

## **The Curriculum Story Project**

# **4. Balancing Expectations: the experience or the outcome?**

This pack provides examples of how settings design curriculum that strikes a balance between the learner experience and the expectations from a local context and from national guidance. .

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# Successful interdisciplinary learning strikes a balance between expectations and the starting point of learners.

**The best curriculum design begins at the local level - as close to learners as possible. But the design also strikes a tricky balance. On the one hand, learning has to meet the needs of the learners experiencing it. On the other hand, it has to address wider contextual expectations such as national guidance.**

The guidance for Scotland's Curriculum was refreshed in September 2019: [Scotland's Curriculum For Excellence](#).

It reminds us of the purposes of our curriculum: developing four broad capacities.

It sets out a canvas for learning design: the four contexts.

These contexts offer a helpful starting point for designing a meaningful local experience. One of these four contexts is Interdisciplinary Learning (IDL), the focus for this set of Curriculum Stories.

Over time, the focus on the simple the purposes and contexts, that overarching framework of our curriculum, has been shifted. For many educators, the demands of planning their curriculum using the Experiences and Outcomes (Es &Os) feels overwhelming.

## A shift from 'fitting' expectations to 'flexing' them

Schools and settings have frequently struggled to make them 'fit' with the context in which they find themselves. Successful planning for IDL projects begins with schools and settings looking closely at their unique context and asking their learners' starting points. IDL projects are planned based on their relevance to the local context and focus on the impact on children and young people's learning.

**As the Scottish system seeks to empower learners by co-designing their learning pathways, there is a need to view 'coverage' from the learner's perspective, not a syllabus. For example, a fixed learning objective for a group of 30 learners, which many educators have been using as a teaching approach for decades, is less compatible today with the flexibility one needs to design ever more personalised learner pathways.**

## Northern Alliance, A Regional Improvement Collaborative

**Start where the learner is and design the curriculum from there.**

The Northern Alliance team has found that effective curriculum design that starts with the learner makes a difference locally, too. Their approach connects educators and learners, solves problems, and relates to rights and the world of work.

Beginning with the learner impacts the focus and drive for the IDL projects. It is the interactions, experiences and spaces that matter.

The schools design those so that they really do matter to young people - they don't just design tasks so that they "hit" Es&Os.

**Curriculum design becomes less about the teacher delivering the curriculum and more about a curriculum co-designed with and for the learners.**

The Northern Alliance works collaboratively across eight local authorities, building networks, connecting schools, and facilitating learning and collaboration. It looks at making the curriculum design of IDL relevant to learners and their context and reflects their context. Even five miles apart, their schools' contexts can be very different. The Northern Alliance discovered that everyone wanted to start with the Es&Os at the regional level. However, they challenged conventions by suggesting that schools begin their IDL plans with the learner. Interactions, experiences and spaces are what matter. The educators already have the necessary skills to design those, not just tasks that hit Es&Os.

### Creating space for collaborative planning

The Northern Alliance team worked collaboratively with Education Scotland to design professional learning and create networks and safe spaces to learn to challenge thinking on the why, what, and how of IDL. A significant part of this was of schools sharing their practice, where they were on their IDL journey and the opportunity to ask and answer questions.

***“Teachers are concerned with starting with the Es and Os. We challenged this thinking by encouraging teachers to start with the needs and interests of their learners and activate learner agency through co-designing the learning with them and alongside partners. Reflecting the uniqueness of your school community in your curriculum makes learning relevant, meaningful and engaging.”***

Audrey Buchanan, Development Officer, Northern Alliance

Schools mapped curriculum knowledge across a three-year programme of development. For some schools, this meant that Es and Os were allocated to specific year groups and teachers would plan collaboratively and backwards map the Es and Os, but the starting point was their learners, context and four contexts for learning.

The Northern Alliance team also found that many teachers found it challenging to approach curriculum design in such an open way. Other schools designed three years of suggested contexts for levels, and again, this was based on the needs and interests of learners, reflecting the unique context of the school community. Class teachers would have an overview of the learner's journey but still have the flexibility to utilise local and world events as a context for learning and use big questions within these contexts.

