DOES DIGIT COUNT?

An Evaluation of the DIGIT Project by Highland Children's Forum

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Highland Children's Forum would like to thank the young people, staff, parents, community partners, further education and other onward destinations who had experience of DIGIT and were willing to share their views of it.

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Abbreviations

YP - Young People

SfL- Support for Learning

GIRFEC - Getting It Right For Every Child

CfE - Curriculum for Excellence

MCMC - More Choices, More Chances

PSA - Pupil Support Assistant

HT - Head Teacher

DHT—Deputy Head Teacher

FE - Further Education

ASDAN—Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network

What Is DIGIT?

Dornoch, Invergordon and Golspie In Transition

DIGIT began in 2009 as a response to two young people (YP) in one school for whom differentiation and support had been largely successful in ensuring that they had an accessible curriculum from S1 to S4. However this was not going to be possible from S5 onwards and alternatives were needed. The Educational Psychologist identified that there were other YP in nearby schools for whom similar issues were emerging. The YP needed to maintain their mainstream peer group but also needed curriculum input that was more relevant and appropriate to their particular needs. Following meetings to explore how the schools could work collaboratively and with partner agencies and the community to meet the needs of the YP, it was decided to merge them to form a group. The YP needed curriculum input that was based on developing life and social skills in order to improve outcomes and employment prospects post-school; it needed to be sustainable and easily transferrable.

Initially Dornoch, Invergordon, and Golspie Schools were involved with St Duthus opting in when they had students for whom it was appropriate. The project is currently running with the addition of Tain Royal Academy and without St Duthus.

The initial project team included Teaching Staff, an Educational Psychologist, a Skills Development Scotland Officer, College Tutors, a Development Officer and Transition Co-ordinator. The current Steering Group consists of a Support for Learning (SFL) Teacher, Development Officer, Educational Psychologist and Transitions Co-ordinator.

The project which developed, aims to

- embed the four capacities of the CfE (Curriculum for Excellence) - successful learner, effective contributor, confident individual, responsible citizen
- be GIRFEC (Getting It Right For Every Child) compliant—linking the SHANARRI capacities (Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurturing, Active, Respected, Responsible, Included)
- support Highland Council's local outcomes and service plans.

The Digit project is delivered by PSAs with the YP as a collective group off-site, but is overseen within individual schools by teachers who have responsibility for the YPs' personal planning, target setting and for co-ordinating the links between the Digit activities and the in-house, local and national curriculum and assessment processes, ensuring that the YPs' outcomes are met. There is evidence of some of the planning and recording being delegated to PSAs and the extent to which the teachers are involved varies from school to school.

The project has a comprehensive photographic and diary record of its activities and a number of lasting artefacts e.g. the Tam O'Shanter Wall Hanging, the Mosaic Mural, DVDs, and has won awards including a Social Enterprise in Schools Award in 2012 and a Crest Science Award.

From information provided the project has served 9 boys and 7 girls with 4 boys and 3 girls currently attending.

The project is hosted by each partner school in turn, with each taking responsibility for the delivery for a term in rotation. Staff from the partner schools travel with the students to the host school/venue for one day per week. The project frequently works with community partners and this is seen as invaluable in providing learning experiences in a fun and relevant context with a foothold beyond school. The YP have to overcome the challenges of unfamiliar adults, venues, activities and expectations. A local museum and a music group have worked with DIGIT recently .The project has developed to include enterprise learning and has recently set up a shop, 'Made in Tain', through which they sell soaps, candles, gifts cards and other goods which they have produced.

It gets people into school when they don't want to come for other days. **Group of 3 YP**

The Evaluation

After 4 years of the project it was decided that it was appropriate to undertake an Independent evaluation. The evaluation has been beset by a number of difficulties - key DIGIT contacts and staff on long term sick leave, changing jobs, retiring, new to post etc. This has resulted in difficulties in speaking to them and in identifying other parties and information, and difficulties have been encountered in communicating with other parties without these key staff to facilitate the contact.

