



Towards an improved student experience:

Exceleerate schools
in Scotland

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July 2023

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank The Wood Foundation for helping us gain access to the schools in the study and for their time throughout our research. We also would like to thank all participating schools, senior leadership team members, teachers and learners, that took part in the interviews for their valuable input.



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Reference as: Dabbous, D., Laczik, A., Rogers, L., and McGrath, S. (2023).
Towards an improved student experience: Excelerate schools in Scotland.
London: Edge Foundation.

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Introduction

Experiential approaches to education offer the potential to transform the learner experience, whilst also offering a benefit to educators themselves. Observation and evidence gathered by the Edge Foundation over many years supports this argument, all of which – along with real world learning, community connected learning and oracy – highlights the immense benefits that a more student-centred approach to education brings.

Among experiential approaches, project based learning promotes engagement among different stakeholders including teachers, employers and the local community as well as crossing traditional subjects boundaries. Such approaches broaden the transferable skills that students encounter through meaningful authentic real world projects thus preparing students for the world beyond school that they seek to enter.

Attempts to transform approaches to teaching and learning are not without challenges. Shifts in pedagogical approaches necessitated by PBL, for example, can be challenging for teachers (Dole et al., 2016) and require time to develop. As long ago as 2007 Herzog commented that the move from a teacher-centred approach to more student-centred learning is a gradual process and one that requires support and training over an extended period.

Rarely can all these four approaches (PBL, real world learning, community connected learning, and oracy) be found in one institution despite the fact that they reinforce each other and together they have a greater potential to make learning more relevant to the real world hence may lead to greater learner engagement with education. These elements are often underpinned by engagement among different stakeholders, teachers, employers and the local community.

The Excelerate Investment¹ developed and supported by The Wood Foundation is an example of an approach to transform the educational experiences of young people in Scotland. Excelerate is a community-connected learning approach that invests in professional learning opportunities for teachers to strengthen pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning including project based learning and oracy. The ultimate aim is to empower young people with the knowledge, skills and experiences to make informed decisions about their futures and to better prepare them to be active, contributing citizens.

This research investigates the approach taken by three Scottish schools participating in the Excelerate Investment and simultaneously reflects on the success of the Foundation's vision of transforming schooling through innovative pedagogies and interventions.

Scotland's Curriculum

Scotland's Curriculum, formerly known as the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), was introduced in 2010 as the national curriculum for the 3-18 age range. It is described as a coordinated approach intended to equip young people with the skills and competencies needed to thrive in the 21st century world of work and society (Humes, 2013). These skills and competencies enable all young people to become successful pupils, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors. These are referred to as the four capacities. High importance is placed on literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing, which are designated as areas all staff

¹ The Excelerate Investment: <https://www.thewoodfoundation.org.uk/developing-young-people-in-scotland/excelerate/>

have a responsibility to teach. Although the interdisciplinary and competency-based learning is promoted, there are eight overarching curriculum areas:

1. Expressive arts;
2. Health and wellbeing;
3. Languages (including English, Gàidhlig, Gaelic pupils, modern languages and classical languages);
4. Mathematics;
5. Religious and moral education (including Religious and moral education and Religious education in Roman Catholic schools);
6. Sciences;
7. Social studies; and
8. Technologies

An interviewee from The Wood Foundation stated that the Scottish Curriculum has supported the approaches adopted within the Excelerate Investment *'We've got Scotland's curriculum formerly known as Curriculum for Excellence, which encourages the delivery of education through interdisciplinary approaches, and putting the student at the centre.'* Broadly, within the Scottish Curriculum, teachers and schools have space to develop local curricula and use their knowledge to enhance learning.

The curriculum outlines that every student is entitled to:

1. A curriculum which is coherent from ages 3-18.
2. A broad general education including well planned experiences and outcomes across the curriculum.
3. A senior phase after Secondary School S3 (age 13-15 years)² which provides opportunities to attain and achieve, including studying for qualifications, awards and other planned activities to develop the four capacities.
4. Opportunities for developing skills for learning, skills for life and skills for work.
5. Opportunities to maximise their individual potential, benefitting from appropriate personal support and challenge.
6. Support to help them move into positive and sustained destinations beyond school.

