as a good deal is expected of them.
- Teacher mobility requires careful managing to ensure we get the right people for job. With the current 'pool' set up, this can be difficult.
- Establishing the right team is crucial to the success of such a venture. Securing commitment to the vision and a desire to reform are vital.
- Leadership at Phase Leader and Assistant Phase Leader level is essential for success.
- Remaining committed to your beliefs as a Head Teacher and placing trust in your teachers makes the real difference. There were many times when I thought I might 'pull the plug' on the proposed changes before September 2005!

Key lessons to share from the project

- You can think 'outside the box' and make a difference. You need belief and commitment from all, coupled with a lot of hard work!
- Young children have specific needs and planning for these in a creative way removes many of the anxieties that can occur, e.g. switching off boys from learning at an early age.
- Take learning outside of the classroom when you can. It's exciting and also allows those who need it space to express themselves.
- Focus on learning and look for learning opportunities in everything you plan for.
- Teaching and non-teaching staff make the difference! To fundamentally alter the way in which you are teaching children requires staff who are open and adventurous.
- In amongst all the exciting creative, remember that a child's ability to read, write and work confidently with numbers is paramount.



Key lessons for leaders from the project

- Go with what you believe in and stay committed to the change.
- Plan for change and ensure you have people in place who can manage it.
- Secure the commitment of all involved.
- Communicate with all the concerned parties as early as possible. I didn't do this and caused unnecessary anxiety amongst parents as a result!
- Open the doors and allow parents to see what you are doing. This reassures and brings them 'on board'.
- Regularly review and accept that it won't all go smoothly to begin with.



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