Planning, teaching and assessing the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties: an introduction and overview

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Non-statutory guidelines for Planning, teaching and assessing the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties have recently been published by QCA/DfEE (2001). The materials consist of 15 booklets which incorporate general guidelines on developing the school curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties, support material for developing skills across the curriculum, and support material for each National Curriculum subject, personal, social and health education (PSHE), and religious education (RE).

This article, written by the research and development officers (RDOs) involved in the project, outlines the process of developing these guidelines and discusses some of the issues arising during the project. It focuses particularly on the development of the subject materials, using the subject of geography to illustrate points.

Background

The project began in October 1999 as a collaborative venture involving the Universities of Birmingham, Cardiff and Cambridge and EQUALS, a national organisation of teachers of pupils with severe learning difficulties. The project brief given by QCA was to develop ‘curriculum guidelines for pupils whose attainment up to the age of 16 was expected to remain within the range from below level 1 to level 2.’ These pupils, initially described as ‘attaining significantly below age-related expectations’, were subsequently referred to as ‘pupils with learning difficulties’. This description includes pupils who have severe learning difficulties or profound and multiple learning difficulties and some who may have moderate learning difficulties. The guidelines were intended to support all multidisciplinary staff teams in order to ensure that the curriculum offered was appropriate to all learners. They covered the whole curriculum and not just the subjects of the National Curriculum. From the outset it was recognised that the participation of pupils was to be more than ‘access’: for example, the importance of early communication was highlighted and exemplified within the programmes of study for English.

‘In particular, English materials offer pupils with learning difficulties opportunities to:

• develop the ability to respond, to listen and to understand
• interact and communicate effectively with others in a range of social situations.’

(QCA, 2001a, p.4)

The objectives of the project were clearly set out by QCA who stipulated that, drawing on the inclusion statement in the National Curriculum, the guidelines must set out a full and appropriate learning entitlement, which carefully balanced the need for breadth and depth for all pupils and should:

• set clear learning outcomes with provision for lateral and vertical progression
• acknowledge the widening experience of pupils as they move through education
• present learning opportunities in age appropriate contexts.

Development teams

The three RDOs were appointed to work for two and a half days a week from October 1999 to July 2000. All had substantial experience in curriculum development and
evaluation, in teaching pupils with learning difficulties, delivering in-service training and researching practice. Initially they collaborated with the core project team: Dr Christina Tilstone, from the University of Birmingham, Richard Byers, from the University of Cambridge, Dr Jean Ware, from the University of Cardiff (on secondment to St Patrick’s College Dublin) and Michael Thompson, representing EQUALS. The core team’s responsibility was to establish the content of the guidelines, to formulate working briefs for the development teams and to undertake a trawl of published curriculum materials. Using agreed criteria, the team analysed 214 curriculum documents submitted by schools which were subsequently used in the development of subject materials. In further phases of the project each RDO led a development team, worked on drafts of materials and continued as an active member of the core team.

Three development teams, each under the leadership of an RDO and each with four practitioners, were established in different areas of England. Team members selected were experienced and qualified in the teaching of pupils with learning difficulties and were recognised for their innovative approach to curriculum development. An ability to work to tight deadlines, and to have written extensively for a range of readers, were also a requirement. The members of the teams were seconded for one day a week for 12 weeks in the spring term 2000 and each team was allocated different subjects from the National Curriculum. The team members used the identified curriculum materials from a range of schools and EQUALS and made reference to the National Curriculum, foundation stage curriculum and QCA schemes of work.

**Subject development**

Subjects were approached from two perspectives:

- through the extension and exemplification of the programmes of study in the National Curriculum. This process questioned how teachers could interpret each aspect of geography, for example, knowledge and understanding of places
- by considering the needs of pupils with learning difficulties. For example, by questioning what geography means for pupils at the earliest levels of development. What are the learning requirements for pupils with learning difficulties within the context of geography?

Considering these two perspectives enabled the teams to focus on entitlement to a commonality of learning experiences and breadth and balance on the one hand, and the relevance to pupils’ individual learning needs on the other.

