Cambridge Assessment International Education

Getting Started with Key Concepts

Using Key Concepts - Transcript

Interviewee

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Why is it helpful to use key concepts in planning?

So I think it's helpful for the teacher as a professional to use key concepts in planning because it avoids the subject just becoming an accumulation of factual knowledge. It helps you think about the big ideas within your subject and if you like to shape that knowledge, to craft it into your subject discipline. So it's a sort of knowledge is power thing if you like. You know when you're planning you're thinking what is the purpose of this learning? Where are we going here? How do we make links across different parts of the subject? How do we help children develop their progression in particular understandings? So it's the teacher developing their thinking about the subject and how to teach it and just being able to engage in that dialogue with other teachers about their planning and thinking. I think is going to improve the quality of the resulting learning and thinking about obviously student outcomes from that teaching.

Is this the same for all levels of learning?

So I think teachers planning for learning at all levels, all ages of learners, can benefit from considering key concepts within their planning, but obviously different ages have different needs, with different topics. You might well have different sets of key concepts and you might have to make careful decisions about the extent to which you share those key concepts with your learners, in terms of what's appropriate for that particular group. But, yes, I think it is helpful for teachers of all age groups. But I guess we have to recognise that primary colleagues have a particular challenge because they may be teaching across nine or ten different subjects, so developing a rigorous disciplinary understanding is something that I think is needed to do in teams. So different primary colleagues with different specialisms are able to support each other in thinking about the particular subjects, so it's not one teacher trying to do everything.

What could be the pitfalls for a teacher when using key concepts?

So I think there can easily be two pitfalls for a teacher of using key concepts. One of those is to get a set of key concepts and then to really focus on children learning a definition of those concepts, and when they can give you that definition, feeling that they've arrived if you like, they've learnt that concept. But actually just being able to give a definition of a concept is I think ... could potentially be quite a shallow form of learning. It is of course important to be able to define a concept but that really comes from really quite a deep and rich understanding of that particular concept. So, it's not just something to tick off. I think another worry is that sometimes we can use the set of key concepts almost as a checklist and perhaps look at one of them one term, the next the next term and think well that's it we've done and covered it now. But actually because these are key they're likely to be quite complex, quite difficult to really grasp, you need to help

children develop a more sophisticated understanding over time. So what we're wanting to do is plan in that spiral of learning if you like and return at a progressively higher level to that key concept. So we're developing a deeper and richer understanding. So I think when we're working with key concepts it's often quite a long term process, that's why we need to think so carefully about which ones are worth putting as key in a particular context, so that we can really plan in for children to get better at those over time.

How would you know your learners are developing their understanding of key concepts?

So when we think about how our learners are developing their understanding of key concepts, this is actually quite a complex area to get into because we're thinking about progression here. So in terms of understanding those substantive concepts within a topic or a subject, we need to expose the learners to lots of different examples of that concept and to help them make connections, parallels, similarities, differences between them. And I guess we can monitor that, we can look at how their understanding develops, how it progresses in richness, sophistication. Sometimes that's easier in some subjects than others. In some subjects we have quite good research on how children's understanding of particular concepts develops.

In other subjects that's much more patchy. In terms of the really big ideas, so perhaps the second order concepts within the subject, it's quite hard, again we don't have an awful lot of research in this area, but we would be wanting to consider, to engage with that as a subject team or a department or a year group team within a school. And to just in our own thinking to consider how do children get better at understanding that particular concept. And being aware that it's usually quite a long term and a complex process. So you can't be said to understand a concept if you can just parrot a definition of it. That's perhaps a point along the understanding, but you need to think about how the richness and the subtlety, the sophistication of understanding that concept develops over time. So again I think this is an area where departments need to engage in dialogue and to perhaps look at examples of people's work. And also to think long term what are we wanting learners to be able to understand about these concepts at eighteen? And what do we have to be planning in backwards if you like through their school career to give them the opportunities to get better at that understanding, and how do we then monitor that? And of course you're then into the area of assessment as well as progression.