

“A Curriculum for Excellence”

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH-BASED LITERATURE FOR THE CURRICULUM REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

The report *A Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Executive, 2004) points the way towards reviewing the curriculum in a more generic way, rather than in the more traditional, compartmentalised fashion. It also emphasises the importance of the values underlying the curriculum as well as the processes of learning and teaching entailed by a broad set of aims. The curriculum for all children and young people 3-18 should, the report argues, complement the important contributions of their families and communities to enable them to become:

- Successful learners with
 - enthusiasm and motivation for learning
 - determination to reach high standards of achievement and
 - openness to new thinking and ideas
- Confident individuals with
 - self-respect
 - a sense of physical, mental and emotional well-being
 - secure values and beliefs and
 - ambition
- Responsible citizens with
 - respect for others and
 - commitment to participate responsibly in political, economic, social and cultural life
- Effective contributors with
 - an enterprising attitude
 - resilience and
 - self-reliance (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.12).

The central question for all concerned is how these purposes can be achieved. This is the question which provided the focus for the reviews of research-based literature carried out for the Curriculum for Excellence Programme Board.

KEY MESSAGES FROM THE REVIEWS OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

A Curriculum for Excellence (ACE) sets out seven principles for curriculum design, namely, challenge and enjoyment; breadth; progression; depth; personalisation and choice; coherence; and relevance. These principles find some support in the literature on learning and pedagogy accumulated over several decades of research. ACE also

identifies three factors upon which the opportunity for children to develop the four capacities will depend:

- the environment for learning;
- the choice of teaching and learning approaches; and
- the ways in which learning is organised (Scottish Executive, 2004, p. 13)

A number of common themes have emerged from the present reviews of the research-based literature across the different ‘areas’ of the curriculum, which can be grouped under the three factors. These are listed below together with some key questions for all concerned.

The environment for learning

- **Respect:** To what extent is the integrity of individuals and groups safeguarded and enhanced by the learning experiences provided?
- **Pupil voice:** To what extent are pupils consulted and encouraged to express their views about, and hence shape, their own learning experiences through constructive dialogue?ⁱ
- **Experiential learning:** How can we create an environment in which students are allowed to interact in real life contexts, to construct individual meaning, and to engage in complex actions that reflect life outside school?
- **Relevance:** Can learners relate the purposes of the learning to their own needs and interests arising out of their individual experiences of life – in school, in their families and in their communities?
- **Clear goals and feedback:** To what extent can pupils share in setting targets for their own learning and how is attainment and progress tracked and effectively communicated to learners in ways that can enhance their learning processes?

The choice of teaching and learning approaches

- **Active engagement:** How can learning activities be designed in order to provide a stimulating context for the active engagement of individual learners?
- **Meaningfulness:** How can we ensure that the learner can make the necessary connections with new information, and make sense of the learning experiences provided?
- **Motivation:** Is there a willingness on the part of pupils to engage with the process of learning? How can we make the learning challenging, enjoyable and/or seen as worthy of effort?
- **Metacognition:** How can pupils be encouraged to be reflective – to ‘learn how to learn’?ⁱⁱ
- **ICT and learning:** How can we use ICT tools to enhance and transform pupils’ learning?

The ways in which learning is organised

- **Cooperative and collaborative learning:** What opportunities are provided for peer mediated learning? How can a collaborative learning community be constructed in order to reap the advantages of a classroom culture within

which teachers and students support one another in pursuit of clearly articulated goals?ⁱⁱⁱ

- **Problem-based learning:** How can we provide pupils with the challenge of real problems to solve as individuals or in collaborative groups, thus fostering the motivation which comes from a genuine ‘need to know’ the answer?
- **Grouping:** How can the needs of individual pupils best be met by differentiation and organisational strategies and that do not themselves create negative consequences?^{iv}

Teachers’ understandings, their values and their degree of autonomy.

Three closely related themes which have emerged very strongly from almost all of the reviews of factors influencing learning were (1) the importance of teachers’ knowledge and understanding of the subject matter, (2) teachers’ underlying values and beliefs about their role and (3) the degree of autonomy teachers had in deciding how best to meet the needs of their pupils.