By design, the Scottish Curriculum enshrines the principle of local curriculum flexibility since it gives schools the autonomy to design their own curriculum to best respond to pupils' needs. The Scottish Curriculum has led to a number of developments in policy that support flexibility, innovation and collaboration principles. These may not be a direct result of the Scottish Curriculum but they exist in the Scottish context and can be viewed to support the teaching of the national curriculum.

² Curriculum Stages in Scotland: <https://education.gov.scot/curriculum-for-excellence/about-curriculum-for-excellence/curriculum-stages/>

Developing the Young Workforce Strategy (DYW)

The Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) strategy was introduced by the Scottish Government in 2014 to prepare learners for future employment pathways and opportunities as they transition into the world of work. The provision of the DYW is focused in schools through the Broad General Education (BGE), and the Senior Phase of Scotland's Curriculum (Scottish Government, 2014). Within the strategy the Career Education Standard was developed to support children and young people to learn about the world of work from the early years to the senior phase. "It sets out what children and young people will learn and what parents/carers, teachers/practitioners, employers and Skills Development Scotland will do to support their learning" (Education Scotland, 2015, p.2). This is another example of a policy that has supported the Excelerate Investment's mission 'We have the Developing Young Workforce three to 18, career education standard as well. So we've got some quite solid policies that give our educators the permissions to deliver school in a different way' (member of The Wood Foundation team).

The Wood Foundation and the Excelerate Investment

The Wood Foundation is a Scottish charity based in Aberdeen and works to support schools in Scotland's 3-18 school-based system. Through Excelerate they work with 17 secondary schools in Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Angus Council. Aberdeenshire Council is a pioneer partner and through Excelerate they work closely with Education Learning and Leisure, which is the largest department of Aberdeenshire Council's services and accounts for spend of 46% of the council's budget. The council is responsible for 17 secondary schools in the region. According to the Aberdeenshire Council's website, their five main strategic objectives include:

- To have successful pupils, confident individuals, effective contributors, and responsible citizens.
- To ensure that the needs of all pupils were met and that they achieved their potential including through joint working with other services.
- To have more people leading healthy fulfilling lives through regular involvement in sporting, recreational, cultural, and creative activities.
- To have sufficient facilities of suitable quality to deliver the educational, sporting, and cultural experiences people deserve.



They set out to ensure that all aspects of the service are of high quality, continually improve, efficient and responsive to local people's needs.

The Wood Foundation is a committed and connected partner in education, having engaged hundreds of schools in its innovative programmes and investments since 2008. One of their key investments is the Excelerate Investment that set the ultimate goal of developing 'Engaged, Informed and empowered young people'. The way in which this goal can be achieved is visualised in the diagram below:



Source: <https://sites.google.com/view/excelerate-learning-hub/about/about-excelerate>

