
Year 7 Accelerated Learning Curriculum 2006-2010: from a concept to an outstanding curriculum

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ABSTRACT The author, Head of Year 7 at Cantell Maths and Computing College in Southampton, describes the development of an innovative approach to Year 7, which is based on the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency programme 'Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills'. He shows how the new approach evolved and continues to develop including the impact it has had on improvements across both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.

Cantell Maths and Computing College, Southampton

Cantell Maths and Computing College is an 11-16 Community Specialist Secondary School of 950 students serving a wedge-shaped catchment area from the affluent north of Southampton to the inner-city wards with the highest levels of deprivation. Situated a short walk from the University of Southampton, it is also alongside an estate of mainly white families with high levels of unemployment and deprivation. Its student profile is truly comprehensive although a graph of its social class would not be the standard bell shape but would have higher numbers at either end.

Latest statistics at the end of November 2010 show free school meals at 28%, 54% of the students are other than White British, and 46 languages, other than English, are spoken, from Akan to Zulu. Turbulence is high compared with other City schools, with 80 students admitted mid year since September 2010 and 30 leaving. Incoming students can include traumatised asylum-seeking children, with no English, who have been moved into the City at short

notice by the Government, to high-achieving children of overseas lecturers and students from the University.

The school moved into new private finance initiative (PFI) funded buildings in 2003. In 2004 it was put into 'Special Measures' from which it emerged in 2006. The exam results that year were: 37% achieving 5+ A*-C GCSEs, with 35% including maths and English. Under the new head appointed in 2008 results have improved significantly so that in 2010 5+ A*-C GCSEs were at 63% and with maths and English 41% (this being a disappointing drop from 47% in 2009). This achievement was based on an academic curriculum of which Michael Gove would approve. Targets are for considerable improvement in 2011 but include an extended curriculum to include some additional BTEC courses. The policy of the school is to provide as wide a curriculum as possible, from Latin to hairdressing, giving the opportunity for all students to achieve at a high level in something.

There are nine primary schools in the feeder cluster, the highest number for any secondary school in the city, which presents particular issues for the transition from Year 6 to Year 7. The new approach to the curriculum and organisation of Year 7 as outlined in this article is aimed at stopping the slip back that can occur on transition but also raising achievement across the whole KS3 period.

What is the Cantell Accelerated Learning Curriculum?

The Cantell Accelerated Learning Curriculum – ALC – is dedicated to teaching our pupils the vital skills required to make them successful learners and future leaders. The students' work is centralised *on* a Year 7 Learning Base where students are supported by a member of the Accelerated Learning staff. Our curriculum is thematic and differentiated according to the individual needs of the students. The 'themes' are vehicles for the teaching and acquisition of skills and students are encouraged to explore and utilise a range of approaches to learning. Our students are encouraged to take an active role in their learning and are consulted in the development of 'themes' or projects. By the end of Year 7 our learners will have all the necessary skills needed to be truly effective learners throughout the rest of their education. The Cantell Accelerated Learning Curriculum is structured around the Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) published by the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency QCDA.

Why did Cantell Maths & Computing College Decide on a Competency-Based Curriculum?

From 2004 to 2006 Cantell Maths & Computing College was in Special Measures with several areas requiring improvement. One of the most important of these was a traditional subject-based curriculum that focused on the acquisition of knowledge, with students who were disaffected and lacked the

necessary literacy and personal skills to access it. This led to poor behaviour in many lessons and *many* students were becoming disaffected as their learning was disrupted.

We also had to improve in the area of attendance. We had an unacceptably high number of exclusions in all year groups, coupled with high numbers of internal truancy and poor attendance, which left us with an uphill battle to help students make even satisfactory progress. We were also struggling to help the 'silent majority' of students who were being 'lost' (in that individual needs were not recognised and students found it too easy to coast) from the start of their time with us, leading to underachieving and slow progress. One of the reasons for this was that students joining the school were met with as many as 15 different teachers a week. All of this led to a falling roll and poor transition from primary schools.

It was obvious to our leadership team that something needed to change for our students, starting from their first day.

How did Cantell Maths & Computing College Develop its Accelerated Learning Curriculum?

November 2006: two-day staff consultation and training, Paris

The issue of how we teach and welcome students to our school was discussed, debated and investigated. We looked at some of the problems, mentioned above, that were highlighted by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and developed an idea of how to reduce these. Guest speakers from schools and educational establishments who were already following similar projects presented their ideas and successes, and this was added into our developing plans. The outcome of this was that it was decided that we would take the best of the primary system and merge it with the best of the secondary system. It was agreed that we would have a team of eight teachers to teach a group of students for the majority of their lessons and for this to be in one place: the Year 7 Learning Base. The only other lessons these students would have would be: English, maths and physical education (PE).

Spring 2007: the team and setting up of the curriculum

During the spring term of 2007, interviews were held to select the eight teachers who would form the Year 7 Team. These eight team members plus the lead member of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) then visited the schools who already had this form of curriculum, most notably John Cabot School, Bristol.

The team were then taken off timetable for several planning days to create a curriculum that was interesting, relevant and tailored towards the needs of our students. By September 2007 the team had created the Schemes of Work for the autumn term and our Key Skills curriculum (later to become the Accelerated Learning Curriculum) was ready for its first intake.