These themes point to the importance of connecting the Curriculum Review 3-18 with relevant initiatives which focus on the ‘teacher as learner’. The development activities associated with the review of the curriculum will, it is hoped, provide opportunities for teachers in clusters of schools to engage in processes of enquiry which will be a context for continuing professional development. Current funded research being conducted in Scotland is also potentially relevant, for example, in projects being undertaken by the Networks of the Applied Educational Research Scheme: Learners, Learning and Teaching; School Management and Governance; and Schools and Social Capital.

Progression

It should be pointed out that the reviews of research literature yielded relatively little evidence directly concerning pupil progression. The concept of progression is not well understood and is not prominent in the literature on curriculum or on learning. Theories of learning from Piaget through Vygotsky to Bruner often lead to slightly different views of how learning takes place and how progression, or progress in learning, comes about. Just as there are many alternative views of learning, there are also several ways of construing progression. For example, one may subscribe to the view that progress in learning is simply developmental, taking place through a series of maturational stages. Alternatively, one may take the view that learning is social, involving the co-construction of meaning with others. Yet again, one may believe that the best metaphor is ‘scaffolding’ and that progress in learning depends on the mediation of another (the teacher?). Therefore, depending on which view or combination of views of learning one takes, one may have a quite different concept of progression.

It can also be argued that the concept of progress applied in any context depends on the uses to which information about progress is put.^v However, the clearest message on progression which emerges from the reviews is that it is not *what* and *when*, but *how* learning takes place that really matters. There is also an argument that focusing on progression tends to drive thinking about the curriculum into a linear mode, which fails to reflect the true complexity and multi-dimensional nature of learning.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the prodigious efforts of a very large number of colleagues involved in compiling comprehensive reviews of research-based literature in the different areas of the curriculum within such a very short timescale. They were as follows:

Literacy and Language -	Vivienne Smith and Susan Ellis	University of Strathclyde
Mathematics -	Taro Fujita, Willie Magill and Penny Munn**	University of Glasgow; University of Strathclyde
Science -	Donald Gray	University of Strathclyde
Design and Technology -	Susan McLaren* and John Dakers**	University of Strathclyde University of Glasgow
Social Subjects -	Henry Maitles and Robert Munro	University of Strathclyde
Health and Well Being -	Joan Forrest	University of Strathclyde
Expressive Arts -	Marie Jeanne McNaughton, Liz Mitchell and Wilma Eaton	University of Strathclyde
Gaelic and Modern European Languages -	Richard Johnstone	University of Stirling
Religious and Moral Education -	Chris Foxon	University of Strathclyde

We would also like to acknowledge the assistance provided by Professor Ian Menter of Glasgow University and Professor Mary Simpson of Edinburgh University who acted as critical friends to this short but intensive project. Finally, we wish to record our appreciation of the efforts of Sanna Rimpilainen, Research Officer in the Applied Educational Research Centre, University of Strathclyde, who so efficiently collated the reviews and managed the Virtual Research Environment for the project in association with the AERS Learners, Learning and Teaching Network.

Reference

Scottish Executive (2004) *A Curriculum for Excellence*. Edinburgh: Scottish Executive.

Notes

ⁱ Rudduck, J. (2004) Consulting Students about Teaching and Learning. In A. Pollard and M. James (Eds) *Personalised Learning: A Commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme*. Cambridge: ESRC TLRP.

ⁱⁱ James, M. (2004) Learning How to Learn. In A. Pollard and M. James (Eds) *Personalised Learning: A Commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme*. Cambridge: ESRC TLRP.

ⁱⁱⁱ Blatchford, P. (2004) Improving the Effectiveness of Pupil Group Work. In A. Pollard and M. James (Eds) *Personalised Learning: A Commentary by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme*. Cambridge: ESRC TLRP.

^{iv} Hamilton, L. (2005) *Organization of Learning in Scottish Primary Schools. A Focus on Setting and Broadbanding*. Edinburgh: Moray House School of Education.

^v Hughes, S (2005) Current doctoral study of progress in writing, University of Strathclyde.