***“It takes a thorough knowledge of the curriculum to map backwards and an investment in time to do this collaboratively with colleagues. A suggested contexts framework may be a way of structuring this, allowing flexibility for big questions and local, national and international events. It’s knowing the needs of your staff and learners and investing time to do it well.”***

Audrey Buchanan, Development Officer, Northern Alliance

## **Start with your learners, and their context today**

The Northern Alliance Team reflected that knowing your context is crucial. So the team asked educators to question their own beliefs and values. For example:

***What do we believe about our learners?***

***What is the purpose of education for them?***

***Who are our learners, and what do they need to thrive in the world?***

***What is unique about our context?***

They talked to the community council and parents. The curriculum design started at school and in the playground and then looked out to the rest of the world.

## **Don’t work alone: develop partnerships to open horizons**

Partnership working was key to understanding the school context better and making the curriculum design work for IDL. For example, working with your Community Council, Parent Council and learners to identify what is in your community? Use maps to explore what learning opportunities there are within your community and how learners can make a difference. Identify those partnerships which can enrich IDL experiences and tap into their expertise. An authentic audience increases engagement and motivation. For example, some schools were using business partnerships as IDL provocations. Then learners presented their learning at the end of an IDL project to the business partner.

A successful curriculum design reflects the unique context of a school and is built on collaborative learning. The Northern Alliance worked alongside schools on IDL and curriculum design and facilitated professional development, networking and resource sharing. They realised that building educators' knowledge, skills and confidence in implementing IDL is crucial for a more experimental curriculum planning and design approach.

***“Schools are in different places in their IDL journey, and building teacher confidence is key. Once we have clarified the why and what of IDL, what is of most value to schools is sharing practice. We are not at the stage where everyone feels ready to share, but they feel they can ask questions - we emphasise being curious learners for our learners, being open, agreeing/disagreeing - we are learning alongside each other. Schools are connecting and sharing their practice. By networking through collaborative sessions, the schools who engaged in 2020 and were curious to learn more, now feel ready to share their learning across the Northern Alliance formally.”***

Audrey Buchanan, Development Officer, Northern Alliance

**Oxbridge Tree School**  
Our motto: "Together we grow"

**Our values:** Equity, Flexibility, Respect, Kinship, Nurture, Resilience

**Our shared vision:** We are passionate in our shared commitment to provide a learning environment where each pupil experiences a personalised pathway, enabling them to be the best they can be in all that they do, achieving their potential in academic, creative, physical, emotional, social, and personal ways, and therefore fully equipped to contribute to society in positive, productive, and meaningful ways.

**Our aims and objectives:**

- We will work together to ensure that every child has the opportunity to achieve their full potential.
- We will foster a culture of respect, kindness, and empathy, where every child feels safe, valued, and supported.
- We will provide a personalised curriculum that meets the needs of every child, ensuring they are challenged and engaged.
- We will engage in learning that is fun and challenging, promoting a love of learning and a growth mindset.
- We will work together to build a strong partnership with parents and the wider community, ensuring every child has the best possible start in life.
- We will challenge ourselves to be the best we can be, striving for excellence in everything we do.
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It is about connecting, collaborating and innovating and should be playing a critical role in joining up thinking and learning across the curriculum and connecting students to the wider world. RSE

The Four Capacities

**OUR BIG QUESTION: How can our children be involved fully participate and actively engage in IDL when they have limited capacity to say, make, do or write on their own?**

When supporting learners with complex additional support needs to access the curriculum, it is important for practitioners to take account of the additional physical, communicative, sensory and cognitive barriers to learning which the children and young people may experience (Milestones)

**Knowledge harvest – through observation**

**Cross age & stage Discovery Days**

**THE BIG PASTA CREATIVITY CHALLENGE**

Take some pasta and...

- Curiosity** – what happens when...?
- Open mindedness** - I can use this for...?
- Imagination** - I can make this into...?
- Problem solving** - We can use this to...?

**SKILLED COMMUNICATION PARTNERS**

A skilled communication partner, who is sensitive to the learner and can scaffold or structure their learning, can impact on their ability to progress.

**irresistible invitation to learn**

**resulting in irresistible engagement**

We must be guardians of a space that allows students to breathe and be curious and explore the world and be who they are without suffocation. They deserve one place where they can rumble with vulnerability and their hearts can exhale. And what I know from the research is that we should never underestimate the benefit to a child of having a place to belong—even one—where they can take off their armor. It can and often does change the trajectory of their life.

