

Semi Formal Curriculum QA Report October 2019

(Peter Imray Equals Consultant, Julie Barnett Vice Principal, Maree Jordan Assistant Principal)

The day consisted of two main observations with V Group and LG4 alongside members of MHS SLT, as well as discussion re A1 group and the semi-formal curriculum. Verbal feedback was given to teachers, SLT and SMT.

Observation over 45 minutes of KS3 & KS4 V Group led by Ryan Shoesmith with 4 support staff. The room was set out with separate work stations involving water play, bubble blowing, a foot spa, wet sand play and a ball pool. Various other resources such as light tubes were openly available and there was an enclosed cardboard structure in the shape of an ark in the centre of the room. The blinds had been closed, the lights were off, soft ambient 'sea' music was being played, and each station was manned by a member of staff. When we walked in all students were engaged.

The over-riding atmosphere was one of calm concentration as 4 of the 5 students worked at the various work stations for the whole 45 minutes. One student took himself off to the ark structure to lay inside and after a few minutes a member of staff went over to him to see if he would engage with some light toys. It was evident that all staff were trying really hard to let the students take the lead, the students were clearly able to direct their play if they chose to do so. Ryan, seated at the bubble blowing station for example, engaged a student in blowing small bubbles from a pipe, but then switched to a much larger bubble blower, whilst the student continued to use the smaller pipe. Ryan said nothing, but laid the larger blower in the centre of the table and just waited to see if the student would pick it up, which he did after several seconds. This sort of modelling was also evident on the other work stations, for example using a small bucket to make sand castles on the wet sand station which was then copied by a student.

Staff were attentive and aware of students' engagement levels, as exemplified by one student freely moving onto the other work stations so that he engaged with 4 of the 5 whilst another student stayed at the water play. This latter student, who was starting to display small signs of distress towards the end of the session, was firstly, invited to put headphones on and then play bounce/catch with a small football in the outdoor space. This was all done very calmly with a minimum of fuss and language.

The school are to be commended for the recent allocation of class size and space to V Group, the considerable increase in resources, and not least the considerable freedom given to Ryan and his team to put theory into practice. I was also impressed by the three Semi Formal/ Informal classes being in close proximity to each other which allowed for free movement from one class to another if students chose. My understanding is that adoption of the new Semi Formal/Informal Curriculum philosophy has considerably increased learner control and considerably decreased incidents of challenging behaviour. It is however, hugely important that staff record the changes and I'm sure that upcoming sessions with Mike Sissons (the author of MAPP) will aid this process.

SLT also spoke to me about developing the outside space and I would commend having a look at Infinite Playgrounds (www.infiniteplaygrounds.co.uk) with a view to installing attractive high physical activity structures. Such resources are likely to be very expensive but may last for many years if funds can be found and it is the sort of project that may attract outside donations.

Two small points. Firstly, I'm not too sure about the no lights/working in the dark. I understand the concept of calming down visual distractions such as glare from windows, but even a slight visual impairment (which may or may not be known) may reduce learners' ability to engage with the activities. Secondly, the awareness of individual engagement may be enhanced by Ryan (or the HLTA, as it is excellent CPD) stepping away from one to one activity and occasionally observing the class as a whole and perhaps all of the learners individually, rather than just the ones they are working with personally. This will depend on class dynamics, but opportunities for just watching and of course, recording observations, should be sought.

Observation over 45 minutes of LG4 Class led by Jo Roscoe with 3 support staff and 8 KS4 students. As Maree, Julie and I entered the classroom, the class were seated at three tables (one three and two twos) each with a member of staff supporting. One pupil who was having significant problems, had opted out of the classroom environment, and was outside of the classroom with another member of staff supporting him. The main body of the class were involved in making Angel Delight; they had choices of flavours and each table had a carton of fresh strawberries to add to their final product and a symbolled recipe per student. This was the second time they had made this dessert and it was intended that they should continue for a number of weeks.

It was recognised that the staff team have worked hard to develop a consistent approach for these pupils including, consistent staffing, classroom management, resources and classroom environment. This has enhanced the learning opportunities provided for these students and has in turn increased engagement, enjoyment and learning outcomes.

In discussions with Maree and Julie, and subsequently with Jo after the lesson, it was agreed that through modelling and CPD Jo has worked hard with the support staff who have moved a considerable way in allowing students to perform the various tasks as independently as they could. It was evident however, that there is still a way to go in this regard since staff at various times offered too much support to complete the task.

Cooking space: Cooking in a classroom when students are sitting down at conventional desks is difficult. Standing allows for much greater flexibility and ease of movement; if a resource needs getting, one simply moves to the appropriate cupboard. Constantly having to stand up and sit down again acts as a barrier to simplicity and is likely to enhance helplessness. There is a really good resource in the form of the kitchen right next to the classroom we were in. In terms of future development, it probably needs extending with more cupboard space and at least one additional long worktop, sink and cooker, but it is usable for a class of 8 as it is.

Resources: All pupils had their own well prepared resources more can no doubt be bought over time, for example (i) larger sized mixing bowls (ii) whisks (rather than wooden spoons), hand-held for those that can use them or electric for those who can't (iii) adaptative resources for undertaking mundane tasks like opening a carton of milk or a packet of mix. Such tasks might not be easy if one has a poor grip or fine motor difficulties.

Support staff roles. Staff could have their own work stations and they make whatever the class is making, for themselves. This way also has the added advantage of allowing staff to model, without doing it for students.

Having a whole class perspective. It might also be useful for Jo to take a more observational/supervisory role for the whole class, rather than working directly with 2 or 3 students. That way she can intervene if she feels that staff are doing for rather than doing with, and generally have a greater opportunity to see how all the class are progressing or not as the case may be.

Some points to consider when developing the Semi Formal curriculum:

Active learning: Learners need to do in order to learn, and the more they do, and the more often they do it, the more they are likely to learn. There are consequences to this policy, the most significant being (i) time – it might well take considerably longer to make even a relatively simple dish, and clear up afterwards and (ii) product – this might not be as good as it could be because the students have made it as independently as they can. The solutions to these dilemmas are (i) to allow far more time for the activity and if some students finish quicker, so be it and (ii) the more students do it (whatever it is) the better they'll get at it, and if it takes numerous weeks to get good at it, so be it. It may therefore be that the class are making different things within the same lesson as some students make more rapid progress and prove their readiness to move onto more complex activities.