The evaluation was to take evidence from a sample of all groups who have been involved with DIGIT:- students, parents, head teachers, teachers, support staff, parents, partners and onward destinations. The final sample was not as many as initially hoped for due mainly to the aforementioned difficulties. Also some difficulties were encountered in trying to speak to past DIGIT students as many were unwilling or felt that their recall was not sufficient to be able to contribute. It was difficult to identify parents as it was not possible to access their contact details in order to make direct contact and the approach through schools yielded few.

Consents were obtained from the YP and from parents, with the assurance that personal details and evidence would be stored securely at Highland Children's Forum office in compliance with legislation and policy.

Discussions were held with a sample of each of the groups across each of the schools, mainly with individuals, though there were a few small group discussions. Discussion followed broad themes around students and criteria for selection, curriculum, staffing, venues, transport, and resourcing.

Numbers interviewed :-

3 HTs/DHTs

3 Teachers

3 PSAs

7 Students

2 Community partners

4 Onward destinations

2 Parents

Other evidence informing the evaluation:-

- Annual reports for 2010-2011, 2011-2012 Digit Information Booklet
- Visit to a DIGIT session at Timespan Museum, Helmsdale
- Attendance at DIGIT celebration event at Dornoch Academy
- DIGIT/Feis Rois CD
- Visit to Mosaic Mural, Dornoch Academy garden

Summary

The success of DIGIT is largely due to the enthusiasm and commitment of the staff involved who are focussed on the YP and work hard to ensure that outcomes are positive. This is achieved in spite of difficulties with senior staff movement, lack of support with planning/administration, budgetary uncertainty, venue and transport uncertainties, communication difficulties, lack of clarity of the staffing structure. This dependency on the merits and goodwill of the PSAs results in a project of some fragility, in spite of excellent outcomes.

Young People

Young people are selected to attend the DIGIT project using a number of criteria. 'Information about the DIGIT Project' states:-

The students identified

- are ill –prepared for post school transition
- do not have a suitable curriculum
- have no peer group
- are unlikely to gain work or a training place post 16

The needs identified are

- gaps in skill base
- self-esteem issues
- lack of maturity
- poor skill transfer
- poor retention skills

Following selection using these criteria students, staff and parents are involved in the decision to attend DIGIT, though it must be remembered that YP fulfilling the criteria typically lack the self-awareness to fully assess or acknowledge their own needs. The full range of additional need is considered including academic, social, emotional and attendance.

DIGIT attendance is offered to S5 YP. Schools state that they are able to successfully differentiate and support to ensure that YP have an accessible curriculum through S1 to S4 but this becomes increasingly difficult as the YP move up through the schools. The gap between them and their peers widens as they get older and they become increasingly isolated. By the time they reach S5 they typically have no peer group and a deficit of age-appropriate life skills. Schools feel that intervention at this point helps them to a more positive transition and helps to prevent them from descending into social exclusion. Certain students with issues leading to school refusal have supported the project as peer mentors to the benefit of both themselves and students within the project. There is one example of a peer mentor returning to school attendance who is now in employment. However efforts to make contact were unsuccessful.

The HTs seem very supportive of the project, citing benefits to students of having a peer group, enjoyment in learning, the enhanced self-esteem of knowing that they are 'part of something special'. Students gain in confidence to the extent that some of them have spoken publically about the project. Though schools employ initiatives to encourage friendships these are often forced or fail but DIGIT provides the opportunity for these YP to forge their own genuine friendships. They experience a degree of interaction and independence which school would not normally afford them and all within a 'safe' environment of YP with similar needs.

The YP themselves, many of whom spoke with excitement and animation about Digit, feel that it has enabled them to become more confident and less socially anxious, giving them the opportunity to experience unfamiliar activities and gain skills in an environment where they feel confident to 'have a go' and to accept the possibility of failure. This confidence has enabled them to take further steps e.g. one girl now works for one day a week at Made in Tain and another day at a charity shop. Young people felt that it was also preferable to being in 'the base' with the consequent stigma and 'support following us around'.

