

How Are Colleges Taking Forward *Curriculum for Excellence* in Educating the Early Years Workforce?

1. Introduction and Methodology

1.1 Introduction

The Scottish Social Services Council¹ records that there are over 25,000 early years and childcare workers, employed in a variety of pre-school settings and also working alongside teachers in the early primary classes. The majority of staff in these early years educational settings are qualified to SCQF level 7 (SVQ level 3 or HNC level). Many obtain their qualifications through colleges and childcare courses make up a significant part of the portfolio of Scotland's colleges. Learners on such courses undertake a significant work experience placement. There is the potential for very close relationships between colleges and employers in the sector, and for this to be reflected in courses offered by colleges, through increased vocational relevance.

For their part, colleges work closely with the SQA (as Care Scotland) and employers to ensure relevance in the curriculum and have adopted a national qualifications framework that is built on the national occupational standards developed by the sector skills council for care, Skills for Care and Development. This in turn has ensured a registered (with the Scottish Social Services Council) early years workforce.

Curriculum for Excellence (Curriculum for Excellence) provides the foundation for the curriculum in early years settings, in both pre-school and primary settings, replacing the 3 to 5 Curriculum. Curriculum for Excellence is holistic and integrative, covering basic skills but also health and wellbeing, principles that continue throughout education. It focuses on partnership working, notably with parents, and in the early years, stresses the importance of active learning and play in delivering the curriculum.

Of particular significance within Curriculum for Excellence for the early years sector is *Building the Curriculum 2*, which focuses on active learning in the early years. It emphasises *...All staff have a role as leaders of learning²....*

Given the undisputed significance of Curriculum for Excellence in Scottish education, it is timely and important to consider how colleges are responding to this in educating those who will play an important role in working with the youngest and most impressionable learners.

1.2 Aims

This investigation seeks to establish the degree to which Curriculum for Excellence is reflected in the curriculum offered in Scotland's colleges to learners engaged on programmes leading to qualifications as early years practitioners.

The investigation addresses these aims through the following:

- identifying the programmes, and the indicative content, recognised by the Scottish Social Services Council as required for registration as a practitioner

¹ <http://www.sssc.uk.com/Social+Service+Careers/Social+Service+Home.htm>

² Scottish Executive, 2007 *A Curriculum for Excellence: Building the Curriculum 2 Active Learning in the early years*

in an early years and/or childcare setting, to ascertain whether this fulfils the knowledge and skills requirements of the sector, in relation to Curriculum for Excellence;

- consideration of the delivery of these programmes within colleges and the quality of the learning experience on these programmes, to determine how far these enhance learners' understanding of Curriculum for Excellence;
- evaluating the impact on the programmes of employers' practice and the perceptions of employers within the sector.

1.3 Methodology

As Childcare and Early Years makes up a substantial part of most colleges' portfolios and there is a nationally agreed curriculum and programme, the colleges selected were chosen on pragmatic grounds.

A field visit will be carried out with each college, to include:

- observation of learning and teaching
- interviews with learners
- interviews with key staff responsible for the design, management, delivery and internal review of childcare/early years programmes.

The procedures for review of national qualifications will be discussed with a representative from the national qualifications body, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

In addition, three employers in the early years sector will be approached, to ascertain how well prepared they feel that employees coming direct from college are with regard to Curriculum for Excellence. They will also be asked about the contribution made by college students in placement at their establishments and the opportunities they have to comment on course content and learner performance.

Findings to date (2 college visits – curriculum leaders, teaching staff)

- SQA units are due for review in August 2010. The general feeling amongst teaching staff is that until the units are revised, they must do a great deal of interpretation (i.e. for 'curriculum', reading 'curriculum for excellence') and have had to 'subsidise' materials through their links with employers;
- Colleges have embedded CfE into other childcare programmes, including Intermediate 2;
- In CCLD, CfE is well embedded in the materials;
- LTS has proved useful and have held several conferences on CfE, aimed at colleges' EY staff;
- Colleges are making use of VLEs to share information and developments in CfE and to record learner progress;
- At the moment, no access to GLOW although LTS are considering a pilot for this with colleges;
- Little done yet in relation to *working with parents*;
- Some work experience is patchy because employers are at different stages in their understanding of CfE. Around 50% of learners experienced CfE in practice and the general consensus is that most establishments are on a steep learning curve.
- Support of Scotland's Colleges – Embedding CfE into the EY Curriculum
- Colleges are providing learners with copies of relevant CfE documents, including E and O documents, and BtC2 and BtC3;
- College libraries are not automatically supplied with CfE documents in hard copy;
- Colleges recognise that they must be 'ahead of the game' to ensure that learners are more employable at the end of their course. Learners must have a good theoretical and practical grounding in CfE if they are to enhance their employability;

Learners

So far, I have spoken to around 25 learners about their experiences in class, their understanding of CfE, and their experiences on placement.

Several learners felt that placements varied from almost providing staff cover, and therefore not able to benefit from the supervision of class teachers, to having very little contact with learners. It is clear that placements experiences vary from one learner to another, as did the learning opportunities they were allowed. This had impacted on their experiences of CfE in the workplace.

However,

- All had a clear understanding of CfE and had researched this as well as seeing it in operation, to a greater or lesser extent, in practice;
- With regard to application of theory in practice, this clearly depended on the stage that the placement organisation had reached in its understanding. The discussions appeared to indicate that a lot of work

was being done in nurseries but many organisations were at an early point of development so were limited in the support they could give students in this regard;

- Placement supervisors were generally supportive although some students had experienced the effects of staff shortages and one had received very little supervision or contact with children;
- Learners felt very well prepared before going out on placement and had been given appropriate CfE material and class input.

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