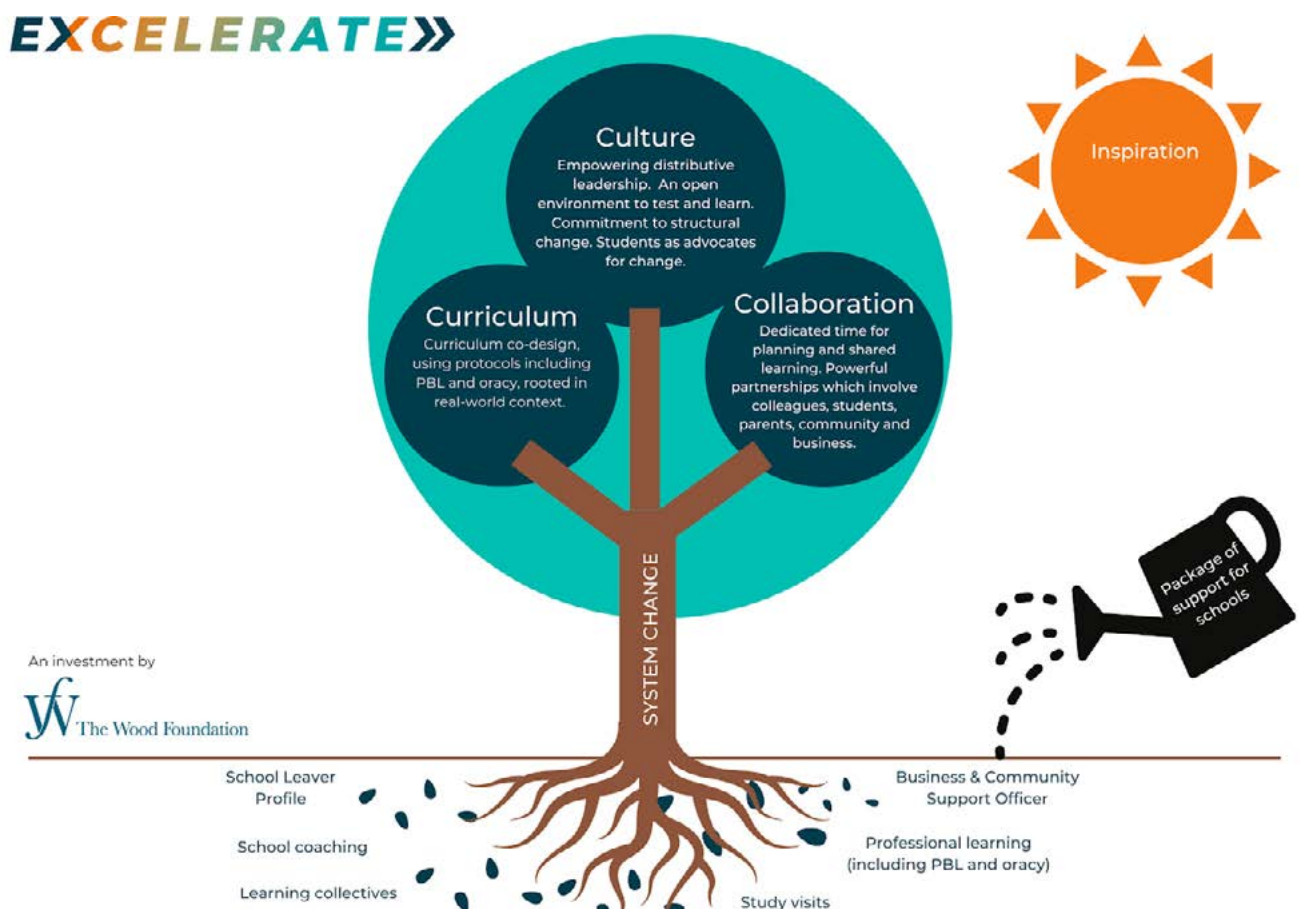
The investment was developed based on The Wood Foundation's internal research where they explored innovative approaches to learning and teaching looking both nationally and internationally. They found models in schools such as Academies of Nashville, School 21 in Stratford, London, and XP in Doncaster for inspiration. In addition, Excelerate has been informed by the Foundation's previous experience of delivering and piloting education-based programmes in Scotland for almost 15 years.

Hence, a key aim of Excelerate is to build examples of good practice within Scotland to support other schools across the United Kingdom to learn from.

The investment currently consists of 17 schools in the North-east of Scotland working on developing their pedagogy and culture in a transformational process. The investment consists of different approaches to

teaching and learning that each school adopts and adapts in their own unique way for example the integration of project based learning and oracy. Therefore, this study was interested in understanding and exploring how the Exceleerate schools have translated different parts of the investment to fit their specific context.

Exceleerate is aimed at empowering young people with the knowledge, skills, and experiences they require to make informed decisions about their futures. This includes pathways both in and out of school, Exceleerate is designed to engage with secondary schools across the Broad General Education phase (BGE) as well as the senior phase. In Scotland BGE includes early years (from age 3) until the end of S3 (age 13-15) and senior phase S4 to S6 covers ages 16 to 18. Exceleerate engages with secondary school aged pupils between S2 and S6. The programme offers a multi-layered approach to help schools realise the ambitions of Scotland's policies.



Source: <https://sites.google.com/view/exceleerate-learning-hub/about/about-exceleerate>

The tree above illustrates how fundamental change in culture, collaboration and curriculum may be achieved with the proactive support by The Wood Foundation. This includes giving educators a 'stretched vision' with study visits to schools, professional development, and coaching to transform structures in schools. The focus is on encouraging a different way of delivering education one that puts the student at the centre and encourages interdisciplinary (IDL) approaches. While there are well established policies in place that give educators permission to deliver education differently, traditional structures and assessment methods can often limit innovation. The investment hopes to change this by giving schools the vision and opportunity to deliver education in a different way that is more linked to the real world.

What we're hoping through the interventions that we put in place, is that we give the vision and we build the capability of our school partners to help them deliver things slightly differently. In fact, very differently. We want it to be very different. We don't want our interventions to be subsumed into business as usual (Member of The Wood Foundation).