> It's a good way to make new friends. Everyone is different but if you are nice to them they get to know you **Group of 3 DIGIT students**

It must be borne in mind that the community partners and onward destinations had no baseline by which to measure any difference that DIGIT may have made to the YP. However they reported that students who had attended DIGIT were interacting well with both peers and staff, showing little social anxiety in the new environments. They showed a degree of confidence and independence which was not normally expected with two YP travelling around 50 miles on public transport to get to college and one who had moved straight from school to a residential college (where he attended 3 different departments) settling and progressing more quickly than was usually expected of students in this situation. They have coped well with the transition and have settled quickly into new surroundings and routines.

The parents contributing to the evaluation were both parents of YP who were current attendees and were very positive about the benefits of DIGIT to their YP, both of whom had attended for over a year. Parents noted increased social skills, confidence and self esteem and the ability and opportunity to transfer these skills to other contexts e.g. work experience and other aspects of school. They both reported that their YP are happy attending DIGIT and really enjoy it in spite of one of them battling with motivation and reluctance to attend subject classes within school on the other 4 days.

All felt that YP have benefitted from an increase in social and life skills, confidence and self esteem which has transferred to other aspects of their lives and education, enabling them to move forward in a positive way. An outcome reinforced by celebrations, displays and events by DIGIT which heightens the status of the students and celebrates their achievements in a powerful way sometimes for the first time in their educational lives.

The young people themselves are generally very positive about the benefits of the DIGIT curriculum. They report better relationships with staff and students and less stress than in a classroom environment.

One student spoke about how he worries so much about school (particularly failing in Maths and English) that he can't sleep, consequently he is tired in lessons, which he finds boring because they are delivered in a style which he can't access "I just shut myself off". So he gets further behind and resorts to bad behaviour and more worrying. "I covered up by making a big noise and pretending I didn't care".

He finds Digit more accessible and enjoyable and less stressful. "Stuff sticks in more if it's fun....you are not worried about annoying a teacher, no homework, less nervous because the group is smaller, more comfortable with people, no one is judging you, no one is noticing your disability and whispering behind your back, everyone has their own special reason for being there so they are all in the same boat."

Parents reported being happy with the curriculum and felt that they had been given enough information and had, and still have, the opportunity to ask questions and get regular updates. Satisfaction was expressed that the YP were receiving a curriculum which was entirely appropriate for their individual and personal learning needs and styles.

The recently opened 'Made in Tain' enterprise has become a strong component, with the real work environment and experiences it offers. One HT describing it as 'the jewel in the crown'. The YP are able to experience aspects of the world of work and to learn other skills from volunteers and partners within the protected and supported environment. It provides a context for working towards qualifications in work skills. The positive benefits to the transition of these YP of the context it provides for life skills, work skills and community involvement are seen as significant benefits giving the YP a foothold in the community on leaving school. The 'Made in Tain' enterprise succeeds with certain students who are otherwise difficult to engage. Through working in the enterprise the young man in the following example continues to benefit from engagement with other students, staff, the community and to gain skills and experience in spite of having rejected other forms of learning as he could not cope with the other people.

Work with community partners has been valuable in providing learning experiences in a fun and meaningful context. The YP have had to overcome the challenges of unfamiliar adults, venues, activities and expectations. A local museum and a music group have worked with DIGIT recently. They report that there were initial meetings with DIGIT staff to ensure that the partners were aware of the ability level within the group and of the philosophy behind DIGIT. Work with these partners has afforded the YP unique experiences e.g. gold-panning, textile printing, music writing and recording. Links to the wider curriculum have been fully pursued e.g. work with the music group led to a residential writing course and the music group is currently working with DIGIT at a Croft Education Centre further exploring cross-curricular links between music/song writing and their environmental activities there. The community partners found the flexibility of the curriculum liberating as the input could be tailored to the YP's individual needs and pace; there were no barriers and constraints to limit expectation and achievement and if something was working they could 'run with it' to ensure that it was exploited fully as benefits the particular YP.