In the early stages a framework for teaching and learning was devised, which after consultation was considerably altered. The final framework is discussed in detail in a later section but it is important to highlight the extent of the consultation.

**Consultation**

A wide range of practitioners were involved at a number of levels:

- through the collection of curriculum materials from schools and organisations
- through NAGSEN (National Advisory Group for Special Educational Needs) as representatives on the QCA steering group
- as ‘critical friends’ commenting on particular aspects of the project materials as they emerged; for example, whether the materials were age appropriate, whether they demonstrated progression, and whether the materials met the needs of pupils at either end of the continuum of pupils with learning difficulties, that is, pupils described as having moderate learning difficulties and pupils with the most complex, profound and multiple learning difficulties
- as members of the development teams
- through informal and formal consultation processes.

Consultation with, and advice from, a QCA steering committee (with members from the DfEE, Ofsted, QCA, Teacher Training Agency and NAGSEN) took place throughout the project. Dialogue with individual QCA subject specialists was also a valuable process as it gave the subject specialists an appreciation of pupils’ functioning at the earliest levels of development and provided the development team members with subject expertise and knowledge.

A formal consultation of draft materials was held in June 2000 and was one of the largest for a project of this kind. A full set of draft materials (general guidelines and each subject) with accompanying questionnaires was sent to a random sample of 438 schools in England. The sample comprised one third of special schools identified as providing for pupils with learning difficulties, including schools designated for pupils with severe, profound or moderate learning difficulties, specialist units or provision within mainstream settings, and 25 mainstream primary and 25 mainstream secondary schools.

Staff in schools were asked to comment on the overall clarity, coherence and usefulness of the guidelines for their work with pupils with learning difficulties. The results of the consultation indicated that respondents found the materials both useful and supportive.

Mainstream schools felt in particular that the guidelines would considerably enhance their ability to respond flexibly to pupils’ needs, and one mainstream head stated that just having the opportunity to take part in the consultation had given her a new perspective on those pupils who she had previously seen as marginal, even though she had only one or two pupils who would be likely to fall within the scope of the guidelines.  

(Ware, 2000)
Final structure for subject materials

As a result of the consultation process, the following structure was adopted for each subject:

The importance of the subject area to pupils with learning difficulties

Within the National Curriculum programmes the importance of the subject for all pupils is highlighted for each of those subjects. The teams felt, however, that it was important to emphasise the particular benefits for pupils with learning difficulties. Some of the opportunities (taken from a longer list) which geography offers these pupils are to:

• become aware of and understand their personal position in space
• develop an interest in, and knowledge of, places and people beyond their immediate environment
• experience aspects of other countries and cultures, especially where there are comparisons with their own.

Ways of modifying the programmes of study

In the main the ideas presented on ways of modifying the programmes are similar for each subject, for example choosing material from earlier key stages and focusing on one aspect, or a limited number of aspects, of the age-related programmes of study in depth or in outline. However, subject-specific ways are also suggested, one of which for geography is:

• helping pupils experience geography for themselves; at first, by using a sensory approach to experience and investigate familiar places, and then by contact with different people.

The basis for the ideas stemmed from the inclusion statements in the National Curriculum Handbooks (DfEE, 1999a; 1999b).

Each aspect of the programme of study is elaborated. Two examples from geographical enquiry are that teaching this aspect across the key stages can help pupils to:

• collect, explore and sort different objects and artefacts, for example, shells, pebbles, leaves and use them as evidence
• respond in different ways to people, places and environments by expressing their own views about their surroundings.

Improving access to the curriculum (including suggestions for approaches to learning and teaching)

Suggestions for improving access are similar for each subject, for example, the use of sensory experiences, ICT and adaptation of tasks. For geography, such adaptation may include the provision of less detailed maps or models.

