



Planning with the Big Picture in mind

The group

National Middle Schools' Forum Co-development Group.

Members

Ten middle schools from across England.

Focus

Using the Big Picture of the curriculum as the starting point for exploring imaginative approaches to curriculum planning and delivery.

Aim

To design compelling learning experiences that engage middle school pupils and extend their learning. Each school analysed its existing curriculum against the principles of good practice outlined in *Middle School Matters* and identified one or two specific areas in which it wanted to improve.

How did the schools organise learning?

The schools used the Big Picture as the basis for designing a series of changes or interventions to their existing curriculum practice. Rather than concentrating on covering subject content, they shifted the focus to concern about the nature and impact of subjects and the effectiveness of learning.

Individual projects included giving learners the opportunity to work in the context of a fictional marketing company, devoting a week to the topic of remembrance, running an eco-day, taking new approaches to out of school learning, working with a local artist and setting up a pupil-led teaching and learning group.

How did the schools and colleges evaluate their work?

At the start of the project, the schools gathered qualitative and quantitative data to form a picture of 'what our learners are like now' in relation to the focus of their curriculum development work. They identified the outcomes they wanted to achieve and gathered the perceptions of learners, staff, parents and governors and used these to establish a baseline.

At the end of the project, the schools collected a range of evidence to show how their curriculum development work had made an impact on learning. Methods used to collect data included field notes made by teachers during lessons, audio recordings, pupil diaries, interviews, video, questionnaires and observation. The schools then analysed their findings against the Big Picture aims to evaluate how effectively the project had contributed to pupils becoming successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens. Teachers found this new emphasis on evaluating impact helpful, as one explained: 'I have learnt that it is often easy to be completely unaware of the impact of the work we do.'


Across the schools, the impact of the curriculum changes was significant and there were reports of increased enthusiasm, energy, attendance and achievement. Praise was fulsome from both parents ('My son came home every day full of enthusiasm and interest in what he learned.') and children ('I think it was a very interesting way of learning and it will stay in my mind forever.').

Related resources

Visit the National Middle Schools' Forum website at www.middleschools.org.uk to download a copy of the report *Middle School Matters* and read more about the co-development project.

Planning a learning feast


To help them think creatively about different ways to approach curriculum change, the schools in the Middle Schools Group focused on providing a learning feast that took into account the different elements of the Big Picture. Here we look at some of the approaches to teaching and learning they used. Could you use similar ingredients to help your learners develop an appetite for learning?



Make the most of ICT
As well as being a useful tool for learning, new technology often enthuses and motivates learners.




Vary pupil groups
A number of the middle schools reported the value of learners working in mixed age or unusual groupings. In particular, they found this enhanced cooperation and teamwork among pupils.



Make activities memorable
Plan activities that stimulate the imagination and offer opportunities for genuine creativity, such as visits, performances and workshops with experts. Remember that although enjoyment is important, activities need to be sufficiently challenging for real progress to be made.



Allow for depth
Allow time to approach learning in a way that is deep and profound, rather than taking a lily pad approach and skating quickly over the surface. Offer learners opportunities to take part in open-ended investigative activities.



Use the cross-curricular dimensions
Several of the middle schools focused on aspects of the cross-curricular dimensions – such as enterprise, healthy lifestyles and global dimension – to provide relevant learning contexts.




Vary activities
Use a range of approaches to teaching and learning – for example enquiry, active learning and practical activities – to retain pupils' interest and meet the needs of all.

Planning a learning feast
We want to:

- help pupils develop an appetite for learning
- use the ingredients to create a learning feast
- recognise individual taste, considerations and needs
- see the big picture of the curriculum.




Make connections
Think about the entire planned learning experience – pupils' complete learning journey through a subject and the school.



Listen to learners
Engagement rises when learners feel they have a say in their learning and experience a degree of control over the direction of what they learn. This was a significant feature of all the middle school projects.




Engage with parents and the community
As well as bringing new insights and ideas into learning, involving parents and the community in the curriculum can make learning relevant and bring it to life.



Bring passion to learning
Harness the energy of passionate and committed subject teachers and give learners the opportunity to meet enthusiastic and authoritative experts.




Question institutional habits
Consider how to change the routines of the school day to make the curriculum more appealing to learners.



Rethink subjects
Shift the emphasis from concern about subject content to concern about the nature and impact of subjects. Focus on effectiveness of learning.




Rethink out of school learning
Make sure that homework captures pupils' interest and makes a real contribution to their learning.



Focus on learning
Start by identifying opportunities for effective learning and work across subject boundaries in a cross-curricular way. Be flexible: in many of the middle schools' projects, learning went beyond that originally planned by the teacher.



Make learning real
Learning in the classroom becomes deeper through application in a meaningful context. In some of the projects this involved taking learning outside the confines of school. In others, teachers focused on helping pupils to see the relevance of what they were learning to the real world and real-life issues.



Raise expectations
Don't impose a one-size-fits-all solution to the curriculum. Challenge and raised expectations led to outcomes of a higher quality than normally seen or expected in the middle schools. Pupils can surprise you!

Collecting data

The schools in the Middle Schools Group used the following methods to collect data so they could evaluate the impact of curriculum change. How valuable would these be in your own curriculum development work?

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION	HOW COULD WE USE THIS?
<p>Field notes Made by teachers during lessons. These could focus on a single issue, a whole class issue, general impressions, unexpected outcomes or the overall learning journey for individuals and groups</p>	
<p>Audio tape Recordings of learners working together in groups</p>	
<p>Pupil diaries Providing insight into learners' perspectives, data on general classroom climate, information for triangulation</p>	
<p>Interviews These can be structured or semi-structured and involve teacher/pupil, observer/pupil or pupil/pupil</p>	
<p>Video Providing a vehicle for discussion after a lesson</p>	
<p>Questionnaires If these are carefully structured and suited to the age group, they can provide rich data</p>	
<p>Observation Including participant observation, non-participant observation, lesson observations and shared perceptions</p>	
<p>Triangulation Using a range of data collection methods enables impact to be measured more effectively</p>	