**FUN sticky learning**

**RELEVANCE:**

- Child
- Functional Learning
- Life long
- Geographic context
- Shaped learning context
- Class big questions

Focus on learning context that are relevant to our current and future life  
Skills for Life/Learning/Leisure/work

No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship.  
James Comer

It with those Relevant partners that our learning will deepen

A brainstorming planning tool to think through how curriculum co-design might be introduced.

### Key features of balancing expectations and outcomes from the Northern Alliance curriculum development team:

- The curriculum design of IDL should start from both the learners' needs and the school's unique context.
- Educators may benefit from frameworks and suggested contexts to help guide an approach to curriculum design that is not led by an imperative to hit all the Es and Os as the starting point. The key is knowing your own needs, staff, and learners' needs.
- Truly knowing your school context takes time. Utilise the expertise in your community: learners, parents, community council, parent council, groups and businesses.
- Seeking out and developing a range of school partnerships is key to making IDL relevant, meaningful and tapping into expertise.
- Invest in collaborative professional learning and planning time to build confidence and develop the confidence to backwards map the curriculum.
- Evidence of high teacher and learner agency was matched with greater engagement, enthusiasm and relevance.



# Glenelg Primary School, Highlands and Islands

## Pivot curriculum design by starting with the four contexts for learning.

Glenelg Primary School believes the four contexts for learning are a better starting point for curriculum design than starting with the Es&Os.

The four contexts for learning allow the school to plan for IDL and student achievement. Furthermore, emphasising the unique community context has opened up many opportunities for partnership working. Rather than tracking every outcome, the school focuses on student achievement and attributes such as thinking skills and leadership.

Glenelg Primary is a small school with a profound understanding of its context and the local community. The community is integral to the school. For example, assemblies on Monday are so popular with the older ladies in the community that they make their doctor’s appointments after the assembly.

*“In a small school, we work closely. The same IDL projects can’t be repeated every third year, as we have a single class school. Our curriculum feels scary but alive because it’s so flexible. It’s hard for people to make sense of it from outside.”*

Kate MacArthur, HT, Glenelg Primary School

## The school at the heart of community partnering

Glenelg Primary uses a comprehensive range of community partnerships to plan projects and provocations for IDL. For example, when the new bus service required a logo, they asked the school to help. The students love art and were interested to learn how to do oil painting.

Teacher planners map out the potential of these partnerships and make connections back to the Four Contexts to take simple ideas even further.

For example, they researched the local area and discovered a local artist, who they invited in to help. The school also took part in a food festival in the community. There is a poly tunnel on the school grounds, and local grandparents work with the children to farm it. Soup was made from the vegetables and fruit crumble from the wildlife garden. There was a table for comments with evidence from visitors who had visited the food festival. One comment said it was the ‘best place to visit,’ despite the competition from the local restaurants.

## Personal achievement and micro-credentials

The outdoor mapping provided many exciting starting points for using the local context as a basis for IDL curriculum design and project-based learning. For example, the learners mapped out an orienteering course from a local area that included a historical building from the Jacobite era and a Viking era castle. The learners also mapped out the biodiversity of the local area on a map that was made available for tourists. Glenelg carefully tracks the Es&Os, but it’s not the starting point for planning IDL projects and recognising personal achievement.