The investment was initially a five-year investment by The Wood Foundation however, The Wood Foundation is committed to eight years of support for schools to embark upon a transformation process. The goal is to improve the pedagogical approaches to education through a shared and consistent vision and further to involve pupils in decision-making processes. Pupils are given permission to hold their teachers and teams accountable for their performance, and they are encouraged to provide feedback about their educational experiences:

There's been some really powerful conversations that pupils have been a part of on maths and that numbers and that skills around [maths] we must do better, there's a need for change and building the pupils ability to hold their teachers and the teams accountable (Member of The Wood Foundation).

The investment also emphasizes the importance of collaboration between schools and industry partners. Schools are encouraged to develop curriculum and deliver it through project based learning. This involves bringing in experts from different industries to co-create projects with teachers thereby bringing the curriculum to life. The programme's success depends on building trust with industry partners and developing a reciprocal relationship that benefits both parties. The Business and Community Support Officers (BCSOs) are a key part of Excelerate and is offered to every Excelerate school. They are fully trained to establish and maintain relationships with external partners who then will support the school and help develop and implement the curriculum.

Through these efforts, the investment aims to create a better learning environment for pupils and to help them develop the skills they need to succeed in the modern workplace. A key message from The Wood Foundation on what they are trying to achieve through Excelerate was: *'We're not trying to deliver education; we're bringing the curriculum to life.'*



Methodology

Data collection and analysis

The aim of this study was to explore The Wood Foundation's Excelerate Investment in three case study schools, to understand its features and the ways in which the three schools interpreted and implemented it. The research questions explored are:

1. How has the Excelerate Investment been adopted in each school?
2. How do the key approaches within the Excelerate Investment such as PBL, real world learning, community connected learning, and oracy contribute to change in the school?
3. What are the lessons learnt in adopting the Excelerate Investment in the school?

This research utilised a qualitative methodology and data collection was completed in October 2022 across three schools in the Excelerate Investment in Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City, Scotland. Each school was adopted as a single case study, and semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews were conducted with teachers, members of the senior leadership team, the Business and Community Support Officer (BCSO) and pupils. A total of 54 interviews were conducted across the three schools (see Table 1). In many cases, some interviewees were interviewed twice due to their dual roles. For examples some English teachers were also Head of English and were interviewed as teachers and as members of the senior leadership team. Interviewees were given an information sheet in advance outlining the study and how their recording would be used for the purpose of this research, and they were able to ask questions before the interview. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants, including student permission and approval by the school or parents/guardians. All participants were asked to sign a consent form before the interview. Permission to use school names was also granted by the schools and The Wood Foundation. Table 1 outlines the number of interviews conducted at each school. Schools were identified, selected and approached through The Wood Foundation.

Table 1: Number of interviews across each school

Interviews	St Machar	Kemnay Academy	Banff Academy	Total
Teachers	7	6	7	20
BCSO	1	1	1	3
Senior Leadership Team	6	1	5	12
Pupils	6	7	6	19
Total	20	15	19	54

Edge follows the British Education Research Association ethical guidelines 2018, concerning issues such as informed consent, anonymity of interviewees, confidentiality of research data and data protection. Edge also adheres to the EU's GDPR introduced in May 2019. The ethics committee at IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society granted ethical approval for this research. Each school was contacted separately and participation in the interviews were voluntary and at the school's discretion. Therefore, each school had different number of interviewees. While the three schools agreed to be named in this report, in identifying the quotations and illustrations, care has been taken to anonymise individuals as much as possible.

Data analysis adopted a thematic approach where common themes across each school were identified. These will be presented in the Findings section with excerpts from the interviews in the study to support the themes. Below is a brief description of each school that took part in the study.

Contextual background of the three schools in the study

Aberdeenshire Council was the first local authority to partner with the Wood Foundation in 2019 - they were brave and ready to try something new. Aberdeen City then joined in 2021 followed by Angus Council in 2023. To recruit schools in Excelerate, each council put out an application for expressions of interest from their secondary schools. The Wood Foundation team learned that they needed to work with courageous people who were eager to embrace the opportunity to transform their school models. A senior leader for Aberdeenshire was a powerful ally because they were receptive and engaged in the idea that schools should transform to meet the needs of their young people. They opened the opportunity to four very different school leaders who came forward to work with the team as the first cohort of schools in the Excelerate Investment.

