Putting critical thinking into practice: St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School

Between 2015 and 2018, 800 teachers took part in free CPD from the Geographical Association and SSAT to develop their understanding and practical strategies for critical thinking; part of the international British Council Connecting Classrooms Programme to develop core skills. A key part of the training is the opportunity to try something out in the classroom and discussing the results with other participants (the plan, do, review model). Teachers from Early Years to the Sixth Form reflected on what they learned from the course and the impact it had on their pupils’ learning, before sharing their learning with others in their school. Here the teachers at St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School, Wandsworth consider impact of applying the programme on achievement in their school.

1. Classroom application

Following the initial training in 2015, the school applied the critical thinking course with whole-staff CPD, led by Assistant Head Stephen Ellis. The school’s aim was to improve questioning and so raise achievement across the whole school. Staff carefully monitored the improvement in the classroom and shared practice at staff meetings, finding that the project positively engaged staff and learners with critical thinking strategies, with clear impacts on achievement:

- In six out of seven classrooms surveyed, the pupils were now asking more questions than the teacher.
- In five out of six classrooms surveyed, learners were showing a growth mindset and a higher level of thinking through asking higher order questions.

Stephen concluded: ‘Students are showing more engagement in class than ever and the questions they’re asking are of a higher level. They’re able to tackle non-routine problems more effectively and consider a wider range of solutions’.

2. Network learning

The impact on teaching and learning was such that in 2016 St Joseph’s hosted CPD for teachers from fifteen other local schools in their network; the group applied critical thinking strategies in a range of subject contexts including English, mathematics, geography and history, then shared their practice and the impact on learning. For example:

After completing the activities, I observed an increase in questioning from the children, and pupils from a wide range of abilities are now able to engage within discussion confidently and effectively. They are able to apply their skills of empathy

1 https://schoolsonline.britishcouncil.org/whole-school-approach-problem-solving
to put arguments across and they are able to think critically, supporting their ideas with evidence from research (Rachel Dangerfield, Swaffield Primary School).

As a result of the project, lesson observations have seen an increase in teaching practices that promote and celebrate questioning from pupils. There has also been an increase in the quality and frequency of questioned asked, and anecdotal evidence also suggests pupils are achieving greater depth of understanding of taught subjects (James Tristram, Shaftesbury Park Primary School).

3. International partnership learning

A visit to a partner school in Jordan followed, funded by the British Council. Stephen Ellis reflected:

As a result of the Connecting Classrooms programme, I was able to visit my partner school in Jordan. It was an amazing experience; they completed the same core skill programme - not only could we share our passion for critical thinking, but I had the opportunity of teaching some critical thinking to students there. This project has developed my knowledge and understanding of critical thinking, given me the opportunity to learn from teachers and students in Jordan, and this amazing project will result in so many more teachers experiencing the opportunities that I have been able to.

4. Further development

The CPD in critical thinking has been the catalyst for long-term staff development and school improvement well beyond the initial training. For example a teacher investigating rainforest deforestation with his Year 4 class went on to develop pupils’ skills in reviewing evidence, developing arguments and engaging in debate, alongside developing their geographical understanding, speaking and listening and writing skills.

The activity improved the quality of the whole-class debate and the pupils’ understanding of the issue of deforestation in Amazonia … (it) allowed pupils to think independently while working collaboratively, proving an effective way of engaging the whole class in sharing their knowledge and understanding of a controversial issue… (this) can enhance pupils' thinking, enable them to problem-solve and support their understanding of different viewpoints.

Ellis, S and McCarthy, M (2017) ‘Challenging geography through silent debate’ Primary Geography, 94.