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Curriculum planning near Lough Allen

St. Brigid's N.S. is situated near the shores of Lough Allen in Drumkeerin, Co. Leitrim. It has three classroom teachers with 62 pupils and is also the base school for two shared learning support/resource teachers.

Ten years ago

In the early years of the implementation of the curriculum our main concern was to have a policy for every subject as it came on stream. We borrowed, adapted and worked diligently to produce marvellous documents! Often, it would fall to each of us to fill in our templates separately. Then the principal put the document together and filed it proudly in the Pleán Scoile.

We also worked hard to change our methodologies. We enthusiastically embraced the 'new' subjects and took on board the centrality of language and the importance of reading across the curriculum. With the help of our learning support teachers, we tried strategies such as paired reading, parent/child reading, Book Week etc. We consider ourselves willing and eager to work towards change if we are convinced it will help the pupils in our school. It is a priority in our school to ensure children are actively involved in their own learning.

Challenges in more recent times

When our principal Máirín returned to school in 2007 (after her secondment of three years as a PCSP music trainer), she wanted to review the way she planned for her own teaching of 4th, 5th and 6th classes. When she began writing her yearly schemes, she referred to the school policy on each subject. It was then she realised that our curricular policies, (many of which she had written herself!), said very little about what was

happening in OUR school. They were far too general. In our anxiety to have policies down on paper, we had written them before our practice had properly evolved. Ironically, now that we have the experience and the knowledge to write meaningful policy, we just have one planning day per year. However, the Board of Management has agreed to close school early to allow us have a monthly planning meeting from 2-4pm, in the months when no staff meeting takes place.

Our planning meetings

At these meetings, we:

- review one aspect of a curricular area
- set out some achievable targets for each class teacher
- prioritise the area we will review at the next meeting
- organise the preparation necessary for the next review.

School Planning: small steps

Now that the totality of the curriculum is in place in the school, a narrow focus is very effective for these short planning meetings. We review practice and planning of just one or two strands of the curriculum in any term and the subsequent changes are much more likely to be implemented. Our policies reflect what we actually do. This understanding leads to a lessening of pressure. We no longer have an expectation that our Plean Scoile will be 'finished.' We just think about what is the next area that needs to be addressed.

Measuring for success

Last year following our standardised testing, we realised that there was room for improvement in the measurement strand of the mathematics curriculum so we reviewed that strand. We identified the common language that each teacher would teach and organised the resources that were available to us. With the help of the learning support teacher we set up a trail, like a mini-sports event, based on the topic of length. We have noticed a steady improvement in the achievement of the children in the measurement strand and look forward to having this observation confirmed in this year's tests!

More fabric and fibre

The fabric and fibre strand of the visual arts curriculum was next for review. We re-read the objectives, brought lesson plans to the meeting and agreed that we would each teach a minimum of three fabric and fibre lessons during the school year – about one per term. Extra resources were ordered. When we were offered the opportunity to work with a craftsperson, in a scheme run by Kilkenny Craft Council, we asked that the focus would be on fabric and fibre and updated our Visual arts policy accordingly.

Particular multi-grade challenges

One of the challenges faced by a three-teacher school is the division of classes and the subsequent division of the curriculum. We are aware of many valid suggestions and strategies, but the day-to-day reality faced by the multi-class teacher needs very creative management. Organisation is key, as well as having a thorough knowledge of the content and methodologies of the curriculum.

Currently there are 27 children in our 1st, 2nd and 3rd classroom. We became concerned about the difficulties children might potentially face in moving from that classroom into the senior classroom. As the majority of children in the middle classroom are in 1st & 2nd classes, those curriculum objectives take precedence. In the senior room, the 5th & 6th class curriculum has precedence because most of the children are in these classes. Therefore, the children faced a potential jump in some curricular areas from 2nd class to 5th class content when they moved from one room to another. To try to redress this, we looked at the areas that concerned us most and devised strategies.

Teacher-friendly planning: Gaeilge and SESE

Our main areas of concern were Gaeilge and SESE. In Gaeilge we took time to write specific objectives for each class so that we would know precisely what the children were being taught in each room and we are now trying to ensure continuity and progression.

We have drawn up a 4-year plan for each of the SESE subjects. Over the cycle of this plan we have tried to ensure that the children will cover a broad range of strand units described in the curriculum. Our 3rd class now go into the senior room for history and geography. For the teacher in the senior classroom, it just means a few more children in the classroom each week, no extra planning is required. For the children, it makes the transition between the classes easier as they have first-hand experience in the senior room. It also ensures that, even in a busy week, history and geography are never neglected as they are timetabled in both rooms simultaneously! It also gives the middle classroom an opportunity to work specifically with the 1st and 2nd classes. The teacher in the Infant classroom then suggested that she would like to take over the teaching of SESE for 1st and 2nd classes during the last hour on selected days. She felt that because she currently has only two classes and smaller pupil numbers, she could contribute to supporting the teacher and children in the room that currently has the highest numbers.

Conclusion

Good co-operation in all schools is important, but in small schools it is vital. There is a need for all schools to have dedicated planning time so that there is good inter-staff communication. There is a common misconception that in smaller schools, communication is easier, but the reality is that, with the onus of supervision, we rarely if ever get the opportunity to meet at break times.

When you read this, please don't think that we have everything sorted! Nothing could be further from the truth. In common with most teachers and with every multi-grade teacher, there are days and even weeks where we simply don't manage to do anything like the work we have planned. When we are writing our monthly progress reports, we sometimes wonder how so much is left undone, when we have worked so hard!

But there is the positive side of multi-grade as well – there is always next year. So, if, for instance, you have neglected the composing strand of the music curriculum, done very little printing in visual arts, postponed weather in geography... because of the weather, prioritise them for next year! More and more we are taking the long view. Children are in our multi-grade classrooms for two or three years and in our school for eight years. We

will try to see to it that over that long cycle, we will have given them a broad-based education across the curriculum.

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