It was acknowledged that The Wood Foundation have learned a lot from the first four schools that they worked with. Some school leaders saw this as an opportunity to develop their staff, while others were eager to embrace the opportunity to transform their school models.

Within this study, three Excelerate schools were visited, each at a different stage of their Excelerate journey. Below is a short description of each school.

St Machar Academy

St Machar Academy is a secondary school located in Aberdeen City. The school serves a diverse community of pupils from a variety of backgrounds and provides a supportive and inclusive environment for learning and has a student population of approximately 990 pupils, aged between 11 and 18 years old. The school joined Excelerate in 2021. St Machar offers a broad and diverse curriculum, with a focus on developing pupils' skills in a wide range of subjects, including STEM, humanities, and the arts. The school's goal is to provide pupils with a well-rounded education that prepares them for success in all aspects of life, not just academically but also socially and emotionally. With a strong focus on inclusion and diversity, St Machar Academy is committed to ensuring that every student has access to the support and resources they need to achieve their full potential. The school has a long-standing tradition of excellence, and through its work with Excelerate, it is continuing to innovate and improve to ensure that it remains at the forefront of educational excellence in Aberdeen City.

Kemnay Academy

Kemnay Academy is a comprehensive secondary school in Aberdeenshire. The school has a student population of approximately 982 pupils, aged between 11 and 18 years old. The school has a strong commitment to academic excellence, and its mission is to provide a high-quality education that prepares its pupils for the challenges of the modern world. Kemnay Academy is one of the first cohort of schools that has been involved in Excelerate. Kemnay Academy strives to provide an inclusive environment that supports the learning needs of all pupils, regardless of their background or ability. The school offers a wide range of academic and vocational courses, catering to the diverse interests and abilities of its pupils. Through Excelerate, Kemnay Academy has been able to identify areas for improvement and develop targeted interventions to support its pupils.

Banff Academy

Banff Academy is a secondary school located in the town of Banff in Aberdeenshire. The school provides education to pupils between the ages of 11 and 18 years old and serves approximately 962 pupils. Banff Academy joined Excelerate in 2019 as one of the pioneer schools. Within the school the Pathfinder programme initiated through the visits to the Academies of Nashville exposes young people to more career opportunities and understand their skills. According to their website, the course prepares pupils for senior school and beyond by learning about themselves, building skills, and developing a Personalised Pathfinder Map. This is achieved through a series of timetabled lessons, co-designed through collaboration between teachers and pupils. Pupils also benefit from community and industry exposure. Pupils are exposed to different career opportunities within the projects they choose.

Findings

The interview data yielded five themes that emerged in each case study school regardless of their individual context. Each theme will be discussed in turn below, Table 2 outlines the different themes and subthemes in this section.

Table 2: Table of Themes

Themes	Subthemes
<p>Theme 1: Accelerate implementation at each school was an 'evolutionary rather than revolutionary' process</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Senior Leadership Team (SLT) steer the programme ● Staff training and exposure to PBL and oracy ● Long-term commitment from staff ● Staff have been reflective of their practice
<p>Theme 2: The Business and Community Support Officer (BSCO) plays a key role in supporting teachers</p>	
<p>Theme 3: Project -based learning provides active engagement and learning across staff and pupils</p>	
<p>Theme 4: Developing pupils' oracy skills creates opportunities for pupils to take ownership of their learning</p>	
<p>Theme 5: The Accelerate Investment helps schools bring learning closer to the real world</p>	

Theme 1: The Accelerate Investment implementation at each school was an 'evolutionary rather than revolutionary' process

The Accelerate Investment at each school visited in this study was applied differently. Each school came from a different starting point, had their own vision for how they wanted the elements of the Accelerate Investment such as PBL and oracy to be weaved into the school and had a different style and structure that reflected their schools' individuality. This was not without its challenges. The teaching staff and leadership team were very honest with the barriers and challenges they faced including getting staff onboard with this new approach. This led each school to view the implementation of the Accelerate Investment as a long-term process and as an evolutionary rather than revolutionary process with staff, pupils and parents in partnership.

Senior Leadership Team (SLT) steer the programme

For any successful programme to be implemented, the school senior leadership team (SLT) plays a vital role. Learning from the first four pioneer schools of the Excelerate Investment showed it was needed to invest in team building within leadership teams. Therefore, The Wood Foundation piloted a Big Team adventure opportunity in one of the pioneer schools and further implemented the Big Team adventure for the following cohort of schools who joined Excelerate.

