

## **A Bright Start :The experience of an Aberdeen primary school introducing the Bright Start cognitive curriculum**

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**Synopsis:** This article by Sarah Philp (Depute Principal Educational Psychologist), Emma Powell and Melissa Mitchell (Educational Psychology Assistants for Research) summarises the experience of an Aberdeen Primary School which introduced the *Bright Start* cognitive curriculum. The aim of this project was to focus on the experience of the staff involved in the Primary School and to consider what would be helpful to other schools or individuals interested in using Bright Start.

**Keywords:** behaviour management, Bright Start, meditational teaching, structural cognitive development, zone of proximal development

### **Overview of Bright Start:**

Bright start is a cognitive curriculum for the early years designed to develop self-confidence, school readiness and thinking processes. The programme focuses on the development of cognitive functions or key thinking processes or abilities and aims to teach the basic and transferable processes of thinking and problem solving so children can become successful learners.

Bright Start is designed to be used with children aged 3-6 years and is also appropriate for some children with additional learning needs. It focuses on the thinking skills that are prerequisites for learning, not just in early years but to enable successful life long learning. Bright Start does not replace the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence but instead sits alongside it, focusing not on teaching content but on basic processes for learning. The premise is that cognitive processes and subject content are interdependent and so development of both are more effective when these are taught together.

The key characteristics of the programme are not so different from what is commonly found in classrooms, but in Bright Start particular aspects are emphasised and explicitly labelled and brought to consciousness through its delivery.

- The curriculum focuses on general processes of thought, rather than specific content.
- Teachers use a 'Meditational Teaching Style' (to assist and guide minimally, without just telling the answer).
- A cognitive approach to behavioural management is emphasised
- The development of 'Task Intrinsic Motivation' (motivated by success in the actual activity) is emphasised.
- Children are thought to be active, self-initiating learners.
- Teachers help children think of the nature of their own thought processes.

The Bright Start programme is split into seven units which focus on specific cognitive functions or skills of learning; self-regulation, number concepts, comparison, classification, role taking, pattern and sequence and letter shape concepts.

It is recommended that Bright Start is delivered to small groups, alongside the standard curriculum and the Bright Start lessons are bridged out to the child's wider context: their home, play and school. Bridging is the way of generalising thinking and learning skills to other situations relevant to the child.

### **Theory of Bright Start:**

Educators and developmental psychologists agree that the most effective educational programmes are those which base their principles upon child development. Bright Start is based on a system that builds upon the work of several key developmental psychologists. Bright Start's authors integrate elements from: Carl Haywood's 'transactional' view of nature and the development of intelligence, Jean Piaget's concept of the cognitive development of children, L.S. Vygotsky's work on the social context of cognitive acquisition within the 'zone of proximal development', and Reuven Feuerstein's theory of structural cognitive development. The integration of these theories allows Bright Start to be an effective programme for developing learning in early years that is easy to implement alongside other targets and the Scottish Curriculum and provides an essential foundation for learning throughout the life of a child.

### **Context**

Aberdeen City Council through the Educational Psychology Service has implemented a pilot of the Bright Start Cognitive Curriculum. Three schools participated in the training and two went on to introduce Bright Start in their schools.

The primary school referred to in this article was keen to participate in the training and had previously been introduced to Bright Start by the school's Educational Psychologist. In addition the school had received in-service training from the school EP on theories of learning pertinent to Bright Start and other related methodologies used.

### **Delivery of Bright Start:**

Staff decided that in order to familiarise themselves with the Bright Start units and the mediational teaching style they would benefit from initially working with small groups. They recognised the potential for whole class delivery and decided that a term to develop a deeper understanding and knowledge of Bright Start would be beneficial. They started by introducing pupils to the 'self-regulation' module. It had been anticipated that this would be the only module focussed on. Staff quickly became interested in introducing a second module (number concepts) and began to work between the two.

The experiences of the staff at the Primary School were central to the focus of the research and so a 'community of enquiry' model was adopted. There were two

community of enquiry meetings over the term, these were video recorded and used as the basis for our analysis.

### **What did we learn?**

The purpose of this piece of research was to explore what the training in and opportunity to deliver Bright Start offered to those involved. It was also important to utilise this experience and pilot in providing information for other schools and interested parties for future application and roll out. This section aims to provide those who may be interested in the development of Bright Start either as an early years initiative, class initiative or as a small group intervention with some points they may wish to consider.

