

I The Keycolab European Project UK: Final Evaluation

I. INTRODUCTION

The Keycolab Project. The project focused upon the teaching of the European Competencies in Primary Education together with the related training of teachers and the evaluation of outcomes. The full list of the European Competencies is given in Appendix A of this evaluation. In order to sharpen the focus of teacher observations the UK project proposed that the project should consider four competencies in detail. The competencies are: Communication in the Mother tongue; Mathematical Competence; Learning to Learn and Sense of Initiative and Entrepreneurship. The selected competencies thus address two core elements of the curriculum and two important aspects of affective development. The UK proposal was agreed by the partners in the project.

a) Context of evaluation. Each school evaluated the development of children's competencies when engaged in cross curricular educational visits outside the school classroom. This approach was decided on the basis of the commitment by the National Association for Primary Education to learning through direct, fully sensory, experience in the environment. Such experience was closely related to teaching and learning in the classroom both prior and following the visits. There was a specific focus on groups of six children from each of the six laboratory schools. The requirement was that the children, aged from eight to nine years at the commencement of the project, would be selected as representative of the full range of the age group's abilities.

b) Approach of evaluation. Teachers were asked to plan four educational visits in two tranches of two separated by several weeks. The visits supported the school curriculum and fostered the learning of the four designated European competencies. Evaluation of the children's competencies prior to the visits was requested. Following the conclusion of the visits further evaluation assessed signs of progress. Evaluation was largely based upon observation, questioning and monitoring/discussion of children's responses with regard to each of the designated competencies.

c) Adaptation: Materials Developed and Implemented. Evaluation was based upon existing best practice and no adaptations were made to the original outline set out in the paper agreed following consultation with the schools *. In order that the project should sit comfortably within current practice flexibility in methods of recording was permitted. It was considered important that the work of the project should, as far as possible, be incorporated in the day to day work of the participating schools.

*Partner report of the implementation of the competencies evaluation. 16/7/2017. +

Director's paper, The evaluation of the Keycolab European project. 10/12/2016.

II. INTERVENTION, DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

1. Initial Evaluation of Students

a) Period. Completed through perusal of records and discussion at a meeting of involved staff prior to the first educational visit. Children participated through discussion and brainstorming activities (e.g. What do we already understand? What can we already do?), Questionnaires followed by discussion were used.

b) Instruments of evaluation. Prior knowledge of the children by staff. This included reference to internal records and earlier assessments. No formal testing was carried out.

c) Results. There was wide variation among the children assessed. However, there was a general indication that a number of children lacked confidence to direct their own learning. Several children among the 36 selected were vulnerable and lacked parental support. A minority had special educational needs. The approach to learning through experience in the environment was found to be particularly valuable for such children. The competences were not taught in a specific manner but were subsumed within the conventional school curriculum and assessment confirmed that children's individual learning needs were identified. Assessment was undertaken in the course of the educational visits on the basis of teacher observations which were reviewed in the classroom following the visits. There were contributions by teaching assistants and the children themselves. In the light of the pressure stemming from the UK Government's insistence on the statutory testing of English and mathematics as the prime measure of primary education, teachers reported that there was a likelihood of insufficient emphasis on wider learning. It was considered that there should be greater opportunities for full personal development.

2. Evaluation During the Project

a) Instruments of evaluation. Best practice was employed in the course of evaluation. This included: observation, discussion and questioning, review of children's responses both in writing and visual representation, video and still photography, children's and teacher's learning logs, individual profiles and success criteria checklists.

3. Final Evaluation of Students

a) Period. Typically, the evaluation period spanned a total of six months.

b) Instruments of evaluation. See above under 2a. On a majority of visits the children and teachers were accompanied by teaching assistants and discussion with the assistants proved most valuable in making the final assessments. In many cases children undertook and

presented an account of the visits and an analysis of personal reactions to them. The project required the compilation of individual learning profiles. Once again, the current government pressure for the measurement of progress through formal testing was at odds with the project.

c) Results. Together with the growth of understanding and the acquisition of knowledge related to the particular character and circumstances of each visit it was reported by the teachers involved in the project that, overall, children made sizeable gains in the affective domain. Freed from the conventional constraints of the classroom many made significant progress in personal confidence, self awareness and self-efficacy as learners. Furthermore, skills of cooperation improved. Mathematics, more implicit in the environmental experience than explicit, was found to be more difficult to assess and it is felt that educational visits require a specific focus if this competency is to be tackled effectively. Only two of the participant schools reported specific mathematical learning arising from the visits.

III. EVALUATION FINDINGS

a) Perceptions About School Experiences Teachers in the selected laboratory schools work to a greater or lesser degree in a cross curricular way and this is related to the age group being taught. Constraints due to statutory assessment tend to have most impact upon children aged nine to eleven years. It is for this reason that the project focused initially on a younger age group in the selected schools. However, the duration of the project extended into the subsequent year and the extent to which the project was overshadowed by statutory assessment and preparation for national testing should not be underestimated. The laboratory group of schools faced an undoubted challenge. All the schools supported and acknowledged the central importance of the competencies and the undoubted value of educational visits but the need to extend the provision so that it is central to children's learning and the school curriculum rather than a pleasant extra was one of the main messages conveyed by the project.

b) Experiences In the Project All teachers reported that their school's involvement in the project had been of undoubted benefit both to the children and to their teaching competency. The sharing of experience outside the classroom enhanced knowledge of the children and their learning needs. Teachers reported that without exception the educational visits and related work in the classroom had been a positive experience. Teaching assistants were able to report that children became more animated about their learning, and through the visits they became more engaged resulting in an improvement in spoken skills.

