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in Education and Training

Caerphilly Skills Strategy
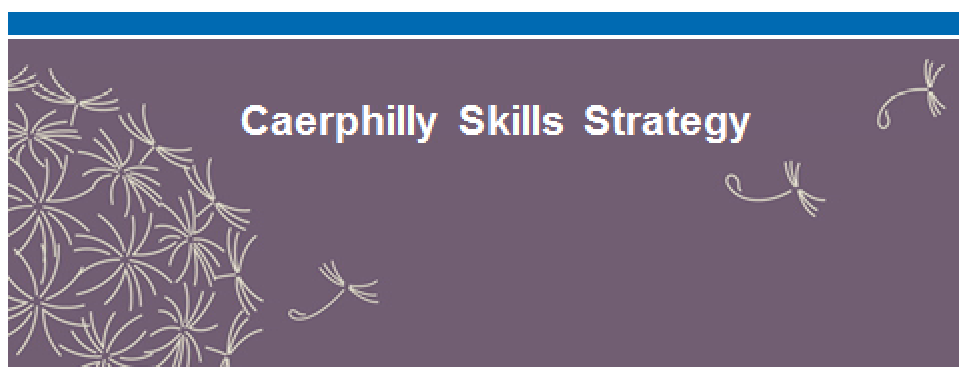
Evaluation Report: Improving Pupils Writing in Key Stage 3

Purpose and aims of the project

The project was designed to reflect the key aim of the Caerphilly Skills Strategy as set out in statement of intent in the summary leaflet, namely to raise standards by placing the development of language at the heart of pupils' learning.

The approach adopted has been flexible in order to support schools in achieving a number of overlapping objectives, including the need to:

- raise awareness of the importance of all aspects of language in learning across the curriculum: oral work, reading and writing

- implement the WG's Skills Framework by embedding purposeful opportunities for pupils to develop and improve their thinking and other skills in day-to-day learning and teaching

- benefit from WG guidance publications on 'the teaching of writing skills' and 'the development of higher-order literacy skills across the curriculum'

- enable schools to demonstrate during future Estyn inspections that they have in place a strategic, consistent and effective approach to language skills development

- meet the expectations of WG that all local authorities will have a coordinated strategy in place for improving standards of literacy

At the same time, the Key Stage 3 language in learning project has been designed to link with and support two other major initiatives within the county, namely:

- project work and PLCs (primary and secondary) aimed at closing the gender gap by improving the performance of boys

- ongoing work on 'theories of action' initiated by Professor David Hopkins aimed at promoting 'enquiry based learning' (see ANNEX A) and raising expectations through developing agreed protocols for teaching.

Phases of activity

The project has been delivered by Mike Haines, a language in learning specialist consultant and Director of Optima Learning. The work is part of Tier 1 of the strategy: 'the provision of high quality inclusive teaching for all learners'.

For each of the participating schools, there have been three phases of activity:

Phase 1: Initial Planning Meeting With School Leaders

- A pre-meeting with the secondary headteacher and senior members of staff, usually including those with a specific responsibility for developing language/literacy across the curriculum. The purpose of the meetings has been to explore the school's current focus on skills development and their identified priorities for staff development. This has helped to ensure that the project meets current needs, links closely with other aspects of CPD and builds on the best practice within the school. In one case, there was also an opportunity to share the aims of the project with a Chair of Governors.

Phase 2: Audit of Pupils' Writing

- In nearly all cases, a half or full-day audit of pupil's writing in Year 7 was undertaken jointly by the consultant working with either the school's literacy co-ordinator and/ or head of the English department. The aim of these audits has been to critically examine and evaluate the

entire written output of six Year 7 pupils in every subject of the curriculum, including two pupils from each of the most able, average and less able groups. The outcomes of the audits have been:

- o the production of an audit chart showing the nature, extent, and main types of writing undertaken by learners during the year

- o an opportunity to identify both the strengths/good features of pupils' writing as well as their weaknesses and areas for development

- o an indication of teachers' expectations, the opportunities provided for pupils to write in different forms and for varied purposes and audiences

- o the way that teachers set and prepare pupils for written tasks, provide explicit criteria for success and assess and feedback to pupils on their written work

- o a copy of the audit chart and accompanying notes has been left with/ sent to each school

In some cases, there has also been an opportunity to speak directly with the pupils concerned to gather their views about writing, the tasks they enjoy and way they feel about their own written work.

The outcomes of the audit and subsequent discussions with headteachers and literacy co-ordinators have fed into the subsequent training workshops.