Onward destinations appear not to have been made aware that the students had received the DIGIT input with one commenting that 'the more information we receive about a student the better'.

The curriculum seems to have evolved over the life of DIGIT and remains flexible within the parameters set by the local and national requirements. A curriculum framework is being developed which would provide useful guidance, but one of the strengths of the project is its ability to respond to the individual needs and input of students and to feature in the personalised curriculum negotiated by the school and student. It is felt that it is more important that all involved subscribe to the philosophy of DIGIT rather than follow a framework.

It cannot be easily formalised and depends for its success on having enthusiastic staff who understand the potential and benefits rather than an imposed model
Headteacher

Curriculum

'Information about the DIGIT Project' states that DIGIT will provide

- A relevant curriculum
- A resource informed by the views of the YP
- The opportunity to work with a peer group
- A programme of study to link with GIRFEC, CfE, MCMC
- A programme to address gaps in life skills
- A portfolio of evidence to inform CV

The project has developed a curriculum to be interdisciplinary and cross-curricular through themes which are referenced to the CfE. (An example of the planning showing links to CfE is in 'Information about the DIGIT Project'). Schools felt that this was more relevant as practical and life skills, social skills, team work, communication etc. could be incorporated in a meaningful and accessible way. It provides work experience and links with ASDAN qualifications and SQA units and HTs feel it has the scope to be further developed e.g. links to the John Muir Awards. They expressed the view that YP would be unlikely to achieve these qualifications without the more accessible and individualised curriculum of DIGIT.

One of the main intentions was for the YP to be able to revisit earlier experiences which they had not been able to fully assimilate initially. DIGIT is seen as offering the YP a context in which to learn and practise skills (e.g. weighing, measuring in a real situation) which would give it relevance and meaning and enable them to transfer skills. The progression of seeing a project/activity through from the beginning to a successful conclusion is also seen as important.

Through liaison with subject teachers the DIGIT work supports and is supported by links to the subjects and this cross-pollination back into mainstream subject departments is seen as one of the benefits for schools, raising awareness amongst school subject staff of new ways of working. The opportunity for the YP to work with other YP from outside their school community and off-site in unfamiliar venues is seen as beneficial to their social and emotional development and is an important life skill as they move towards transition.

Themes are planned but not 'set in stone'. Flexibility of the curriculum is seen by schools and partners as one of the major strengths of DIGIT as it takes account of the dynamics of different groups of YP with different needs and sometimes evolving personal circumstances of which school may not be fully aware.

The thematic approach is also seen as important as it is more relevant to the YP who find it difficult to transfer learning and skills when they are experienced within the artificial boundaries of 'subjects'.

Staffing

There is at least one member of staff involved from each school depending on the students' needs. The project is delivered by PSAs (pupil support assistants) It is seen as essential to have PSAs with the 'necessary skills and sympathies', to have some consistency of staff and the right dynamics with a solution focussed ethos where students can have confidence to 'have a go' and even cope with the possibility of failure.

The ability of PSAs to work flexibly and creatively with some independence and autonomy was seen as important and it was also felt that it was important that schools were able to delegate to the PSAs as micro-managing the project would be stifling. One HT felt that PSAs have responded positively to being given responsibility for this discrete project by becoming more enthusiastic. Schools felt that DIGIT represents good use of staff time as the staff/pupil ratios achieved on the project would not be achieved in the classroom. It also has the benefits of freeing up staff remaining within schools to concentrate on other high tariff students.

Staff felt that liaison between the partner schools is good but it is recognised that this could be an issue and indeed communication has been an issue for some in the past. Some staff felt that though communication was good between personnel on the same level there was a lack of communication between the levels e.g. some had no knowledge that there was a steering group.

