

Primaries give the thumbs-up to a global perspective on learning

A thematic approach to education is rapidly gaining supporters in Wales, but with adopters having to pay an initial fee of £10,000 followed by an annual subscription of £1,000, what exactly is the attraction for cash-strapped schools?

By Darren Evans

AROUND a large table a group of company directors, scientists and protestors are locked in debate over the building of a proposed power plant.

As the arguments fly back and forth, their colleagues in the next room are quietly getting on with the business of designing new water turbines.

This might sound like a normal working day in big business, but these scenarios are in fact being acted out by pupils in the classrooms of Maindee Primary School in Newport.

Maindee has become one of a growing number of primaries in Wales prepared to pay thousands of pounds to teach the thematic International Primary Curriculum (IPC).

Originally developed in 2000 by the Shell oil company for the children of its employees at 15 international schools, the IPC is now taught in schools all over the world.

It aims to teach pupils using cross-curricular units of work, rather than individual subjects.

Four years ago, Albert Primary in Penarth became the first school in Wales to teach the IPC. Since then, 27 more primaries across the country have adopted the programme.

But with each school paying an initial £10,000 to sign up and a further £1,000 annual subscription, why are cash-strapped Welsh primaries paying to run the curriculum?

Carol Wadsworth, head of Maindee



'Just look at our children now,' says Maindee's deputy head. 'They are so engaged. I think it's proved we have made the right choice.'

Primary, said the pressures of preparing for the new school curriculum that was introduced by the Assembly government in September 2008 led her to seek new approaches.

"We realised we had to change our curriculum to make it more theme-based and incorporate the skills framework," she said.

"It was quite a big jump. We looked at different methodologies and tried to do our own, but realised it was going to be onerous in terms of cost and staff time."

Then she heard about the IPC and went

to visit schools running the scheme in Penarth and Swansea to see whether it would be a suitable option for Maindee.

"We could see that the children were engaged and the teachers were happy," she said. "It seemed to be a good vehicle for delivering the aims of the new Welsh curriculum, which is statutory, with the added security blanket of readily available resources and staff on hand to answer questions."

Teachers from the IPC visited Maindee to speak to teachers, some of whom were understandably worried about how their

subjects and expertise would fit in with the new curriculum.

Emma Nolan, deputy head, said: "The presentation seemed to tick all the boxes we were looking for. It was a perfect opportunity to change the way we taught in our school."

Despite the growing popularity of the IPC in Wales and glowing references from schools, the Assembly government has remained lukewarm about the curriculum.

A spokesman said the statutory curriculum is already learner-focused and offers flexibility and reduced subject content, with an increased focus on skills.

"If schools wish to use elements of the international primary school curriculum to assist their learners, it is for them to decide," he said.

"We are aware of some schools using the material, but they need to ensure that any material used is compatible with the curriculum in Wales."

But the IPC's international dimension was particularly attractive for Maindee, where 85 per cent of pupils take English as an additional language.

Years 4 and 6 trialled the approach for a term before it was introduced across the whole school.

Ms Wadsworth said: "We told the staff not to worry and just to teach. At the end of that term, they realised it was great."

"They said the children were really loving it - they were really engaged. The teachers were loving it, too - they were coming up with some fantastic ideas."

Each unit of work in the IPC starts with an entry point, where staff organise an event - sometimes setting aside a whole day - to introduce the theme and get the pupils enthused about the work they will do.

For example, when Year 1 pupils at Maindee looked at Greece as part of a

The road to 'international mindedness': how the IPC took off

The IPC was developed by Fieldwork Education for 15 English and Dutch-speaking international schools run by oil giant Shell.

It launched in 2000 and swiftly attracted interest from other schools.

It is now taught in 53 countries, including at 563 primaries in England and 28 in Wales.

The curriculum started to gain popularity in England's primaries after 2003, when the

Westminster government's Excellence and Enjoyment strategy encouraged them to be more flexible.

In Wales, it was the Assembly government's move towards a more thematic, skills-based curriculum in 2008 that prompted many schools to join the IPC.

The IPC is cross-curricular, so instead of being taught individual subjects, pupils develop different skills by following a thematic unit of work each term.

unit called "the places people go", staff created an entire "airport" in the school hall, complete with check-in desks, passport control and a mock aeroplane with pilot and stewards.

Pupils packed suitcases and dressed in their holiday clothes for the "trip" to Athens.

Ms Wadsworth said: "This approach really engages the children and gets them fired up. It gets them thinking, immerses them in the subject and gives them a level starting point."

Ms Nolan said that because the IPC is flexible, teachers are now using the units in their own way and coming up with new ideas, which they share with colleagues.

"It takes away the pressure of teaching," she said. "Instead of teachers worrying about what they are going to teach, they put more focus on how they are going to teach."

"Overall, I think it's money well spent. If you think about the cost of paying for training courses and buying in commercial resources, then really it's paid for itself."

Maindee staff are also enthused about the IPC, despite some initial reservations.

Year 2 teacher Ioan Ford said: "It was a big leap and I will admit I initially harboured a degree of trepidation. But the children have really taken to it; they are so much more focused and absorbed."

Lucy Preece, a Year 5 teacher, said the IPC was the most exciting thing she had done at Maindee since starting at the school nine years ago.

"For the first time, now there's nothing I dread teaching," she said. "The more confident I feel, the better the lessons. Pupils are more independent and enthusiastic and some of them are even doing research at home, which they have never done before."

Mark Smith, a Year 6 teacher, said the IPC is the "perfect foundation for the transition to secondary school".

To check the school's progress under the IPC, senior leaders requested a review from the local education authority, Newport City Council, last July.

A senior schools adviser observed lessons, interviewed staff and gave Maindee the thumbs-up. Now staff hope that Estyn inspectors will say the same after their visit this summer.

Since seeing its success at Maindee, 12 schools in Newport have joined the IPC.

Gareth Coombes, Newport's lead school improvement adviser, said the council is very supportive of schools that want to use it.

"We are pleased that schools are looking to address the challenges of learning because it's always important that we focus on learning as well as subjects," he said.

Meanwhile, senior leaders at Maindee are convinced that signing up to the IPC was a wise decision, despite the high costs.

"Just look at our children now," Ms Nolan said. "They are so engaged. I think it's proved we have made the right choice."

'It's spot on, and our children are proof of that'

Headteachers of Welsh primary schools that have adopted the International Primary Curriculum (IPC) are keen to talk up its success and the positive effects it has had on their school and pupils.

Huw Jones, head of Albert Primary in Penarth, the first Welsh school to sign up, said: "We knew we were taking a gamble because it was a move away from what everyone else was doing."

"But all the right elements were there - the right foundations for preparing our children for the next stage in their learning, a skills-based approach, and a far better global perspective."

"I know we made the right move. It's spot

on, and our children are proof of that."

Keith Atkins, head of Gors Community School in Swansea, said the IPC was ideal for the required move to a skills-based curriculum.

"Gors is located in a socially deprived area and we knew that we had to do something to address our children's ability to think creatively," he said.

"Many of our children don't have a wide range of experiences at home, some have very limited dialogue within their families, some are even encouraged not to think."

"We recognised that we needed to compensate through their education."