Thinking Skills and a National Curriculum: A case study in Northern Ireland
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Although Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, educational policy is devolved to national level (as it is in Scotland and Wales). Since 2000, Northern Ireland has been involved in a major re-think about the aims and purposes of their national curriculum which has been statutory since 1989. One of the main emphasis in the revised curriculum is to explicitly develop pupils’ thinking skills and personal capabilities throughout the curriculum from ages 4 (early years) to 14 (to the end of Key Stage 3).

This poster will show the work of the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) who has responsibility for advising government on the curriculum and for developing guidance materials to prepare schools and teachers for curriculum changes. The work drew on several local research projects. Professor Carol McGuinness was seconded from Queen’s University to CCEA to advise on the development of thinking skills, and Dr Lynne Bianchi, from Sheffield Hallam University acted as an advisor on personal capabilities.

A recent OECD report (2005) pointed to the need for educational systems across the world to move beyond taught knowledge and skills. The report argued that ‘coping with today’s challenges calls for better development of individuals’ abilities to tackle complex mental tasks, going well beyond the basic reproduction of accumulated knowledge. Key competencies involve a mobilisation of cognitive and practical skills, creative abilities and other psychosocial resources such as attitudes, motivation and values.’ (The DeSeCo Project, Executive Summary, 30 June, 2005 [www.oecd.org/edu/statistics/deseco])

At the heart of the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum lies an explicit emphasis on the development of skills and capabilities for life-long learning and for operating effectively in society. Through opportunities to engage in active learning contexts across all areas of the curriculum, the intention is to develop children’s personal and interpersonal learning skills, capabilities and dispositions, and their ability to think both creatively and critically.

As well as the long term benefits, developing skills and capabilities are important for learning in the short term and for the following reasons. They are more likely to engage pupils in active rather than passive learning, they draw attention to the processes of learning and not just the products, and they provide a new range of criteria against which pupils can evaluate their progress in learning. Essentially, they enable pupils to learn how to learn.

Figure 1 shows the five broad strands that are identified in the Northern Ireland framework. They are Managing Information; Thinking, Problem-solving and Decision-Making; Being Creative; Working with Others; and Self-Management.
Figure 1 Framework for Developing Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities (CCEA)

A distinctive feature of the framework is that it integrates a range of different types of thinking skills and learning dispositions with collaborative learning (working with others) and independent learning (self-management and taking responsibility).

Thinking skills are tools that help children go beyond the acquisition of knowledge in order to deepen their understanding and apply ideas, generate new possibilities, make decisions, as well as to plan, monitor and evaluate their progress. Personal and interpersonal skills and capabilities underpin success in all aspects of life. It is important therefore that children’s self esteem and self-confidence are explicitly fostered along with their ability to manage their own emotions, to interact effectively with others and eventually to regulate and enhance their own learning.

The framework does not stand alone nor is it isolated from the traditional areas of the curriculum. Rather, it is intended that the skills and capabilities highlighted in the framework are developed and assessed in and through the learning areas. This will give opportunities for their development to be reinforced and make it easier for teachers and pupils to make connections and see relationships.
Developing thinking skills and personal capabilities requires a different approach to teaching compared to traditional didactic methods. To develop these kinds of skills, learners need to be thoroughly engaged with their own learning, to be given opportunities to practice their skills, to reflect on their achievements and to recognise their strengths and weaknesses. Opportunities for collaboration and dialogue about learning are likely to be seen more frequently in ‘thinking’ classrooms. To become more creative, children need to be encouraged to take risks for learning and to see opportunities in mistakes rather than mere failure. This shift to a more active approach to learning will enable children to become autonomous and to work more independently.

Emphasising a more learner-centred curriculum has implications for planning, for teacher development and for assessment. It also challenges beliefs about the nature of learning and the how we need to go beyond the notion that learners are empty vessels to be filled with information.