



This profile is part of the EU Study on Supporting School Innovation Across Europe. It presents one of the 24 schools in the study, giving an overview of the changes and experiences in that school. Find the rest of the materials from the study at:

www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation

Promoting students' self-esteem and higher order thinking skills through curriculum innovation at the Willenhall Community Primary School



About our school

- ◆ **Location:** Coventry, West Midlands
- ◆ **Established:** 2005
- ◆ **Status:** Public school that provides primary education for students of 4 to 11 years old (there is also a nursery for children from 3 to 4 years old)
- ◆ **Number of pupils:** 414 (in 2016)
- ◆ **Website:** <http://www.willenhallprimary.org/>
- ◆ **Contact person:** Caroline Kiely



Why did we innovate?

The school's population is very diverse in terms of needs and backgrounds. The school has a very high share of students eligible for free school meals as well as above average number of disabled students and those with special needs. There is also an increased number of students who speak English as an additional language, many of whom are in the reception class. The results of the school were below average and many children did not have opportunities to realise their potential. In this context the school decided to innovate its curricula to help promote educational excellence and success of all students regardless of their background. The school provides a 'bespoke' curriculum, tailored to the needs of the students, particularly in relation to building their confidence and self-esteem and providing them with a wide range of social and cultural experiences. As a result of this innovation, the school performance has improved from 'Satisfactory' in 2008 to 'Outstanding' in all categories in 2013.



What were our innovations?

The school's approach to teaching and learning is based on attaining educational excellence and achievement for all students in the context of serving a very disadvantaged catchment area. To accommodate the needs of their diverse students' body, the school developed a highly stimulating curriculum, which seeks to provide its students with an understanding of the learning processes in which they are involved (meta-cognition) – and to build their self-belief. The provision of specialist teaching in certain subject areas (science, music, art, physical education) is a key element in this process, as is the development of maths teaching throughout the school (for 6th graders), under specialist leadership. The teaching of philosophy to all students is also a vital element in developing students' thinking skills, resilience and self-confidence.

Two maths team leaders had jointly led maths development at the school for some years. They had worked substantially on staff development, to build the confidence of other teachers in teaching the subject. A long-term plan had been developed, based on research and on analysis of students' performance. A major focus currently is on problem-solving and reasoning, which is also consonant with the demands of the new maths curriculum. The school has used the materials developed by Nrich@Cambridge University and suggested by National Curriculum 'Excellence in teaching math'. The team adopts a collaborative approach to maths teaching, where the students are fully involved in and confident with the learning processes.

In the school's approach to maths, there is less emphasis on getting the right answer and more on the thinking process which goes on. Every opportunity is taken to link maths skills to other parts of the curriculum and to real world learning. Examples include entrepreneurial activity, costing of PE(physical education) equipment and sportswear, involvement with the weighing and height measurement of students for their health check and the School Council's costing of changes to the school's rewards system.

The school has a specialist teacher and leader of philosophy, who also leads on the teaching of Religious Education (RE) and Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE). The approach to the subject is based on the work of the Philosophy Foundation, though materials have been tailored to the needs of the students at the school. The focus is on developing philosophical skills and on thus providing support for the students' development.

The programme of Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural and Development (SMSC) is central to the students' personal development and to their learning. An Assistant school leader leads this curriculum area across the Federation¹ (with Whitmore Park School). Students learn how to cope with feelings, relationships, family issues – and how to see themselves in moral and spiritual contexts. The school also has its core values and golden rules: Honesty; Kindness; Respect; Community; Growth; that are prominently displayed across the building and followed in each class.

Teachers regularly receive training in this area (SMSC) of the school's provision (either internally or externally provided) and understand the central role it plays in preparing children for life beyond school. Assessment activities are included in their Personal Social and Health Education provision so

¹ The power to create a Federation of two or more schools with a single or joint governing body was introduced in September 2003, as collaboration was embraced as a route to raising standards. Federations operate under local authority control. The School leader is responsible for both (or all) schools within the Federation.

it is possible to track students' progress. A long-term plan for this area was developed— and all teachers have received full training and support, so that the SMSC programme can be delivered by class teachers.

The school also offers Enhanced Support Class, where an intensive support for children with a variety of special needs, most of whom would previously have been in special schools, is provided. Students from different year groups are involved – and the aim is always to get them back into mainstream classes when appropriate. The work of the class centres on building self-esteem and a culture of success. Assessment is by small stages and through careful observation.

The school employs a specialist teacher in art who is also a practising artist, as well as specialist teachers in science, music, French and Physical Education. The contribution of Physical Education (PE) – including a wide range of very successful sports teams – to raising morale and self-confidence amongst the students has been very significant. A strong link has also been established with a local rugby club, where students have joined junior teams. The PE staff have also started their own junior football club, Willenhall Wolves, which meets on a Sunday morning and has a number of teams for both girls and boys. This has also engendered a feeling of pride in the school and confidence in the education offered amongst the parents and the wider community. There is a designated science area, which is well resourced and provides a proper scientific environment, as well as an outdoor science area. Extensive school grounds provide important opportunities for students to explore different habitats. There is also a specialist art room – and excellent displays around the school reflect the artistic talent of the students.

Curriculum innovation is undertaken on the initiative of the school itself, working in co-operation with its Federation partners at Whitmore Park Primary School. All staff, the governing body and the parents of the students are however regularly consulted and made part of the process of curriculum development. Student voice is also important – and in particular the input of the School Council. The school is also strongly engaged with community partners, such as Wasps Rugby Club, in developing broader learning activities and the personal and social development of the students.



What have we achieved?