Opportunities and activities at each key stage

Pupils with learning difficulties are a diverse group and include those who, at one extreme, are at early levels of development or may, for medical reasons, be regressing, and those at the other who are working at age-related expectations in some subjects but are well below this in others. In order to ensure that all pupils are included at each key stage the terms all, most and a few were adopted. All pupils with learning difficulties include those with the most profound disabilities; most, those with severe learning difficulties who will develop further skills, knowledge and understanding in the subject, and a few with learning difficulties who will develop even further. Examples of activities are given at each key stage. In adopting this approach it should be possible for staff to compare activities across the subjects.

Performance descriptions from P1 to P8

The role of the performance descriptions (originally called level descriptions in the draft materials) is to aid summative assessment at the end of a period of time, for example, a term or a key stage. The issues surrounding their formation are discussed in detail in the next section.

What should be an appropriate curriculum model for pupils with learning difficulties?

At the early stages of the project, a number of curriculum models were explored and debated. These included working from the foundation stage areas of development (language and literacy, mathematics, personal and social development, creative development, knowledge and understanding of the world and physical development) or from a framework indicating a relationship between essential learning requirements in pastoral, paramedical and therapeutic areas, National Curriculum subjects and key skills, which would depend on the changing needs of the pupil. Finally it was decided to use a subject-based model to complement the National Curriculum, which was in line with current curriculum development practices in most schools.

The general guidelines, however, stress that the National Curriculum is only part of a whole school curriculum and that additional learning experiences, perhaps related to therapies, key skills or other priority skills, are also crucial components. The balance between these elements may be different for each school, key stage, year group or for each individual and may vary over time.

Pupils with learning difficulties are a diverse group. Some of their learning needs will be common to all pupils, other learning needs and priorities may be particular to individual pupils, for example, early perceptual skills, access to a range of therapies, behaviour programmes (Norwich, 1996; O’Brien, 1998). The underlying principles now stated in
the general guidelines clearly allow for a balance within the curriculum according to group and individual requirements, without defining any particular balance or proportion.

A subject-based curriculum organisation?

Although subject-specific materials are included, the QCA (1999) has already emphasised that ‘whilst the National Curriculum is specified in terms of separate subjects, schools are not required to teach the subjects discretely’ (p.2). The general guidelines in this set of booklets indicate the flexibilities schools have in determining their curriculum requirements, without defining any particular balance or according to group and individual schools are not required to teach the subjects discretely’ (1999) has already emphasised that ‘whilst the National Although subject-specific materials are included, the QCA (1999) has already emphasised that ‘whilst the National Curriculum is specified in terms of separate subjects, schools are not required to teach the subjects discretely’ (p.2). The general guidelines in this set of booklets indicate the flexibilities schools have in determining their curriculum organisation in order to be most effective and relevant in meeting their pupils’ needs. For example, staff in one school may decide it is more meaningful to plan learning opportunities and experiences for geography through cross-curricular topics or themed days, whilst in another they may prefer to teach each subject as a discrete element.

The QCA guidelines are non-statutory but are designed to allow schools to justify and provide support for curriculum organisation. It is hoped that school staff will feel more confident in organising their timetables and teaching and learning to suit the needs of their pupils. Training for Ofsted inspectors, based on the guidelines, will be available in spring 2002 and inspectors will be expected to be familiar with the ideas presented in them.

Schemes of work

The guidelines are not schemes of work, though staff in schools may find them useful in the development of their own schemes of work. The development teams used a number of schemes of work (including published QCA and EQUALS schemes of work and those submitted by schools) to generate some appropriate examples of activities at each key stage. There is a variation between subjects in the number of examples provided at each key stage, for example there are three or four for each key stage in geography, one of which is reproduced below.

Rainforest

**Pupils experience, explore and investigate the physical/natural features of a rainforest**

They may:

- experience and control (through the use of switches) a simulated rainforest environment, for example dappled, dimmed lighting, sound effects, heat, musty foliage
- observe, touch, smell and taste tropical fruits and vegetables and record their likes and dislikes
- visit botanical gardens and zoos with exotic birds.

