

Opening Minds: A competency-based curriculum for the twenty first century

National Teacher Research Panel 
engaging teacher expertise

This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2006, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research. All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

Aims of the project

- Improve transition for students from Key Stage 2 into Key Stage 3.
- Help to develop transferable skills and competencies such as literacy, numeracy and ICT in the Key Stage 3 curriculum.
- Embed Learning to Learn and Emotional Intelligence into the curriculum.
- Create engagement in independent learning through an innovative and engaging curriculum for students in the 21st century.
- Extend and challenge the most able and engage those with the potential to become disaffected in KS3, creating a resilience in learning that will become habitual and transferable.
- Embed ICT throughout the curriculum with the laptops for students scheme.

Dimensions of the study

The Champion Opening Minds (OM) pilot was conducted over two years 2004-2006 and will conclude in July 2006. It involved two staff teaching the Opening Minds programme, 60 students in the first year and another 60 students in the second year. The National Curriculum was replaced by a competency-based approach, which focussed on the skills learners need for success in the twenty first century.

Summary of main findings

- There was some evidence of improved progress in literacy.
- Using a competency based curriculum has helped improve pupils' learning after transition from primary, as reflected in value added data.
- Students were more engaged in learning than in previous years.
- Students improved their ability to transfer skills across the curriculum and beyond the school gates.
- Parents were overwhelmingly supportive of the Opening Minds curriculum.
- Teachers involved in teaching Opening Minds felt invigorated and inspired in their professional lives.

Background & context

Champion School is a large, successful 11-18 comprehensive school in the heart of Northamptonshire. In September 2004, the school made the decision to implement the Opening Minds RSA (Royal Society Arts) curriculum as part of a pilot scheme. We set out to evaluate the impact of this type of curriculum on transition (from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3) and investigate the benefits of delivering an integrated curriculum to Year 7 students.

We also wanted to embed further the use of Learning to Learn and create a relevant and innovative curriculum for the twenty first century learner. Opening Minds (OM) has also become the ideal place to trial our 'leased laptops for students' scheme'.

Teaching processes & strategies

Two mixed ability groups from an eight-form intake were randomly selected to take part in the initial pilot. Our form groups in Year 7 are placed into a house system and each group is named after a tree – the pilot groups were Ash and Oak. The subjects that were delivered through our OM programme were English, Citizenship, Learning to Learn, Geography, History, ICT, Religious Studies and PHSE. Students were taught in mixed-ability form groups and received a total of eight one-hour sessions per fortnight, taught by the form tutor in the same classroom. This time was increased in the second year to 11 hours over a fortnight, including the same subjects, but the form tutor did not teach this pilot. The members of staff involved had their subject expertise in the humanities in both pilot studies.

Our OM curriculum meant students were taught by the same teacher in the same room with a curriculum that combined subject areas and delivered them in a project based format. This meant students met a smaller number of teachers and had less books to carry around to fewer classrooms. Students experienced a coherent, relevant curriculum that helped ease them into the secondary school experience. Underpinning all the planning and assessment of the curriculum were the RSA competences. These cover five main areas: citizenship, learning, managing information, relating to people and managing situations (often abbreviated to CLIPS).

“ Teaching the same class, in the same room for the majority of the curriculum has had an amazing impact on students settling into Champion”

Campion teacher 2004



Teachers were encouraged to make sure they created the ideal learning environment. Greeting students by name and with a smile, playing music to support learning when appropriate, bright and relevant wall displays for peripheral learning experiences, circle time, and the Philosophy for Children (P4C) techniques were all part of our OM approach. Students were regularly encouraged to 'give praise and advice' to each other and active teaching and learning methods were entrenched in the Opening Minds programme.

Many students chose to take part in the leased laptops for students scheme, and this added an enhanced dimension to teaching the various subjects contained in the Opening Minds projects.

The OM projects have been mapped against the National Curriculum but with a focus on the skills rather than the content. It is evident when the National curriculum is scrutinised in this way that there is much similarity in subject requirements, e.g. all subject areas require students to evaluate, describe, explain etc. Students need these and many other strategies to be successful in life. Assessment for Learning strategies are used throughout the course, including self and peer assessment.



The course at Campion commenced with a focus on Learning to Learn (L2L) and in the first OM project 'Smart Brain' students identified how they learned best and needed to grow their whole brain. A strong emphasis was placed on emotional intelligence, team work, listening skills, note taking and mind mapping techniques using ICT. By starting with this project OM embedded from the start of Year 7 the importance of L2L and set up the skills needed for students to become successful independent learners.

