

National Low-Attainers Pilot (LAP)

Parklands School, Liverpool: Curriculum planning

The school is a mixed 11–18 comprehensive with a population of 800. Over 50% of pupils are on the SEN register with a similar percentage qualifying for free school meals. Pupil attainment and attendance are below the national average.

When the staff of Parklands first met to discuss the school's involvement in the pilot, they agreed that they wanted to develop happier, more autonomous learners. They were aware that pupils' levels of motivation were dropping, the existing subject content often led to repetition and that Year 7 pupils needed more challenge in their work.

What resulted was a curriculum designed better to meet the needs of the learners, built around the skills that the staff felt the pupils would need in the future rather than the content contained in the discrete subject programmes of study. Now, all Year 7 pupils spend 12 of their 25 periods in mixed-ability groups following thematic schemes that take the form of half-termly projects with such titles as 'I'm a learner, get me out of here' and 'Spring into summer'. These are delivered by a team of five learning tutors who also fulfil the role of form tutors each with their own teaching base, which are clustered together. The team is led by the pilot coordinator.

The school believes that their innovative, systematic but flexible approach to curriculum planning has been pivotal to the success of the pilot. Initially, funding was made available for staff to plan collaboratively off site. Twenty-four staff representing a wide range of subject specialisms worked in cross-curricular teams of three or four over six half-day sessions to plan the themes. The outcome of these creative and dynamic meetings was the set of frameworks for each of the six half-termly projects which outlined what needed to be covered.

Wanting to avoid the traditional model of planning and keen to explore a different way of working, the school decided to adopt an alternative design for Year 7 lessons known as mind-friendly learning. Essentially a cyclical model, it has five stages that structure each week. It begins with the *Big Picture* when pupils are introduced to what they will be studying and why and how it fits in with what they have done in the past. Invariably, this happens on Monday morning first lesson and involves all of the pupils together. The next three stages take place in individual teaching spaces.

Stage 2, *Connect*, makes use of the pupils' existing knowledge, understanding and experiences. The third stage, *Input*, is where whatever is new to the pupils is introduced. *Actively Process* is the fourth stage where pupils complete a series of activities that help them acquire new knowledge, better understand key concepts or refine important skills. The final stage, *Review*, often takes the form of a celebration where pupils demonstrate to each other what they have learned and evaluate what they have done and how they have worked. As with the first stage, this involves bringing all the pupils together. Usually it happens on Friday afternoon and there is an open invitation for parents to attend.

From the outset the staff recognised that vitality and freshness would be key to keeping pupils and themselves engaged and motivated. One way of doing this was to plan in such a way that teachers can respond to what has happened very recently and what is topical locally or nationally. To aid this, a particular way of working has been adopted. Weekly, usually on a Tuesday or Wednesday afternoon, the pilot coordinator meets with another staff member for half a day to determine what exactly will be taught the next week, how it will be delivered and what resources will be needed. Generally, the teachers get involved on a rotational basis although the coordinator exercises some discretion in the light of what is to be covered and the specialisms and expertise of her individual team members. What is being proposed is recorded on an A3 planning sheet. The project frameworks drawn up by the cross-curricular teams are the starting point and the five stages of the mind-friendly learning model provide the structure. Once the plan is finalised and resources are prepared, these are circulated to the team of teachers in good time for the following week's lessons.

A range of methods are used to evaluate the success of the projects and the weekly plans. The informal staff discussions on how things have gone are punctuated by formal meetings to review the impact of the plans. Pupils' views are gathered as the lessons progress and at the end of each theme pupils are invited to speak individually or in pairs directly to camera, *vox pop* style, about what they enjoyed, what went well and not so well.

The Parklands method of planning has proved to be very successful and the approach is now a feature of Year 8, too. Staff members involved feel that the radical departure from what normally happens has allowed them to be far more creative in their approach and better placed to respond more effectively to the emerging needs of the pupils. These teachers describe themselves as being re-energised and believe that the pupils are getting a better deal. Levels of motivation are higher, there is minimal duplication of work and pupils are far more challenged than previously. The school is closer to achieving its ambition to develop happier, more autonomous learners.