Though DIGIT is delivered and largely organised by PSAs there is a lot of organising and recording which is beyond their remit. The view was expressed that the success of the project to date is due to the willingness and goodwill of the PSAs and that if it was staffed by PSAs who restricted their work to that within their remit it would be unsustainable. Some PSAs, though they were happy to work at the level of responsibility required, felt that other PSAs would not be willing unless their remuneration reflected it. Some of the schools seemed to allow time within the PSA's timetable to reflect their DIGIT input and the administration it engendered whereas others did not.

The support and input of a consistent teacher within the school was crucial and there was an example of one PSA who had temporarily felt very isolated and unsupported. She reported that without the teacher-support time had been an issue, as had some administrative functions she was unable to fulfil e.g. risk assessment paperwork, curriculum links.

YP were very positive about the DIGIT staff; one YP who was somewhat negative about his DIGIT experience as he 'didn't like other people' had thought that the staff were 'quite good'.

Parents were also positive about staff, stating that they are very encouraging and positive and adept at finding and building on individual YP's strengths.

The community partners commented on their observations of the good relationship between the YP and the DIGIT staff; how the staff were genuinely delighted by the YPs achievements and how the YP valued the appreciation of the staff. Liaison had been good and the skills and knowledge the partners had of their specialist subject was respected and complemented the knowledge that the staff had of the YP.

DIGIT seems to have been blessed with excellent PSAs whose skills, commitment and consistency have ensured its smooth and successful running at the point of delivery and they clearly enjoy their DIGIT work. However there appear to be some issues of lack of support and poor communication between some of the PSAs and staff higher up the chain, which seem historical, and may have been exacerbated recently by the rapid turnover of the senior staff.

Resourcing

Venues

It is a unanimous view that the YPs experience of the different venues is beneficial. The YP who meet DIGIT's criteria are typically anxious out of their familiar surroundings and therefore ill-prepared for the challenges of the adult world. The benefits gained from experiencing different schools, venues, routines, people, materials are fundamental to their transition from the familiarity of their own school lives into the unfamiliarity of the adult world yonder. The success of the arrangements to rotate termly between the partner schools depends on their proximity and the capacity for transporting YP and staff from individual schools to one venue. It also depends on the capacity of the host school to accommodate the extra numbers. This could be an issue for a small school or for one operating at full capacity and has been an issue in some schools at exam time when there is more pressure on space and staff.

Transport

Transport is a cost but schools felt that it was a minor cost relative to staffing and so represents good value in the DIGIT context. The transport arrangements vary, with some schools finding that the regular booking of the school mini-bus every DIGIT day limits its availability for other school departments and activities. Some do not have use of a mini-bus and rely on staff cars which depends on the staff in question having a car available at school. Some book Highland Council transport but find the administrative paperwork onerous and time consuming. Transport difficulties are currently managed by the partner schools being willing and able to help each other out but this creates extra organisation and communication which is time consuming and is not always feasible. The YP spoken to had all enjoyed the experience of the different venues.

Funding

There is no specific budget for DIGIT so there is an on-going quest for items/activities to be funded by individual HTs. The short-term nature of this kind of funding makes it difficult to plan and to have any long-term confidence. Some commented that there was no equity of funding and some schools organised more expensive activities than others when it was their turn to host the project. The view was expressed that schools receive a budget allocation for Additional Support Needs (ASN) and that some long term commitment of part of this funding to DIGIT should be possible and that some budgetary certainty would benefit the project by ensuring that long term planning could be undertaken more confidently. Resource arrangements seem somewhat improvised with there being a number of uncertainties of both transport and budget. This uncertainty is resulting in increased hassle and pressure for schools and staff which could easily demoralise them and render the project perilous.

Conclusion

Though the limitations of the sample size in this evaluation have to be acknowledged it is clear from discussions with the various groups that the overwhelming view of DIGIT is a very positive one despite there being some serious shortcomings.

There was the unanimous and enthusiastic view that the YPs confidence and self-esteem have clearly benefitted, in some cases immensely, from the opportunity to gain life, social and independence skills and for those who have moved on this has meant an easier and more successful transition beyond school.

