Project rationale and focus

This project was designed to support the academy’s wider aim of addressing areas of underperformance of various learner groups. We called the initiative ‘Reach for the stars’ because the school needs to accelerate the progress of its most able students with the ultimate aim of achieving a higher proportion of A*/A grades at GCSE. The project involved two separate, but related lines of inquiry:

- How can we develop the skills necessary for high ability students to make accelerated progress?
- Do teachers’ high expectations accelerate the learning and progress made by high ability students?

School change context

Top Valley is a sponsored secondary academy in the north of the city of Nottingham and has 620 pupils on roll. The school draws pupils from some of the poorest wards in the city with 51% of pupils in receipt of Pupil Premium (against a national average of 21%). The academic profile of pupils on entry is well below the national average. There is an evident and growing sense of optimism about the academy: numbers are increasing rapidly with the Year 7 intake having doubled in three years and in-year transfers rising. The school has a positive profile locally and parental approval ratings for the school are high. In May 2014, Ofsted acknowledged that the academy had started to successfully tackle some of its deep-seated issues. For example, behaviour and safety are now established strengths of our inclusive culture, and attendance (93%+) is in line with national averages despite the challenging context. The challenge for the school is to translate the positive climate that has been achieved into enhanced outcomes (45% of pupils gained 5 GCSEs including English and mathematics at C or above in 2013).

For the purposes of this project, as the students at Top Valley do not reflect the national gifted and talented criteria of the top 5-10%, the ‘more able’ are defined as students who have achieved the national levels when they enter the school in Year 7 (Level 4b or higher). The school contains roughly half the national average of such learners.
Starting point

This project arose from a shared concern about how to challenge and extend the learning of all students, but especially the most able which was an area of practice which we wanted to improve on. This was a part of a wider project which was concerned with meeting the particular needs of students. The project was implemented by two members of staff, with a third acting as a critical friend. One collaborator was the Gifted and Talented Coordinator for the school and so was able to take a strategic view of this project and link it to school policies. Together we devised two different approaches to enhancing the learning of gifted and talented students which we chose to trial.

Project processes

One project explored the impact of adopting a compressed curriculum in mathematics, whereby all the learning objectives up to GCSE for a particular curriculum area are compressed and taught as a single module rather than over successive years as with the spiral curriculum. The aim was to take the students from a relatively low level to level 8 (GCSE grade B) before changing topic (i.e. increasing the level of challenge incrementally over successive lessons).

Adopting a compressed curriculum involved rewriting the scheme of work for several topics (which took place from October 2013 to January 2014). The compressed curriculum was piloted with a high ability Year 8 mathematics class.

As the students were likely to find the compressed curriculum increasingly challenging, care was taken to manage the students’ reactions. Rather than say ‘I can’t do this’, or ‘this is too hard’ the students were encouraged to think in terms of ‘I am finding this tricky right now’ and ‘practice makes progress’. Care was also taken to ensure that the students were unaware of the level they were working at to prevent the students from trying to opt out of doing the work if they thought it was a higher level than their target level. This meant avoiding using GCSE text books and ensuring every resource fitted in so seamlessly the students did not realise that the grade levels were getting higher.

The other project involved running an extra-curricular history project for more able students who were invited to take part. IT was introduced as an opportunity and was received positively with around half of the students who were invited taking part. The project primarily involved a group of Year 7-8 students and a group of Year 9-10 students, but Year 5-6 pupils from local feeder schools project were invited to take part on occasion as part of a wider transition project. This element of the project was ostensibly run by staff, but Year 7 pupils were also involved in planning and running activities etc to enable them to forge relationships with the younger pupils.

This project was designed to offer the most able pupils in our school a chance to push themselves and move at a quicker pace than they would be able to in regular lessons.
The extra-curricular project aimed to enable the more able students to access a higher level of work than they would normally access in lessons as it involved the students in using GCSE resources and vocabulary. The focus of the project itself was the 100th year commemorations of the start of the First World War. The first few lessons were fairly teacher led seminars to give the students an overview of the period. The students were then involved in internet based research to extend their knowledge of a particular aspect, such as looking at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to research individual people and regiments. They were also provided with copies of newspapers from the time, and poetry and diary entries written by soldiers at the front.

After that, the work was more student-led, with the students deciding how they would present the outcomes of their research as well as the intended audience. The Year 7/8 students decided to produce a video in the style of a news report to be presented to the primary feeder schools whilst the Year 9/10 students decided to prepare a presentation for the senior leadership team and governors as well as organise a way of celebrating the anniversary this year and in future years, such as a garden of remembrance.

Impact on students

Both of these projects have had significant impacts on the differing groups of students. The provision of an extra curricular club has given an opportunity for students to follow their interests and to develop their enthusiasm for learning. In class, students have responded to the challenges they have been set. This has helped them to achieve higher levels of learning than had previously been the cases. In both instances the students believe they can do a lot more than they did before.

We have also seen changes in students' aspirations in terms of what they think they can achieve - they believe that if they are achieving at a higher level than they expected now, they will be able to achieve even more by the time they come to do their GCSEs.

Impact on the team

Taking part in the project helped to bring us together as a team:

“It was really nice for us to come together for meetings. It was nice to know that we were doing this as a team rather than individually. We've not worked in this way before”

“The most valuable thing was the feeling of support. I'm new to teaching so felt I was taking a big risk, but I felt very supported in taking that risk”

Next steps

We have been surprised with how, when given the freedom, the students were able to extend a project in ways the teacher would not have thought of. We intend to feed back the value of this way of working to staff. We were also pleased with how well the compressed curriculum worked and intend to explore how we can extend the approach to other classes.
Benefits of working with the University of Nottingham

The university provided research articles and case studies which helped to shape the project and also indicated other ways we could push the students in the future. The university’s suggestion to baseline the students’ views was important because it helped to show how progress had been made. The meetings we had with the academics provided a useful sounding board for us to test our ideas with people outside of the academy and gain an alternative perspective. Having the support from the university added credence to the project. Receiving support for the project from both the academics and colleagues who acted as critical friends provided a great opportunity for risk taking.

New knowledge gained

This project has helped us to understand how to meet the needs of gifted and talented pupils. We have taken two approaches to this, in one instance we have provided a chance for students to engage in extra curricular activities to extend what they have learnt in lessons. This approach has been compared to attempts to further challenge and extend the learning of students in class. Together this has allowed us to develop different means to extend the learning of the most able students.

In terms of the processes of inquiry, we have also learned about the importance of recording students’ views before and after to plot what impacts a new initiative might have. We are learning as a school that it’s not enough to know things about our students, that we actually need to change what we do in response.

Further reading

Teaching and Learning Academy: *Promoting students’ persistence in meeting challenges*. A research for Teachers summary based on the work of Carol Dweck is available from: www.tla.ac.uk/site/Pages/RT.aspx


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