**Pupils experience, explore and investigate the human-made features of the rainforest**

They may:

- listen to music and explore artefacts made by people who live in the rainforest
- find information from books, pictures, videos, maps and CD-ROMS, related to work, homes and transport
- make artefacts, such as musical instruments, jewellery.

This work can link to work in science, music, design and technology and art and design (QCA, 2001b, p.18).

**Progression**

Progression within the 5 to 16 age range, particularly for pupils with profound and multiple learning difficulties, was a key issue throughout the project. Many pupils with learning difficulties may need to work on some aspects of programmes of study for pupils in Key Stage 1 throughout their school career. It is important to stress, however, that there are elements of programmes of study at later key stages which are appropriate and relevant for all pupils with learning difficulties. To restrict access to the programmes of study at Key Stage 1 would be limiting pupils’ entitlement to a range of curriculum opportunities. The inclusion statement in the National Curriculum (DfEE and QCA, 1999a; 1999b) gives a number of flexibilities to schools by emphasising that teachers at all key stages ‘should teach the knowledge, skills and understanding in ways that suit their pupils’ abilities’ (p.32) and that they ‘may need to use the contents of the programmes of study as a resource or to provide a context, in planning learning appropriate to the age and requirements of their pupils’ (p.33). The QCA subject guidelines (2001a; 2001b) aim to provide different contexts for learning as pupils move through key stages and to ensure that approaches to teaching and learning, in addition to content and activities, are appropriate for learners according to their age and developmental stage.

In geography, for example, progression through the key stages may be ensured by extending study from the familiar to the less familiar, from the smaller local scale to larger regional and national scales. The suggested focus for each key stage in the subject booklets (QCA, 2001a; 2001b) also demonstrates progression. For example, the focus of teaching geography at Key Stage 1 may be on giving pupils opportunities to:

- use their senses to explore their own surroundings or environment, for example, their classroom (p.8);

at Key Stage 2, to:

- experience, explore and investigate their school and local area, for example, parks, streets (p.12);
and at Key Stage 3 it may be giving pupils opportunities to:

experience, explore and investigate a range of localities (both near, distant and outside the UK) comparing them to their own environment (p.16).

Key Stage 4 flexibilities

The subject booklets correspond to the National Curriculum in their key stage coverage and therefore art, history, geography and music are not exemplified at Key Stage 4. This is not to suggest that they are not appropriate or relevant areas of study at Key Stage 4 for pupils with learning difficulties.

‘Exceptional provision’ is possible at Key Stage 4 to meet a wider range of individual pupils’ needs (QCA, 1999). These flexibilities allow for the disapplication of up to two National Curriculum subjects to provide wider opportunities for work-related learning. This should ‘allow pupils making significantly less progress than their peers to study fewer National Curriculum subjects in order to consolidate their learning across the curriculum’ (p.9) and to ‘respond to pupils’ individual strengths and talents’ by allowing them to emphasise a particular curriculum area (p.8). Such flexibilities at Key Stage 4 are not explored in the QCA guidelines but they present an exciting range of possibilities for pupils with learning difficulties, which schools may wish to investigate.

Recognising progress and attainment

The general guidelines include a section on ‘recognising progress and achievement’. Consideration is given to pupils with complex needs, and a number of approaches to recognise progress are suggested.

Learning outcomes were part of the QCA brief, particularly to enable demonstration of progress towards the main National Curriculum scales. The general guidelines include a framework for recognising attainment below Level 1 of the National Curriculum, which outlines a continuum from ‘encounter’ to the ‘gaining of skills and understanding’. The framework describes ‘possible changes in individual pupils’ responses and behaviour as their early perceptions of experiences and their increasing involvement in the learning process develop into areas of knowledge, skills and understanding’ (p.27). It is based on the work of key authors such as Aitken and Buultjens (1992), Brown (1996) and McInnes and Treffry (1982) and was used for the development of performance descriptions (P levels) for each subject, particularly at levels P1 to P3. In addition the teams also drew upon the existing P levels for mathematics, English and personal and social development in the Target Setting document (DfEE Standards and Effectiveness Unit, 1998) and curriculum assessment tools produced by EQUALS and submitted by schools.