The Findings

Enthusiasm for learning in the pilot group was astounding and there were many examples of students becoming engaged beyond the lesson and conducting their own extended learning activities. The increase in confidence was noticeable in students and commented upon by parents too.

"OM is a favourite, it has boosted my daughter's confidence."

The pilot children claimed to really enjoy learning and the teachers claimed to be inspired by their chosen profession again. Teaching staff described how much easier it was to differentiate and use assessment for learning techniques more effectively. The increased amount of contact time with the students in the pilot was cited as the main reason by OM teachers for the ease and improvement in delivery of the cross curricular elements to learning.

We asked our parents if there were any subjects or areas of school life that had particularly helped their child settle at Campion. Of the 90 responses not one was negative. Here is a sample of parental comments from the questionnaires:

"Opening Minds: a great hit!"

"Opening Minds – staying in the same room (form room) for more lessons, stability of having same teacher for a bigger proportion of the week."

"OM is a favourite. It has boosted my daughters confidence."

"I am very impressed with OM, and she is really enjoying it,"

Questionnaires completed by teachers showed that the pilot form groups had adopted some positive learning habits and were transferring skills to other subject areas. Teachers found that forms Ash and Oak were 'noisy' but engaged in their learning and keen to learn. Below is a sample of the staff replies:

"...(Students in Oak & Ash, the pilot groups) seem to understand instructions more quickly."
(MFL teacher)

"Ash 7 are more settled than Beech 7."
(Art teacher)

"The group does seem well settled...can be very noisy."
(English Teacher)

"Attainment is good – comparable with best of other Year 7 groups."
(Science teacher)

"Oak can be very noisy, but always listen when asked... Discipline is really easy with them"
(Music teacher)

"I had a visitor to the school who commented on the difference between Ash 7 & Rowan. They were happier, and listened better, their group work was good and all enthusiastic and joined in."
(ICT teacher)

In both of our pilot classes the rank order remained the same, based on Key Stage 2 data. We felt this showed there was no detrimental effect on the students' English learning. We also compared the average national curriculum level for history and RS for each class that was given at the end of term 1 in Year 8. Both classes were ranked in the top half of 8 classes in the year.

Since the introduction of our pilot Campion has improved



transition from Year 6 into Year 7. This can be seen in improved progress in English based on optional SATS results and value added data.

Research methods

The first pilot was conducted with 60 students (2 out of 8 Year 7 form groups). The other form groups of Year 7 made up the control group. The pilot group was selected at random and contained a mixed ability profile comparable with the ability profile of the rest of the year group.

We have also made a start on collecting quantitative data, although we will need to do this over a period of time in order to demonstrate with statistical data the impact of Opening Minds on students' learning. Initially we used optional Year 7 English tests to provide us with statistical data. The average point score for KS2 reading tests was rank ordered for each class. This was then compared to the rank order for the Optional reading tests taken at the end of Year 7.

Conclusion

Governors have approved the roll-out of Opening minds to ALL our Year 7 students for the next academic year. The implications of the Opening Minds pilot have been far reaching and are forcing us to look again at what and how we deliver the curriculum to our learners. It has become clear that to have this valuable experience in Year 7 and then allow students to move into Year 8 without any further follow up on Opening Minds could create problems. Students and many parents were immensely disappointed not to have an Opening Minds course in Year 8. Hence, at Campion we are now introducing Opening Minds to all Year 7 students and in Year 8 students will receive two hours a fortnight of an Opening Minds course, which will cover ICT, Citizenship, and Learning to Learn, and continue to use competency based project learning. The OM approach will be encouraged in all KS3 subjects across the school as staff training focuses on encouraging challenge and independent learning in all subjects.

We also envisage that other areas of the curriculum can be combined to create OM projects, and will be setting up staff teams with expertise to create Maths/Science/Technology/ICT projects and Art/Dance/Drama/Music based projects. It is possible that students arriving at Campion in a few years time may only have six or fewer teachers in their first year. There appear

to be only two subject areas which do not fit easily into the OM approach - PE and MFL. However, project based approach MFL schemes of work are being considered and may be tried as a pilot so that we can monitor their impact.

We are now considering the option of students sitting KS3 tests in Year 8 in some subjects to reduce KS3 to two years for those who would benefit from starting GCSEs earlier.

Suggestions for further information

www.openingminds.org.uk

www.thersa.org.uk

'The Key Stage Three learning kit' Jackie Beere, Connect Publishing

'Opening Minds: Giving young people a better chance' RSA July 2005

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