

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Curriculum for Excellence is the title of a fundamental rethink of Scottish schooling which is currently under way and will roll out until at least 2016. Richard Coton, Head Teacher of Monifieth High School, Dundee, sees it as the greatest opportunity in 30 years to develop a system of education in harmony with Christianity.

The story behind the Values of Curriculum for Excellence, or CfE, is interesting and significant. Whereas every other part of the architecture of this vast scheme has been endlessly drafted and redrafted, the Values arose out of a single conversation among the original core planning team. They'd been hard at work for many days and weeks when someone pointed out that CfE had not yet been based on a coherent set of values. More or less immediately, someone else in the group suggested the four Values on the Mace of the Scottish Parliament:

- Wisdom
- Justice
- Compassion
- Integrity.

The idea commanded immediate support. There was no further debate.

A Christian world-view?

An unambiguous statement of moral absolutes, at the core of Scotland's radical new approach to education; in a relativistic culture, how remarkable is that? And such superb values too – recognisably biblical. You have to ask 'Whose hand is behind that remarkable turn of events?'

And make no mistake about it, the moral lead within the new curriculum is a central factor. Do you remember the Life skills approach to Social Education in the 1980s? 'Education must be morally neutral. We'll help you develop tools for life, but how you use these skills is entirely up to you.' Young Adolf could easily have got top grades: after all, he was extremely skilful! OK, I'm pushing it, and I'm certainly not saying that the average conscientious teacher took things so far along the relativistic road. But the new world of Curriculum for Excellence is refreshingly different. In line with an increasingly common international trend, the new Scottish curriculum is defined in terms of outcomes, not inputs. This offers greater flexibility and a more professional role for teachers, and at the same time provides clearer focus. And that focus has led teachers to ask a fundamental question, 'What is education for?'

The answer in Scotland is given firstly in high-level terms. We should be helping young people to develop in four areas described as Capacities:

- Successful learners
- Confident individuals
- Effective contributors
- Responsible citizens.

Note the holistic view of education and the clear moral lead. You cannot be a successful individual

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unless you also learn how to serve others and play a responsible role in the world around you. Sitting beneath the four Capacities are very precise Experiences and Outcomes, arranged in four levels for ages 3–15, with a senior phase beyond, defined significantly by external examinations. Curriculum for Excellence is designed to put Scotland at the forefront of educational development world-wide, and is certainly attracting a great deal of attention internationally. We need to celebrate the remarkable fact that so much of it is in complete harmony with Christianity.

Experiencing tomorrow – today

I am really blessed to have been given the opportunity to lead a school that has so many great pupils and great staff. As a result, we've embraced Curriculum for Excellence with immense energy and commitment. We've implemented the Level 3 outcomes, complete with major interdisciplinary elements, a year ahead of the government's timescale, which envisages roll out of Level 3 in secondary, and Levels 1 and 2 in Primary, in August 2010. Consequently, we're now almost half-way through our new S1 course. For us, therefore, tomorrow has already arrived. While we've made mistakes, and are still on a sharp learning curve, it does mean that we can share our experiences with others.

What have we learned? Well, firstly, the bedrock of Curriculum for Excellence is not the Outcomes. It's actually much wider, spreading out to a radical view of what twenty-first century schools should be like. You could say that Curriculum for Excellence is about two things: Doing School Together and Making Sense of Learning, which pretty much embraces everything that a modern school is about. Like many schools, we have been looking at these areas for several years, so in a certain sense we've actually been doing much of Curriculum for Excellence for a decade. One thing

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that nearly everyone is agreed about – the title, Curriculum for Excellence, is deeply misleading. What we're involved with embraces everything from management structures and governance to purposes and pedagogy. Particularly for those outside Scotland, it may be helpful to analyse what we are doing in terms of these two organisers. After all, we are all concerned with learning and community.

In practical terms, Doing School Together or Community, means giving pupils loads of responsibility, both in the classroom and in helping run the school. That, by the way, can be a great opportunity for Christian pupils to have an influence. It also means working in partnership with the wider community – which gives superb opportunities for local churches and Christian organisations to work in partnership with the school and serve it. If you haven't done so already, send today for a copy of CARE for Scotland's DVD 'Keeping Faith in Schools: How Churches are Making a Difference'. It really opens up exciting possibilities, and is just as relevant outside Scotland.

For our school, Making Sense of Learning includes a major restructuring of parts of the curriculum around interdisciplinary projects which we've found our pupils respond to most positively. Real-life contexts have always been pursued by teachers, but the new Experiences and Outcomes really point you in this direction. Have a look at the CARE website for a series of School Case Studies which give a whole range of practical ideas. The case studies are actually linked to the Draft Outcomes, but they all work just as well with the final Experiences and Outcomes. They are also equally relevant to other educational systems. If you look at them now, there'll be at least one or two which will save you work as you develop the curriculum – and will help you legitimately introduce your faith into a wide range of contexts, both primary and secondary. You'll find them at www.care.org.uk. Click on Parliaments/Assemblies, select Scotland, select Information and Resources, select School Case Studies, select Secondary Case Studies.

As I mentioned at the start, however, the biggest shift brought about by Curriculum for Excellence is a broadening of our view of what education is all about. The emphasis on Health and Wellbeing, the Four Capacities, the underlying messages about



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how pupils, staff, parents and the wider community relate to each other – all these lead to a holistic view of education which is much closer to the Bible than Scotland's, and Britain's, traditional tendency to over-emphasise the mind. It's no coincidence that one of the key hothouses of the Enlightenment was in Scotland. We may feel comfortable in the familiar cultural legacy that it has given us, but like all heresies, the Enlightenment was always a subtly dangerous distortion and over-emphasis of just a part of God's truth.

Get praying!

So, are schools finding Curriculum for Excellence easy to implement? And will life be easier in a year's time? To be honest, the answer to both questions is probably, 'No'. Curriculum for Excellence is a fundamental rethinking of what school is all about. The underlying architecture, the thinking and the rationale is coherent – don't let the doubting Thomases tell you differently. But with

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something as big as this, it's probably inevitable that communication and roll out have not been as smooth as we'd have liked.

You may not be able to control the national picture, but you certainly can be salt and light in your school. Change is always stressful, and most countries' schools are facing major changes to respond to what is happening in our societies. So – if there's more than one Christian staff member in the school and you don't have a regular prayer meeting, get going right away! If you already meet and pray, be encouraged: it's the most important single thing you can do to support all your colleagues and your pupils. If there's only one of you, get your House Group/Bible Study Group praying for the school. It really is the most important thing you can do.

And don't forget to pray for your Head Teacher, too. Why not ask him or her if he/she would like you to pray for particular aspects of your school's development? Who knows, your Head Teacher might be grateful for all the help he/she can get!

■ Richard Coton

If you would like a copy of the Chaplaincy Policy mentioned in this article, please send me an email. moncotonr@monifiethhigh.angus.sch.uk