The development of these descriptions involved the most complex and intense debate in the project. The P levels in the target setting document (DfEE Standards and Effectiveness Unit, 1998) were undifferentiated between subjects for the levels P1 to P3. Evidence from evaluations commissioned by QCA indicated the inadequacies of levels P1 to P3. Concerns about these generic levels and the size of step between P levels had already been expressed by head teachers in Male’s study on target setting with specific reference to pupils with severe learning difficulties (2000). The project team was encouraged to explore the possibility of developing descriptions across the range from P1 to P8 for all subjects, providing a greater number of descriptions at the earliest levels of development in order to be more sensitive to smaller steps of progress. The debate centred on two issues: at what point does experience become learning? And at what point can learning outcomes be legitimately described in subject terms? For example, are pupils experiencing geography? Are pupils learning geography? Is this geographical attainment or more generic learning which occurs within the context of geography?

The outcome, as evidenced in the performance descriptions within each subject (and replicated in the revised target setting document, DfEE Standards and Effectiveness Unit and QCA, 2001) represents a compromise between different schools of thought.

The levels P1 to P3 have each been subdivided into two descriptions providing six levels at these early stages of development. They remain generic but each subject from level P1 (ii) contains examples which illustrate how attainment might be demonstrated within the context of that subject. For example, in geography, part of P2 (ii) states:

They [pupils] cooperate with shared exploration and supported participation, for example, moving over different outdoor surfaces (p.20).

In contrast in art, part P2 (ii) states:

They (pupils) cooperate with shared exploration and supported participation, for example, working with an adult to press, roll and pinch wet clay.

The performance descriptions P4 to P8 describe subject specific learning. They have been devised to lead into the levels of the National Curriculum and to be used in a similar way as best-fit professional summative judgements over a period of time (for example, a year or key stage). It will be interesting to explore their usefulness as summative assessment tools, their possibilities in supporting formative assessment, and to carry out a full evaluation of their impact and functionality. As schools become more familiar with the framework for recognising attainment, there may be a need for more detailed research on their use and interpretation.
Practical use of the materials

This project has demonstrated the benefits of drawing on good practice and practitioner and practice-based research in the development of government agency guidelines. In order to provide high quality materials the wide extent of consultation and collaboration undertaken was essential, though time consuming and difficult to fit into an ambitious and demanding timescale.

The project team is aware that because of the external pressures on schools to set standards and to provide reliable evidence of pupil achievement, it is feared that most attention will be focused on the performance descriptions for each subject – on the assessment of learning at the expense of assessment for learning. This would be unfortunate as it is felt that the time spent with subject specialists in debating the interpretation and exemplification of subjects has contributed greatly towards a more sophisticated understanding of the issues. Concerns raised by Grove and Peacey in their article published in the British Journal of Special Education (1999), question the 'relevance of academic subjects to the learning needs of all pupils’ (p.86) and encourage further debate on the essence of subjects at the earliest levels of development. The QCA subject materials demonstrate significant progress in these areas.

It is hoped that the publication of these guidelines will encourage further discussion and debate on a range of issues, some of which have been highlighted in this article. The guidelines are not statutory and do not necessarily indicate a change in the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties. Staff in schools are encouraged to interpret the guidelines flexibly and in ways that are appropriate to their pupils. It is important to recognise the need for staff to use their own professional judgement in determining their school curriculum, and to think flexibly about planning, teaching and assessing the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties.

To our knowledge it is the first time a government curriculum agency, anywhere in the world, has produced such extensive and comprehensive guidance material for pupils with learning difficulties. The guidance demonstrates the value and importance of collaboration and consultation with practitioners and experts in producing high quality materials, and any future developments should embrace this approach.

In future National Curriculum revisions it is hoped that the learning needs of all pupils will be considered within the programmes of study from the beginning. Through the promotion of such practice we will move ever closer towards a genuinely inclusive curriculum.

References


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