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THE
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Character Development Project

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in partnership with

Diocese of Chester

Diocese of Derby

Diocese of Exeter

Diocese of Peterborough

University of St Mark
& St John, Plymouth

GO Ministries Ltd.

About the Project

What If Learning is a cross-curriculum approach designed to support teachers in creating a classroom learning environment that is framed by a Christian ethos. It aims to support pupils in their character development. The approach is not an add-on to curriculum content, but a way of reframing the established curriculum content so that pupils experience learning in character development in all subjects.

In this project the focus was on developing the Christian virtue of hospitality as part of the Church of England's aspiration that pupils in its schools learn to live well together with others as preparation for life in the diverse society that constitutes modern Britain.



What if Learning has three steps:



Seeing Anew

How can a Christian understanding of hospitality provide a different way of seeing a lesson/unit?

Choosing Engagement

How could the students engage with this new way of responding to diversity through the learning experiences teachers design?

Reshaping Practice

How could teachers change their own practices to create a hospitable response to diversity?

The key features of the project were:

- 20 participating schools took part - five from each of the four dioceses
- The schools were provided with a detailed intervention document about What If Learning to support them as they each prepared their own bespoke classroom work with guidance from the project advisers
- The document provided a detailed analysis of hospitality and of its component attributes
- The classroom work took place between January and July 2016
- Classroom work was prepared and taught using 14 different subjects as single lessons or cross-curricular learning experiences spanning from the Early Years Foundation Stage to Key Stage 3
- The classroom work was designed to promote development of the virtue of hospitality
- Pupils and teachers completed online surveys once before and twice after the intervention to measure their responses
- The pupil survey was designed to measure attitudes to those they perceived as different
- University researchers visited 12 schools to interview 42 of the teachers who participated in the project
- Each school produced a portfolio of work that was analysed by the university researchers
- The researchers worked independently of each other until the final pooling of their findings
- The project was independently evaluated



Key Findings

From the pupils' surveys:

- 1 Pupils made fewer negative judgments about other children after the intervention
- 2 Pupils consistently rated their classmates as showing high levels of hospitable attributes from the start of the study
- 3 In nearly all cases, the trend over time was in a more positive direction in terms of the pupils' expression of hospitable characteristics. Some of these changes were statistically significant

From the teachers' surveys:

- 1 Teachers' ratings of the pupils' demonstration of the attributes of hospitality improved through the study and were significantly higher after the intervention
- 2 Once teachers have used the approach on 7-10 occasions, they are much more confident in its use and begin to apply it intuitively in their lesson planning

From the interviews with teachers on their perceptions of the impact of the intervention:

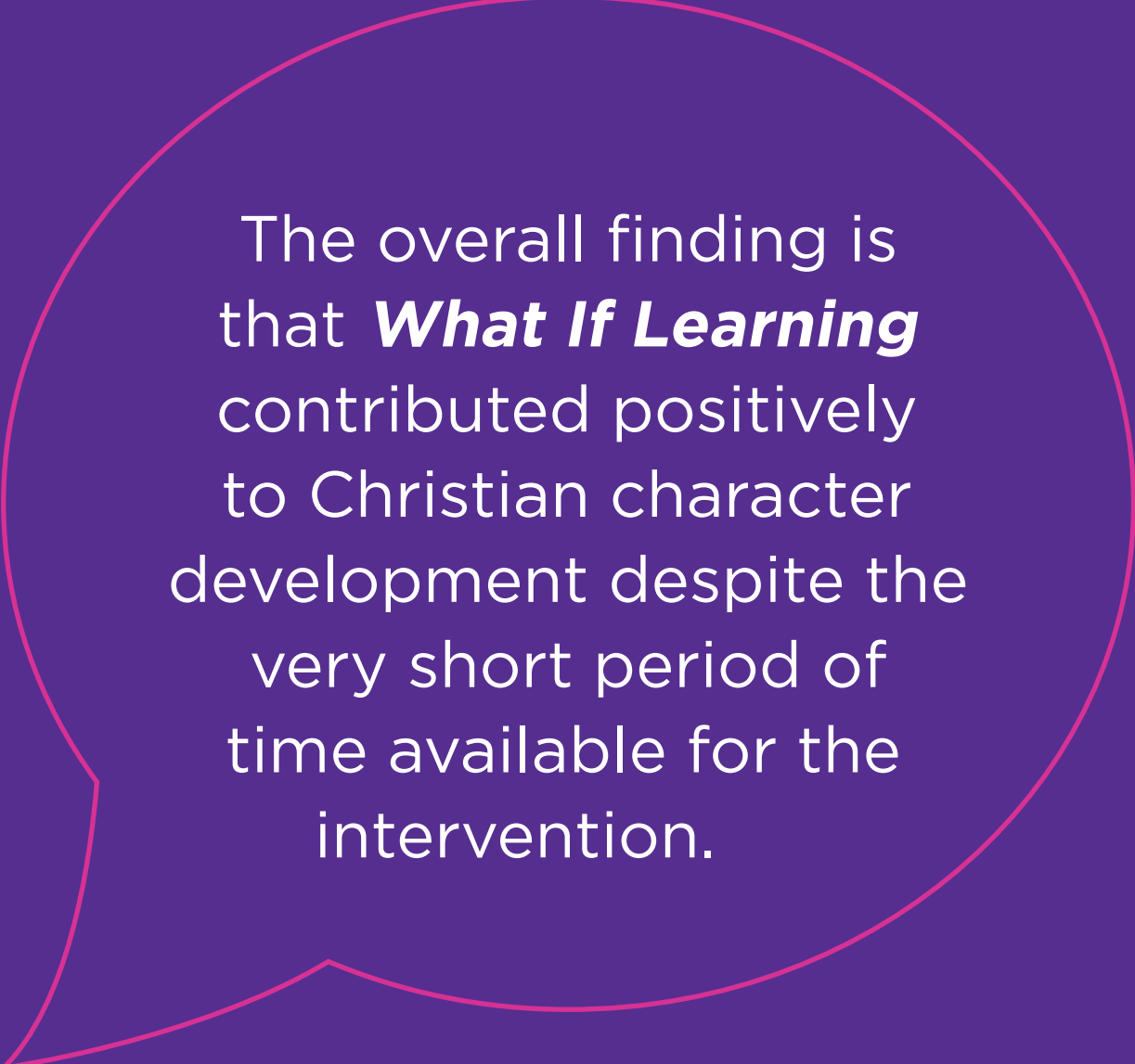
- 1 The intervention promoted deep reflection on professional practice and increased confidence in the teachers' approach to character education
- 2 The initial induction into What If Learning and the virtue of hospitality was very important to the success of the intervention
- 3 The focus on hospitality and the support in understanding its meaning in the classroom provoked a "mind-set" change to teachers' traditional lesson content and delivery
- 4 Pupils moved from merely understanding hospitality to the adoption and exemplification of hospitable character traits