Learning across the four contexts at Glenelg Primary School – Term 4, Mar – Jun 2021	
<b>Opportunities for Personal Achievement</b> <p>This term we're following a science programme so that the children could be awarded a Crest award from the British Science Association.</p> <p>The children are learning about <b>photography</b> from Mr Cameron McMurdo and will enter a photograph each to the Scottish Civic competition. The entries have to show how an older building has changed its use.</p> <p>We have created some <b>badges</b> for the pupils to try to achieve: photography, food awareness, gardening, leadership badges. This will be an ongoing way to achieve different skills.</p> <p>Most of the children will do assessments to show their learning this term.</p> <p><b>Coderacker</b> – PSA will work with the pupils on their reading skills; they get awards for speed and accuracy.</p>	<b>Interdisciplinary Learning</b> <p><b>Improving our Playground</b> – is an interdisciplinary project aimed at providing the children with a better space to play. We are all helping to collect resources to use and the Parent Council have been helping too. Charlie and Sarah have let us use their woodland space too @ <b>Invasive Species</b> – we are learning through a field study about how trout benefit from trees. Dr Lorna Nelson from these agencies will lead this:</p> <p><b>Codecracker</b> – PSA will work with the pupils on their reading skills; they get awards for speed and accuracy.</p> <p><b>Scottish Invasive Species Initiative</b></p> <p><b>KITE &amp; LOPMASH</b></p>
<b>Rights Respecting Schools Award</b> – we are likely to be assessed this term for our Silver award. We have done lots and lots of work over two years for this, raising money for charity, learning about rights and sharing them at assemblies. We need to make sure that we all understand that United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child: <b>A:</b> for all children, <b>B:</b> them from birth, <b>C:</b> cannot be taken away, <b>D:</b> do not have to be earned and <b>E:</b> are all equally important. <p><b>Concert</b> – our end of term concert might be online but we will prepare to entertain one way or another and celebrate our successes with awards and of course the Kindness Cup!</p> <p><b>Transition</b> – from Nursery to P1 – weekly activities in class to get used to where they will be learning next year; from P7 – S1, they will join with other P7s for an Outdoor Experience and hopefully have a trip to Plockton.</p>	<b>Orientation</b> – we are making an orienteering course with markers and a leaflet about the orienteering course the wider community to use. <b>Food</b> – the pupils have chosen what they want to grow in the grounds and the polytunnel. <p><b>Literacy</b> – this term we are learning to do <b>functional writing</b> letters, reports, leaflets and all kinds of factual writing. <b>Maths</b> – Money, Chance &amp; Uncertainty and a bit of practice in Fractions. For P7: decimals, percentages, angles and data analysis. <b>Music</b> – we are practising our keyboard skills. <b>Health &amp; Wellbeing</b> – continuing to keep safe routines, growing healthy food, a Resilient Kids programme and lots of Outdoor learning. <b>Drama</b> – helicopter stories with the nursery. Each pupil gets to make up a story and direct the acting. <b>Religious &amp; Moral Education</b> – 'Philosophy 4 Kids' programme</p>
<b>Ethos and life of the school as a community</b>	<b>Curriculum areas and subjects</b>

***“We’ve got cyclical programmes that we can refer back to and dip into. Tracking Es&Os shows us if there are gaps in the youngsters’ experience and helps us scoop up any concepts we’ve not covered. But it’s the four contexts of learning that we use for planning. It’s broader and more encompassing. That’s the starting point, not the Es&Os.”***

Kate MacArthur, HT, Glenelg Primary School

The school realised that the context of ‘personal achievement’ was hard to spot. Therefore, their solution was to create unique awards and badges for personal achievements, like the scouts. The badges link to the IDL projects and the children’s skills learnt in school. For example, there are achievement badges in gardening, PE, leadership and helping with the nursery children.

***“The Leadership Skills Award started with a focus on PE skills. So to get your PE award, you have to run five circuits of the school or play shinty or practice football skills. But when they’ve learned that, they must pass it on to the nursery children. Whoever is the leader or buddy that week is in charge of creating and running a warm-up or an activity with the nursery children.”***

Kate MacArthur, HT, Glenelg Primary School

### **Key features of balancing expectations and outcomes at Glenelg Primary School:**

- The school begins its curriculum design process with the four contexts for learning, especially IDL and opportunities for personal achievement.
- The school has a very supportive local community and can use a diverse range of partnerships to strengthen IDL projects.
- The IDL projects have a strong emphasis on real-life learning problems and skills.
- The school carefully tracks Es&Os too, but they are not the starting point for curriculum design.
- Badges rewarding learners’ achievements link to their skills and experiences of IDL projects.



# Discussion Prompts

You may wish to use these discussion prompts with your team or create an interdisciplinary learning session with colleagues from across your setting. Set aside three sessions to tackle each question in turn - use the time between sessions to research, experiment and probe further.

## Session 1: How would planning look for IDL projects if you begin with the learner and unique context of your setting?

For example, what specific learners' needs should you consider and opportunities for increased partnership working?

## Session 2: What are the challenges you face in managing the coverage of Es&Os?

For example, would whole-school focus weeks and days be helpful as examples of how to bundle groups of Es&Os across the school year?

## Session 3: How could you use the context of personal achievement as a cornerstone for IDL projects?

For example, how can you encourage diversity through academic and non-academic learning pathways, and amplify learners' agency and achievements in meaningful ways?

# Next Steps

## Tell us how it went:

On social media, using the hashtag #curriculumstories

By email [curriculuminnovation@educationscotland.gov.scot](mailto:curriculuminnovation@educationscotland.gov.scot)

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