

Inspiring learners with different needs

When it comes to special needs learning, solutions are not easy to find. But ask **Eleanor Shaw**, head teacher at **Oaklands School**, a special needs school in Leicester and she believes she's found one. "I've never come across anything that has quite met the needs of our children so powerfully as the IPC", she says.

Eleanor is talking about the International Primary Curriculum, a curriculum that is used in 48 countries around the world and was launched into the UK in 2003. Since then 326 state schools throughout England and Wales have chosen to take its thematic, cross-curricular approach rooted in a skills-based, investigative approach. And it was this that first drew Eleanor's attention to the IPC.

"We've got just about every type of special need here at Oaklands," says Eleanor. "From moderate learning difficulties to Down's Syndrome and various degrees of autism to some very quite disaffected children. It was these children in particular for who I was looking for change." She explains why: "We used to have dreadful problems with the children after lunchtime. We struggled to get them settled. Some

children would refuse to go back into the classrooms and it was a constant issue. We tried everything including changing their diet but it boiled down to the way they were learning. The National Curriculum was too abstract for them; it absolutely did not meet their needs. It was just meaningless to them and gave them no aspiration or incentive to learn." So Eleanor started looking for a better solution and found it, she says, in the IPC. "We broke up for half-term in October 2005 and returned a week later to Earthquakes and Volcanoes, Chocolate and Going on Holiday IPC units. Their feet never touched the ground!"

Earthquakes, Chocolate and Holidays are just three of the IPC's eighty different thematic units of work which focus on a variety of modern-day topics. Through a cross-curricular approach, the IPC separates yet at the same time integrates subjects within these themes which typically last between four and six weeks allowing children to become fully absorbed within each themed unit generating a sense of purpose to their learning. All of the foundation subjects and science are rigorously incorporated, links to Literacy and Numeracy exist too, and IPC learning goals are cross-referenced to meet National Curriculum guidelines.

"We love this thematic approach because it is engaging our children from the start," says Eleanor. The way the IPC achieves this immediate engagement is through the Entry Point. Each unit is introduced

to the class through an exciting, memorable event. "For our Holiday entry point," says Eleanor, "the children came in dressed in their shorts and T-shirts and we pretended to fly to India. They had to go through check-in and they sat on a mock plane we created out of chairs, we gave out snacks just like on a plane and they went through passport control once they arrived at their destination. They were totally engaged. Many of our parents were

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involved in the day; they couldn't believe how inspired the children were."

From the Entry Point, the unit progresses into the Knowledge Harvest which investigates how much the children already know about the unit and where they want the learning to take them. "We can see our children participating at every step; there's collaborative decision-making and collaborative learning," says Eleanor. "It's incredibly powerful for them. But what made such a difference to our children is that the IPC is based on active learning. Half the time the children don't think they're working because they're having so much fun. In reality what they're doing is skill-based, investigative learning and it's really happening, in our classrooms. We've had children making a volcano erupt and they can actually explain the learning behind it. They're building rockets and understanding what parts it needs for take off. Our more able children are starting to ask questions such as 'why?' and 'how did it happen?' and they themselves are starting to put the thought process together. They're



Snack on the plane. Holiday unit entry point

wanting to know 'what' and then wanting to know 'why'. This distinct change has made us critically look at why our children are now so much more eager to learn, and how we are teaching them, and how we can get every single one of our children on board. The length of time that we spend on each unit is a big part of this. It means that the children have the time and opportunity to see the big picture. For example, with the Holiday unit there's time to look at holidays in this country, abroad, different types of holiday, different types of ways to travel on holiday. The reinforcement is vital. The reason for the learning is constantly kept in their minds so that they see a purpose to what they are doing."

Eleanor describes some of the working styles that are now going on in the classrooms at Oakwood: "The other day I went in to one of our classrooms and one of our young adults with Down's syndrome was working with one of our EAL children. He picked up and showed me a rocket that they had been making between them. They were working together incredibly well and investigating collaboratively. Even some of our autistic children are now working in this way. We do have to do quite a bit of tweaking of the IPC teaching frameworks because of the specific needs of our children but the themes and skill-based, collaborative learning are giving them the purpose they need and our teachers like how much of the planning is already done for them. It has made us realise how much more the children can do that we first realised."

Each of the IPC units comes with a rigorous teaching framework which enables the teachers to spend more of

their time being creative in their planning and, in the case of Oaklands, fine-tuning to the needs of their individual children. "With the IPC teaching framework already in place it's very easy to then personalise the learning for particular children," says Eleanor. "It's good that it's not too prescriptive. There's plenty of room for

interpretation but there's something there for everyone. It gives us the room to adapt it with the confidence that we're helping each of our children develop in the right way." And she means socially as well as academically. Personal goals explicit to the IPC learning approach encourage enquiring minds, team spirit and cooperation, and contemplative and confident learners who naturally think from a global perspective.

When it comes to the international element of the IPC, Eleanor says she is seeing a change in her children here too: "Some of our children can manage to view our world from the big perspective but we have some children who are unable to even say that they live in Leicester. However every one of them is becoming more prepared to explore international mindedness; we're just approaching it differently; in very small steps. When we worked on the Earthquakes unit most of the children were able to understand that you get earthquakes in some countries but not in others. It's a difficult concept for some of them to cope with but we've bought a number of webcams and we're about to start matching up with some other IPC schools and I think the children are ready for it."

So what about afternoon lessons? Has there been a change in getting the children back into the classrooms? "The change has been unbelievable," says Eleanor. "I can honestly say that we've never looked back. The children now know that the afternoon is IPC time and for them that means doing, thinking and creating. We set things in motion late morning so they have a taster of their IPC work before breaking for lunch and

there are no issues about returning to the classroom now. In fact what we're seeing is that they are returning in an engaged way; they're actually wanting to learn."

"What is happening at Oaklands is incredibly exciting, it was very moving to hear about the huge shift in the children's attitude to learning" says Theresa Forbes, Director of the International Primary Curriculum. "Working individually and working together towards an end result –

"We pretended to fly to India"

what we call independence and interdependence – is a crucial factor affecting engagement. It's teamwork with a purpose, where every child plays a vital but different role. This flow of knowledge enables children, even those with quite severe learning difficulties, to become deeply engaged in their learning, especially when that learning is relevant to their interests and their needs. That's something that we have continually prioritised and developed within the IPC; child-friendly themes involving issues relevant for today's children and creating opportunities for them to make their own choices in the development of their learning. The teachers keep the direction but the children have the independence to choose within the parameters of the learning framework. As a result, it satisfies the needs of inclusion through learning styles and multiple intelligences and allows the learning to become fun and fulfilling for everyone, whatever their needs." ■

The IPC is endorsed by Ofsted, HMI, the University of Bath, Campaign for Learning and it has the direct support of QCA. The IPC works in conjunction with many respected learning establishments including the Science Museum.

To visit an IPC school near you or for a free sample of units and more information about the IPC go to www.internationalprimarycurriculum.com or call IPC at 020 7531 9696.



Boarding the plane. Holiday unit entry point