There are a number of factors from the experience of this Primary School which have contributed to its success and its potential. From the outset the school has demonstrated an investment in and commitment to the initiative. Releasing four members of staff for four days of training is evidence of this. The school gave consideration to who in the staff team would be interested and how they would be able to carry out the programme once the training was completed.

Following the training there was a planning meeting involving the Educational Psychology Service and the staff in school. This set out some realistic and achievable aims for the school for the term. The school staff themselves were reasonable in what they considered to be manageable and appropriate given the timescale and the 'newness' of Bright Start. Progress and expansion emerged from their experience and discussion. In this sense any developments that occurred were natural and felt right for staff at that time.

The selection of staff to attend the training was key. The Depute Head Teacher was able to run a group herself but also maintained direction and focus for the staff involved. Her involvement has also allowed the Senior Management Team of the school to be aware of developments and how this may relate to other priorities within the school.

It was also important for the school to think about how the programme could be sustained. This forward planning allowed three groups to deliver the programme on a regular basis and a support network to be established within the school. The support network within the school has proved very beneficial to staff allowing them to work as a group, be reassured that their hopes and fears are shared by others, and that problems can be overcome successfully. These conversations also have significant potential at a systemic/ organisational level. In *Changing Conversation in Organisations* (Shaw, 2002) writes extensively about the potential of conversations in an organisation and the power they have in shaping and changing that organisation. It is clear in the case of this Primary School that conversations shifted over time to address the issue of 'how do we make this part of what we are doing at a whole school level?'

Something that was evident to the researchers was that over a relatively short period of time, the confidence and readiness for moving on was quite rapid. For example at the first community of enquiry session (after four weeks of implementation) there was already discussion about the introduction of a second module and at the second meeting (four weeks later) there was a view to whole class work. This perhaps suggests that a little bit of experience with Bright Start can go a long way. The support network within the school contributed to this because the sharing of ideas and experiences helped to create a 'can do' approach within the staff group. It helped to identify what had gone well and what had been achieved, this in turn helped to create a positive way forward. This was also bolstered by the positive feedback and response from pupils to the Bright Start sessions. The community of enquiry sessions contained many anecdotal comments from staff which highlighted their positive regard for the Bright Start sessions and the impact staff noticed on pupil learning.

There was recognition from the staff that the delivery of Bright Start in isolation does not allow for optimum effectiveness. The Depute Head Teacher delivered Bright Start to a group from a Primary 1 class within the school, whose class teacher had not participated in the training. This emerged as a significant disadvantage during the community of enquiry sessions. Staff were concerned that the potential of Bright Start, in particular the opportunities for further bridging, were undermined. This was endorsed by comments from the other staff who talked about how they were able to build on and reinforce concepts and cognitive functions at other times and with other pupils. Some ideas for reducing this disadvantage were generated, for example carrying out Bright Start sessions in a quiet area of classroom, allowing the class teacher to develop a greater understanding of the sessions; and team teaching. Both of these ideas offer the opportunity for the sharing of Bright Start as well as its development into the whole class setting.

### **Conclusion**

Bright Start has a sound research base and an existing evidence base which was recognised by the school before it was introduced. The training in and introduction of Bright Start was well received by staff and pupils and the motivation for further development is present within the school. Such developments will be monitored and supported by the Educational Psychology Service. It is perhaps also worth considering how such a curriculum could contribute to the delivery of a Curriculum for Excellence. If we were to consider how we might recognise Curriculum for Excellence 'in action' we would be looking for the following:

- The values, purposes and principles to be evident in planning,
- An emphasis on teaching and learning,
- Opportunities for personal achievement,
- Assessment to support learning &
- Learning to learn.

Bright Start is a cognitive curriculum which meets these criteria. As a cognitive curriculum it is mainly concerned with activating cognitive functions. In doing so, it equips the learner with the necessary tools to understand more and to learn better (by better we mean more efficiently and more effectively).

Curriculum for Excellence is about developing successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. In order to achieve this we need to help children to develop the necessary thinking skills. As Alex Kozulin writes in *Key to Learning* (2007), 'the psychological developments of early childhood are so important they cannot be left to chance'. We need to think carefully about the curriculum we deliver and how we deliver it, Bright Start combines both these components.