While there are some differences between the writing observed in different schools, overall the evaluation of pupils' writing across the project shows that:

- while pupils write regularly and frequently in a variety of forms, the majority of tasks in most subjects require only brief responses

- pupils undertake writing in a variety of forms and are increasingly familiar with different 'text types'; however, there is heavy emphasis on narrative and comprehension of set material requiring relatively short answers or explanations

- the best writing is of a good standard, especially where pupils write for challenging and authentic purposes, have time to plan and prepare and to complete their work and present it attractively

- many middle and lower ability pupils struggle to achieve the quality of writing of which they are capable: they often produce little, fail to complete their writing

- the quality of much day-to-day written work is disappointing: ideas are often undeveloped and marred by weak expression and errors in accuracy

- there is scope for pupils to make more use of ICT to compose, re-draft, design and illustrate their writing

- teachers mark and sometimes comment on the quality of pupils' writing after it has been completed; they rarely intervene during the writing process to suggest improvements that can then be made

Phase 3: Whole Staff Training Workshop

Workshops have generally involved the entire secondary school staff, often including learning/ teaching assistants, librarians and others. In one case the workshop was restricted to Year 7 teachers. In another case, the workshop was followed by a seminar with the all the primary feeder school headteachers to consider how transition arrangements and, in particular, language-based projects, might help to provide more challenging opportunities for extended written work across years 6/7.

Without exception, managers and staff have responded positively to the project and committed themselves to the implementation of the key actions involved: namely that each subject department in the school will identify a new or existing unit of work for Year 7 that will provide an opportunity for pupils to plan and complete at least one challenging piece of extended writing. The workshops have focused on the design of the language-based task/ assignment as the culmination of a unit of the subject scheme of work. The key features of the writing opportunity to be provided for pupils include:

- an authentic context, purpose and audience for their writing

- clear and understood learning intentions and success criteria

- challenging expectations that pupils will complete the writing task to the highest possible standard of which they are capable

- personal engagement with the writing task with a focus on enquiry, investigation and creative approaches

- an emphasis on the **writing process** with time built in for discussion of the task, planning and preparation, reading and research, looking at relevant models and examples

- help to understand the features of effective writing in the chosen genre/ text type

- an opportunity for pupils to receive feedback on their initial efforts and to incorporate improvements into their finished work

- an agreed format for writing which will be attractively presented, published, displayed or otherwise reach an intended audience

By the end of each workshop, departments have had an initial opportunity to identify a suitable unit from the Year 7 subject scheme of work, to identify the nature of the writing tasks and how it will be planned and delivered.

The final step in the implementation of the project is for departments to submit their proposals to the school language co-ordinator who should then ensure that:

- all the main text types are represented evenly to provide a balanced experience of writing in categories and genres (see ANNEX 2)

- the key writing tasks are spread across the academic year, ideally with no more than three to four extended writing tasks scheduled per term

- there are arrangements in place to monitor the project by sampling pupils' resulting written work and evaluating its quality

- there are regular opportunities to gather feedback from staff and pupils about the success of the writing tasks

Participation

Over the past year, this language-based project has so far been taken on by 8 of the 13 secondary schools in the county borough. The intention is to include all the remaining schools in 2012-13.

SCHOOL	PHASE 1	PHASE 2	PHASE 3
ST CENYDD	■		■
LEWIS PENGAM	■	■	■
ST MARTINS	■		■
RISCA	■	■	■
CWM RHYMNI	■		■
PONTLLANFRAITH	■	■	■
NEWBRIDGE	■	■	■
CWMCARN	■	■	■
BLACKWOOD	■	■	■
BEDWAS	■		
RHYMNEY			
OAKDALE			
LEWIS GIRLS			
HEOLDDU			

ANNEX 1

Professor David Hopkins: Theories of Action

1. 'When teacher directed instruction becomes more **enquiry focused** then the level of student achievement and curiosity increases'

2. 'When teachers set **learning intentions** and use appropriate **pace** and have a clear and strong **narrative** about their teaching then students are more secure about their learning, and achievement and understanding is increased'

3. 'By consistently adopting **protocols for teaching** student behaviour, engagement and learning is enhanced'

4. 'By consistently adopting **protocols for learning** student capacity to learn, skill level and confidence is enhanced'

5. 'If teachers use **cooperative group structures / techniques** to mediate between whole class instruction and students carrying out tasks, then the academic performance of the whole class will increase as well as the spirit of collaboration and mutual responsibility'

6. 'When teachers systematically use **higher order questioning** the level of student understanding is deepened and their achievement is increased'

7. 'When teacher's consistently use **feedback and data** on student actions and performance then behaviour becomes more positive and progress accelerates'

8. 'When **peer assessment and assessment for learning** (AfL) are consistently utilized student engagement, learning and achievement accelerates'

9. 'When **learning tasks** are purposeful, clearly defined, differentiated and challenging, (according to the students Zone of Proximal Development), then the more powerful/ progressive and precise the learning for all students'

10. 'When schools and teachers set **high expectations and develop authentic relationships** then students confidence and commitment to education increases and the school's ethos and culture deepens'

ANNEX 2

The main non-fiction text types identified in WG Guidance publication *'Developing higher-order literacy skills across the curriculum'* :

- **Recount – Purpose: to re-tell events/ narrative in the past tense**

- **Instruction – Purpose: describe how something is done through a series of sequenced steps**

- **Non-chronological writing – Purpose: to describe characteristics/ provide information**

- **Explanation – Purpose: to explain a process or how something works; to explain cause and effect**

- **Persuasion – Purpose: to persuade the reader to agree; to argue the case for a single point of view**

- **Discussion – Purpose: to present arguments and information from differing viewpoints**