'Information about the DIGIT Project' states that The students identified are ill-prepared for post-school transition, do not have a suitable curriculum, have no peer group, are unlikely to gain work or a training place post 16. The needs identified are gaps in skill base, self-esteem issues, lack of maturity, poor skill transfer, poor retention skills. That young people were benefitting in all these areas that had been identified was evident.

'Information about the DIGIT Project' also states with regard to the curriculum that DIGIT will provide a relevant curriculum, a resource informed by the views of the YP, the opportunity to work with a peer group, a programme of study to link with GIRFEC, CfE, MCMC, a programme to address gaps in life skills, a portfolio of evidence to inform CV

It is clear from the evidence that the curriculum fulfils these aims with the added benefits provided by the Made in Tain enterprise.

It also has the wider societal benefits of improving engagement with communities particularly through the Made in Tain enterprise, partnership learning with community partners, and reducing inequalities.

The curriculum is flexible within the parameters of local and national requirements and this flexibility is a major strength giving DIGIT the ability to tailor experiences to individual needs.

The success of DIGIT is largely due to the enthusiasm and commitment of the staff involved who are focussed on the YP and work hard to ensure that outcomes are positive. This is achieved in spite of difficulties with senior staff movement, lack of support with planning/administration, budgetary uncertainty, venue and transport uncertainties, communication difficulties, lack of clarity of the staffing structure. This dependency on the merits and goodwill of the PSAs results in a project of some fragility, in spite of excellent outcomes.

Recommendations These are offered based on the evidence of the respondents.

It is recommended that staff issues are addressed urgently, though it is recognised that some stability of senior staff will lead to better communication and more consistent support for PSAs. PSAs need to have a consistent single point of contact within the school, a teacher who can support with activity planning and take responsibility for certain functions e.g. curriculum links, risk assessment/management, personal planning etc. PSAs also need a clear understanding of the structure of DIGIT and their role within it.

The project would benefit from more budgetary certainty, whether that be some dedicated funding or the diversion of some of the existing budget to DIGIT, to enable a longer view to be taken with more confidence, to give more equity of activity provision amongst the schools involved and to go some way to addressing transport issues. The budget input of the Made in Tain enterprise, though useful does not represent any degree of certainty.

Communication difficulties would be eased by one person being designated as co-ordinator for the group. This role need have no function other than being the central point and conduit for communication. However it could be developed to act as liaison for the group with other bodies e.g. colleges, community partners.

The steering group is beneficial as it represents a number of varied professional backgrounds and so prevents the focus of DIGIT from becoming narrow, however some of the staff were not even aware of its existence. The views of those having face to face contact with the YP and responsibility for the delivery should be directly represented on the steering group. This would be a strong message that their work was valued but would also get the 'view from the ground' to those with strategic responsibility.

Should the project be replicated across other Highland schools it may be necessary to have someone at local authority level with the strategic responsibility of helping schools identify partner schools , considering distances, resourcing, logistics etc.

Though Made in Tain is undoubtedly a strong component of the DIGIT experience it must be seen as 'a component' and must not be allowed to overshadow the DIGIT project. Though it provides excellent work-related experiences and is probably appropriate on its own for some students, it does not have the variety of venue, people, partners and activity which the DIGIT activities provide and which are proving so beneficial to the YP who fulfil the DIGIT criteria.

Though the project has clear objectives (stated in' Information about the Digit Project' and referred to on page 9 of this evaluation) and feeds into schools existing planning, recording and assessment processes it would benefit from having a clearer mechanism by which outcomes and progress towards the YPs' individual targets can be measured; this would particularly support the PSAs and benefit the YP. It is hoped that as the curriculum framework and links to CfE and other programmes of study are developed that this will ensue.

References

Digit: Everyone Counts 2010-2011

Digit: Everyone Counts 2011-2012

'Information about the Digit Project : Everyone Counts'

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