September to July 2007: the first cohort

The first cohort was taught in 'all-ability' tutor groups in a Year 7 base that was solely for the use of the Year 7 pupils. Immediately we saw a reduction of exclusions from 150+ days for Year 7 the year before to just 5 days. As well as this, the problems in lessons decreased and were far below that of other years. Attendance rose significantly to above 90% and students, when asked, felt much safer and much more part of the school. Throughout the year we planned new topics and themes, influenced by the choices and interests of our students.

What we had in July was a curriculum that was more enjoyable and relevant for the students and in a visit by Ofsted that year, the Year 7 offer was described as 'outstanding'. This key skills curriculum was carried forward into Year 8 for a small group of students who still needed support. However, we still had things to improve, including: the need for a member of the team to take on a leadership role, further development of methods for monitoring and assessment, improved lesson plans and teaching methods, and some consideration of how to better meet the needs of the 'high achieving students', ('gifted and talented' [G&T] in Ofsted-speak), and students with special educational needs (SEN), or English as an additional language (EAL).

September 2007–July 2008: the second year

In the autumn term a Subject Leader was appointed with the task of overseeing the next stage of the curriculum's journey. Some of the key areas of development included: levels of achievement were created to help track pupil progress and provide Assessment for Learning (AFL), and there was continual reviewing and improving of lesson plans. A major change occurred in February 2008 when the mixed-ability tutor groups were rearranged into ability-based sets to stretch the G&T and support the SEN. This also allowed for a more directed curriculum to be developed outside the Key Skills which was tailored to the needs of different groups of students. It also enabled us to increase the number of other subjects the students studied, including science and French.

In June 2008 another major change was for Year 8 students to move from Year 7 into Year 8, starting their Key Stage 3 Pathways. This allowed the Year 7 team to adjust the pupil levels to follow the Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS), published by the QCDA. It also allowed much more time for transition, enabling the Subject Leader to visit every feeder school and discuss each child with their current Year 6 teacher. This means that students can be put into *appropriate* teaching and mentoring groups and the correct learning pathway from the start of their time at Cantell.

September 2009–June 2010: the third year

At the end of the second year, there was one key area that still needed to be addressed – that of raising student literacy. To this end the most relevant of the

QCDA Assessing Pupil Progress (APP) levels for English, maths, science and information and communication technology (ICT) were selected and used to create APP levels for Key Skills, allowing for focused AFL to drive forward literacy and influence planning.

This meant that during the third year, PLTS were in use and implemented in all lessons. We had an innovative curriculum that incorporated the latest government standards. It was, and is, a student-centred curriculum and these students are involved in the selection of what they study. The department has an open classroom and door policy, welcoming many visitors from other schools (in the same way that we had gone to see the innovative curriculum at John Cabot), parents of current students and prospective parents, other members of our own staff and of course all members of our team.

The department also has joint responsibility for planning amongst staff, including regular team 'plan, teach and review'. New staff are 'buddied up' with a mentor to assist in the new methods used. There is excellent sharing of good practice and ideas, with informal peer observation built into the timetable, and starting in September 2010 team teaching of a key group of 50 students, the 3a/4c band, by the Subject Leader and Advanced Skills Teacher in a partitioned classroom – one of three in the department – to help secure good level 4s by the end of the year.

The third year also saw the creation of an SEN class to help very low-achieving students and the creation of a 'high achieving' class to extend and challenge the 'top' 10%. It also saw outstanding ICT use in most lessons and good pace and challenge built into the curriculum. The Key Skills curriculum also saw outstanding use of peer and self assessment, with time built in to allow students to improve their work after the self-assessment phase. Driving this was regular moderation of PLTS and APP, excellent relationships between staff and students, good home-school contact and excellent standards of behaviour. It was decided at the end of this year to rename the Key Skills Curriculum the Accelerated Learning Curriculum as this better reflected the pace of learning and progress made in Year 7.

What Difference has the Curriculum Made?

The curriculum has influenced and complemented the new pathway curriculum tailored to each individual that goes right through the school up to GCSE level. The school uses data and other forms of information to design 'Pathways' that give a child the greatest chance of success whilst supporting them in the development of 'Key Competencies' and the successful transition from Key Stage 2. The school attendance has improved significantly, with better application by KS3 students, leaving staff with more time to focus on GCSE groups – which has raised standards significantly. Predicted 5A*-C results for the current Year 10 – the first Year 7 cohort – are over 75% compared with the actual results of 35% when the curriculum started.

Students going into Year 8 are more independent and ready to learn and have a greater sense of being part of the school community. Students are much happier and easier to track as they are better known by their *Every Child Matters* Managers and Progress Leaders. The school has also been able to hold its numbers against a falling Year 6 roll.

Finally, the creation of Assessing Pupil Progress and Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills assessment familiarises pupils with these for the rest of their school career, and as the teaching methodology from Year 7 is filtered through the rest of the school, the transition of students at Cantell is smooth throughout their career with us and there is good progress made across all lessons.

IAN CRESWELL is a history graduate who started teaching in 2002. After a year as a newly qualified teacher teaching Religious Education in Bournemouth, he had a spell as a supply teacher. He came to Cantell Maths and Computing College as a supply teacher in February 2004 – and stayed! Ian took on the role of Year 7 Leader in January 2008. Year 7 is now known as the Accelerated Learning Programme, and the Leader's role includes curriculum planning, initial student assessment, tracking each student's progress across all subject areas and pastoral care. He has advised other schools on the innovative approach to Year 7. *Correspondence:* ian.creswell@cantellschool.lpplus.net