c) Outcomes In the Project. The most significant outcome is that the schools involved intend, despite current constraints, to explore ways to develop their approach to learning through direct experience in the outside environment as an integral element of the school

curriculum. Such development would help to foster the professional skills of assessment through the sharing of experience rather than reliance upon the results of testing. Teaching and learning outside the classroom give rise to different perceptions of children's growth and progress in the acquisition of competencies.

d) Relevance. The project was totally relevant to the UK situation in 2016/17. Both the design and the outcomes will help to hasten a move away from a test-driven curriculum required by successive governments. The six project schools are typical, perhaps even ahead of, mainstream primary practice and there is a developing awareness of the adverse effects on the curriculum resulting from the demand for measurable outcomes achieved through direct instruction. Increasingly it is acknowledged that the reliance upon testing distorts the quality and the level of children's learning and, in the process, deskills the teachers and their assistants. The project provided an opportunity for the laboratory schools to refocus their evaluations of children's progress. Such was the pressure of the test-driven evaluation system that there was a tendency for teachers to find this difficult without 'results' in front of them.

e) Efficiency. One of the main contributions made by the project to the professional development of the teachers involved was the refocusing of assessment on the observation of children and the recording of their growth. The project's requirement of individual profiling made a significant contribution to professional development.

f) Impacts. The laboratory schools are more focused upon the children's competencies for learning. Discussion with the teachers reveals that they are convinced of the benefits to their pupils. Educational visits are more embedded in the school curriculum and greater confidence is shown in assessment through observation without undue reliance upon testing. The professional development of teaching assistants is enhanced by their involvement in the visits and related work in the classroom and they are empowered by participation in the assessment of progress.

These impact assessments will be refined through longer term appraisals (e.g. after one year) undertaken in cooperation with the schools.

g) Sustainability. It is judged that the impact of the project on the schools will be sustained due to the motivation of the school staffs which is high. However, sustainability is most difficult to assess in relation to record keeping since current national and local requirements, external to the teachers, shape the practice of the schools to a substantial extent. The teachers agreed on the value of the long-term profiling of children but considered that this presented considerable difficulty in the light of existing pressures, not least in terms of time expended. Dissemination of the project's outcomes nationally by the National Association for Primary Education will address this situation.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

a) Overall

The pressures bearing upon the schools through the application of government requirements leading to a test-driven school life are considerable and the Keycolab action research project was undertaken with the aim of providing evidence which would encourage the reform of current practice. Dissemination of the work of the project and its outcomes should make a substantial contribution to reform.

The laboratory schools were selected because it was known that the head teachers and staffs agreed with the principles of the UK project and, despite difficulties, had achieved much success in creating child-centred schools while simultaneously accommodating external demands. The decision to focus on the learning of the competences outside the schools was taken in order to distance teaching from the classroom. It is stressed that this is the background against which the success of the UK project should be measured. In this important respect the project was directly opposing current national assessment of primary education through the testing of two core skills. Such testing does not take into account the project's focus on the affective development of children and their ability to access learning for themselves.

b) The Future.

The European competencies for the teaching and learning of conventional school subjects are currently covered by schools which are following the UK national curriculum. It would be advantageous if the competencies could be listed as a more explicit element of the curriculum. Affective development should continue to be nurtured through the school curriculum within which the national curriculum is imbedded.

Direct, fully sensory, experience both within and outside the classroom is at the heart of children's learning, particularly deeper learning which becomes part of growth towards adulthood. Experience of learning in the environment is particularly valuable for children who have exceptional learning needs who may be in danger of developing negative attitudes through failure in the classroom.

Any intervention of the adult in the child's experience of learning and any instruction by the adult is best offered alongside the child and as an outcome of direct and shared experience.

Teaching methods, assessment of progress and record keeping should be related to the individual child. This was most marked in relation to the individual profiles completed as part of the project.

Observation of the children undertaken by teachers in cooperation with parents is the fundamental basis of sound and helpful assessment of progress. Participants in the project

often sought the views of parents at the stage of completing individual profiles. True, ongoing partnership between teachers and parents requires further development and will be hastened by a relaxation of the UK government's insistence that parents are consumers of education and not active partners.

The involvement of parents in their children's learning is an important key to progress and the assessment of progress.

As children grow into maturity their insights into their own progress are helpful to assessment.

The project clearly demonstrated that teachers and their schools should be allowed a considerable measure of freedom to exercise their professional skill and judgement. There was continuing tension between the work of the project and the government's requirement of the measurement of outcomes. The work of teachers and other adults who are close to the children should not be directed by external agencies and there should be an appropriate balance between local and national accountability.

The potential of the outside environment as a spur to learning should be further explored by the schools. Educational visits should be an integral element of the children's experience of learning in the primary school. It is important to acknowledge that such experience is productive of individual development as well as providing observational data of great value to education back in the classroom.

Testing should be seen as an occasional snapshot of progress and of doubtful validity as a measure of assessment. It was for this reason that the European partners were insistent from the outset that testing should not be used as an instrument of assessment and evaluation. The results of testing should be considered only as an adjunct to assessment through observation. Shared experience in the environment facilitates such assessment.

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APPENDIX A

The European Competences in Primary School Education

Communication in the mother tongue

Communication in foreign languages

Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology

Digital competence

Learning to learn

Social and civic competences

Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship

Cultural awareness and expression

Within the European Union area, a competence is defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context. Competence indicates the ability to apply learning outcomes adequately in a defined context (education, work, personal or professional development).

Taken from <http://keycolab.nieikastolak.com/glossary>

Inquirers seeking further detailed information regarding the project are asked to contact John Coe, Director of the Keycolab Project at nape@onetel.com or by phone at 01865 890281.