Key Findings (cont'd)

- 5 The pupils showed deeper engagement in their response to local, national and global events, for example the European refugee crisis which attracted much media attention at the time of the intervention
- 6 Teachers reported a strengthening of classroom ethos, with more emphasis on collaborative learning and building trusting relationships
- 7 Pupils developed communication and analytical skills, perseverance, empathy, respect for diversity and the ability to welcome visitors and new children
- 8 The classroom focus on hospitality worked best when it was incorporated into whole-school activities such as collective worship as well
- 9 The intervention helped schools to embed their Christian ethos in all aspects of their work
- 10 The main challenge in using What If Learning lay in balancing it with the other demands on the curriculum, including progress measures and the specific requirements of different subjects

From the analysis of the schools' portfolios:

- 1 The hospitality theme was represented in virtually all subjects on the curriculum across the twenty schools. Out of 66 lessons, 30% of the work supported learning in the core subjects, namely English, maths and science.
- 2 Samples of work were presented from every year group in the primary school, including early years' foundation stage, and from year 8 at secondary.
- 3 The portfolios were of the highest quality when they included pupils' evaluation of their own learning. In doing this, a variety of methods were represented including written comments, drawings, floor books, photographs and video.
- 4 There were some impressive examples of the school's Christian ethos being translated into classroom work through the use of What If Learning and the hospitality theme



The overall finding is that ***What If Learning*** contributed positively to Christian character development despite the very short period of time available for the intervention.



Recommendations

For What If Learning to work best in a school there needs to be:

- 1 A clear focus on a specific virtue rather than a vague aspiration to promote “good character”
- 2 A clear, shared understanding of the virtue being developed and its contribution to the Christian ethos of the school. This “virtue literacy” is promoted by analysing the virtue into a number of attributes that give a specific focus for classroom work
- 3 A bespoke approach which is tailored to the school's circumstances and the particular subjects being taught
- 4 A collaborative approach to its introduction where teachers work together, share insights and support each other. It takes about 7-10 uses before teachers become fully confident in using the approach
- 5 A systematic induction process where teachers are introduced to the approach
- 6 Development of a shared language which both teachers and pupils use to discuss the focus virtue
- 7 The most powerful results are achieved when both pupils and teachers reflect on, evaluate and articulate the impact of the work on learning
- 8 These are achieved by strong pedagogical leadership at senior level within the school

'I think, for us as a school it has been very positive. The children have benefitted enormously. It is not just the children, who have benefitted, it is not just the teachers that have benefitted it's the whole community.... Lots of the parents of the children are absolutely buzzing with what we have been doing. We've drawn parents into it.'

Braunston School, Diocese of Peterborough

'Just having the What If Learning project and hospitality as our focus has encouraged us to focus our thinking on more of a Christian aspect to our learning.'

St Marychurch School, Diocese of Exeter