Pupils

- Philosophy lessons had a significant effect on the students' skills in concentrating, asking questions and reasoning. The team found that RE was often being taught in a rather tokenistic way – and was failing to engage the students' interest. Students now look at a range of issues and problems from the perspective of different religions. There has been a major impact on the students' ability to cope with mathematical concepts. Students have learned to rehearse arguments in their written assignments, to make coherent statements and to come to logical conclusions. Teachers have consistently commented that they have heard the quality of talk improve. The children understand the link between their learning in philosophy and the rest of the curriculum – they practise the skills.
- According to the school staff, the teaching of philosophy has had a very positive impact on children's behaviour – in relation to solving conflicts and understanding the point of view of others. This is in the context of a school where children 'feel really safe' and thoroughly enjoy school.

School as a whole

- Willenhall rose from being adjudged 'Satisfactory' in 2008 to 'Outstanding' in all categories in 2013. Willenhall Primary School is now very popular with parents and over-subscribed.
- According to the most recent OFSTED² report (2012), the achievement of students in the school has significantly improved and the quality of teaching has been ranked as outstanding. Students are highly engaged in their learning because teachers check on their progress throughout the lesson and know their students' needs very well. The individual attention given to students to ensure that they are making enough progress during every lesson is exemplary.



The process of change: what helped us succeed?

School level

The school leader has played a key role in relation to the development of the school's vision: attaining educational excellence and achievement for all students (in the context of serving a very disadvantaged catchment area). He particularly emphasised the importance of safe and inclusive culture at school, professional development of staff, continuous reflection on performance, research and development and experimentation.

The school leader's initiative in recruiting specialist teachers in Science, Art and PE has been crucial in building students' skills and positive attitudes to learning. The availability of specialist staff in addition to the class teachers has meant that the latter are able to have half a day per week for planning together. Class teachers have been relieved of having to plan lessons in these subjects, which reduces their workload. Staff absence is very low. This constitutes very efficient use of staffing resources.

The maths team leaders visited New Zealand, to observe and learn from the New Zealand maths curriculum, which is very much based on contextual mathematics in a community context. Some of the strategies have been adopted at Willenhall. teachers have also drawn examples of good practice from maths curricula in Singapore and China and looked at successful maths teaching elsewhere in the UK.

The school leader and Senior Leadership team are very much aware of the nature of the catchment area and the limited opportunities for social and cultural experiences that many of the children have. The school has therefore offered CPD to staff particularly in developing teaching and learning strategies in relation to active learning and 'partner talk'.

Support for teachers in developing learning and teaching strategies has been also provided through external support from an Advanced Skills teacher³ based in Coventry.

² Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

³ Advanced Skills Teachers are teachers who have been recognised through external assessment as having excellent classroom practice. They are given additional payment and non-contact time to share their skills and experience with other teachers and learn from them.



The process of change: what limited us?

Regional level

A view expressed by curriculum leaders was that there was little if any support from the broader educational system for curricular development – unless the school could afford to pay for particular courses. However, the professional needs of staff were being met, owing to the high quality of professional leadership within the school and the ability of the school to facilitate internal – and where appropriate external – CPD relevant to the needs of the staff.

One of the main barriers was that the government does not directly support innovation through CPD for teachers. This is very heavily dependent on the budgets and the priorities of each individual school. Schools are in competition for students – and so they tend to be less willing to share best practice, which prevents effective collaboration of schools.



Sustainability of change

According to the school staff, the innovation brought a number of benefits that proved to be sustainable. It was also evident in the high quality of the teaching observed, the pace and level of challenge in the lessons – and the positive attitude of the students.

The school has designed its own assessment systems for the core subjects and for Humanities, Art and Music. The Philosophy Leader, who has a background in CPD work at a national level, is in charge of monitoring the quality of curriculum delivery.

Non-core subjects are assessed using iPads to record classroom practice while evidence from teachers' journals is also used – both photographic and written.

Staff evaluation takes place on a half-termly basis, with much emphasis on developing teachers' professional skills through coaching in teaching and learning. In addition, the school leader observes each teacher once per term.

The main vehicle for sharing good practice and upscaling innovation is the Federation with Whitmore Park Primary School that has improved significantly during recent years. The school leader is also a National Leader of Education (NLE) and is thus able to provide help for other schools – on a contract basis.

The good practice observed in the school is absolutely transferable to other contexts. Strong leadership and a clear vision for any school wishing to implement change is of course essential. However, currently no evidence of innovation transfer to different contexts is available.



What did we learn in the process? Key messages

- Individual schools can achieve highly successful change, if schools and school staff are provided enough flexibility and autonomy to respond to the schools' local needs.
- Time spent on primary and secondary schools working together and sharing information on students' learning and progress is essential. Willenhall school has provided specialist teaching at primary level and has a clear vision of their students as future learners in the secondary sector and beyond.

- Strong leadership and a clear vision for any school wishing to implement change is essential. The central elements of the school vision supporting change are creation of safe, inclusive and collaborative culture at school, professional development of staff, continuous reflection on performance, research and development and space for experimentation.

Further reading

- **A full report** 'Supporting School Innovation across Europe' explores the conditions in the school education system that can enable or constrain positive change in schools.
- **12 case studies** explore the national approaches and individual school innovations. They include the perspectives of key national education experts and stakeholders who were interviewed and took part in workshops.
- **24 individual profiles** give a quick view of the changes and experiences in each school.

Available here:

www.schooleducationgateway.eu/innovation

- The school profiles also feature as part of the [European Toolkit for Schools](#), alongside a range of materials and many other inspiring examples of practice from European countries.

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