

The Big6 in England: Introducing the Big6 in a Small London Secondary School

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Northbrook C of E School is probably the smallest secondary school in **London**, enrolling up to 450 students aged 11 to 16. We serve students of all ability levels, excluding those with severe special educational needs. Being so small means that most of our budget is spent on staffing, so resources are always a struggle. In fact, at a recent inspection I was told how lucky and unusual it was to find a full-time librarian. In England, the library is often run by a teacher with no special library qualifications. The teacher assigned to the library is given a few extra non-contact periods to run the library.

While I am not a classroom teacher, I do consider myself an educationist, and very different from a public librarian. One advantage of not being in a classroom is that when whole classes of students come to the library, they come with their teacher, and we work as a team.

Having said that, for many years it was impossible to have a full class in the library because the space was simply too small. Recently, internal reorganization has meant smaller classes, which has made it possible to begin to develop a coherent information skills programme involving the whole curriculum.

For some time I had been using a model developed by **Michael Marland**, a distinguished London headteacher, called the nine question steps.

1. **What do I need to do?** (formulate and analyse need)
2. **Where could I go?** (identify and appraise likely sources)
3. **How do I get to the information?** (trace and locate individual resources)
4. **Which resources shall I use?** (examine, select, and reject individual resources)
5. **How shall I use the resources?** (interrogate resources)
6. **What should I make a record of?** (recording and sorting information)
7. **Have I got all the information I need?** (interpreting, analysing, synthesising, evaluating)
8. **How should I present it?** (presenting, communicating)
9. **What have I achieved?** (evaluation) (*LISC, 1984*)

I wrote a small booklet based on Marland's steps to provide students with examples of the method, and it was used with a few groups. However, there was never the opportunity to use it in a systematic way. Although I was able to include it in the printed planners we give to all students, without being integrated into the curriculum it was no more than a gesture. The planners are essentially a diary, which are used as a means of communicating between school and home, and for recording homework tasks. The section at the front is generated by the school and covers the school rules, advice on how to cope with the school routine, etc. Sections at the back of the planner include a spelling dictionary, study skills, and general curriculum related information.

About three years ago, in my masters degree program at **Christ Church College in Canterbury**, one of our assignments was to compare various information skills models. I came across the Big6, joined the Big6 mailing list, and became a "convert."

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In spring 1998, I made a presentation to our heads of department on the desirability of using a coherent strategy for information skills development. While the reaction was a resounding silence, the headteacher suggested that I run a pilot. The French department does a Year 7 (11-12 year olds) project on France every summer, and it was decided that this would be a good opportunity to try out the Big6. After the meeting, the headteacher recommended that I just go ahead and use the Big6 with as many departments as I could, without worrying about getting a general agreement. To be honest, I had already jumped the gun by putting the Big6 in the planners instead of the 9 question steps. Money

from a government grant to support literacy as part of a National Year of Reading has been used to fund the programme, making it easier to sell to departments. The justification for using literacy money is that students need to read for meaning and learn to extract and record relevant information.

I plan to use the same instructional format with all units (at least until I feel sure that students have become familiar with the concepts). The teacher brings the class to the library and I explain how and why we are going to use the Big6 to research the topic. I distribute photocopied sheets divided into columns with space for them to write questions, keywords, what they find (also in keyword/phrase form), and sources. After a brainstorming session to determine individual topics where appropriate, students start to explore the resources. Students are using mainly books at present, but we are beginning to make use of the Internet.

Units developed to date or planned for 1999/2000 include:

- History: Year 7: Roman life; Medieval Realms
- History: Year 8: English Civil War
- History: Year 9: Women in Wartime
- History: Year 9: Weimar Republic
- Geography: Year 7: Weather/Climate; Settlements
- Geography: Year 8: Alternative Energy
- English: Year 7: Globe Theatre and Shakespeare
- English: Year 8: Endangered Animals
- French: Year 7: France
- Science: Year 7: Classification
- Science: Year 9: Elements; Plant and Animal Adaptations
- Personal Social Health Education: Year 9: Parenting
- Technology (Resistant Materials): Year 7: Mechanical Toys/Automata

As part of the process, pupils are asked to hand in their notes, printouts, and photocopies as well as the final product. These receive a separate mark from me, and it also gives the teacher the opportunity to see how the pupil has tackled the problem/process. To be honest, this has been honoured more in the breach than in the observance but I am hoping that the assessment mechanism I am currently developing, with the aim of giving real feedback to pupils and parents on pupils' growth in independent learning capability, will give meaning to it. I am also becoming aware of how difficult our students find it to pick out the simple facts in a passage, and would like to plan some work with the English department on extracting facts and summarizing information.

The content-heavy nature of the National Curriculum in England puts a lot of pressure on teachers to simply "get through" it all. Encouraging independent learning has therefore become less of a priority for them. However, there is now a new emphasis on lifelong learning and key skills, and I think there is once more a recognition that enabling students to learn is more important than simply teaching them more facts. The Big6 gives teachers a systematic way to teach those independent learning skills, and I am certainly encouraged by the response in my school.

References:

Library and Information Services Council (LISC). (1984) *School libraries: The foundations of the curriculum*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.