So we try to meet the school where they are, and work with them to bring to life what they think they need to start on. So for some of our schools that actually might be culture. We piloted with four schools this year a big team adventure for senior leadership teams, because some of those schools really needed to get their senior leadership team on a joint mission and vision together (Member of The Wood Foundation).

Across the interviews in the schools teachers were asked why the Excelerate Investment was adopted. In many responses teachers stated that their participation in the Excelerate Investment came from the leadership team:

I assumed it was from authority level or the school kind of leadership team because as far as I can remember, we were informed when we had got the participation (School A, Teacher).

Prior to being in the pilot was part of the senior management team and so was involved in initial conversations about adopting the programme (School B, Teacher).

The Senior Leadership Team sets the direction, tone and vision of the school and must steer the investment effectively to ensure it is implemented in a way that aligns with the school's vision and goals. Within each school visited, the SLT ensured the staff have a clear understanding of the Excelerate Investments objectives, the benefits of its implementation, and their roles and responsibilities within it. They worked together as a team with the school staff to provide the necessary support and resources to ensure the programme's step by step implementation.

Feels very organic, the way it grows and the way it is individualised and it's not one size fits all, really, it's about this school, and this school community and our young people specifically (School A, member of SLT).

In School B, Interdisciplinary learning (IDL) was viewed as an area where approaches that are part the Excelerate Investment could align.

I am currently principal teacher of learning and teaching and a member of support for learning, and I have been a teacher of IDL [Interdisciplinary learning], which was the initial pathway for parts of the Excelerate programme (School B, Teacher).

In School B pupils benefit from IDL experiences. These experiences provide exposure to the world of work, and it allows a more flexible way of delivering the curriculum. For example, the pupils have designed roller coasters with input from roller coaster designers in the US and UK, providing them with first hand encounters with employers to ask questions and provide feedback on their work.

I did the roller coaster one for my second S1 IDL and Drayton Manor, the theme park, sent people to talk to us about our rollercoasters and give critics and feedback and stuff, and then at the end either you had a physical model of a really small scale of what the rollercoasters would look like or they have this app where you could make your own roller coasters and for my teams end thing we decided to be different, so we did a virtual experience rollercoaster travelling through a war scene and you had shoot cartoon people (School B, Pupil).

The PBL element of the Excelerate Investment has allowed for comprehensive community connected learning, work preparation and work ready skills acquisition. There is a genuine emphasis on linking school and life beyond school, with business input that is integrated into the backbone of the schools' model. For example, School B's Braveheart Challenge, an enterprise opportunity that aims to nurture future generations of the city's young entrepreneurs and business leaders, as a resounding success is an example of an initiative that has been built into the school's timetable. Pupils in School C discussed working closely with local charities. They conducted research about their cause, called them to advocate for their charity and raised awareness of their cause to help raise a £3,000 grant as part of their Youth and Philanthropy Initiative (YPI).

I can't actually remember the charity because it feels like so many years ago. But I remember we were doing a lot of phone calls with them, emailing them making sure to see what situation they were in, and then getting all information that many people might not know [...] So even if we weren't getting the money [...] we were still getting the point across that, but people can donate into the charity and really help them (School C, Pupil).

The challenges and barriers to the implementation of the Excelerate Investment were often addressed. They were referred to with a 'can do' mindset by the SLT and they often tried to find methods to minimise the challenges.

We're struggling with elements like school day and stuff, that would be a big structural change, but we are constantly discussing ways we can achieve the same end goals but do it the similar way. Excelerate requires open minded, creative, and positive leaders who can drive change. They also have to enthuse their staff members and offer them opportunities to develop themselves (School A, member of SLT).

Staff training and exposure to PBL and oracy

Part of the Excelerate Investment required members of staff from schools to attend training courses led by international experts presenting examples of best practice in implementing PBL. This PBL training included exposure to Ford Next Generation Learning³ and visits to the Academies of Nashville, School XP and courses such as PBL 101, PBL Splash and oracy Cambridge, to name a few. The SLT chose which members of staff would be sent on which initial training. Teachers mentioned how they were introduced to PBL and oracy and how they have received training, including the activities and strategies that they have learned about. They mention the training received has been crucial to their success in implementing PBL, helping pupils engage with activities, and helping them to be more reflective of their practices by implementing protocols that they have learned across the different training offered. For example, a teacher in School B stated 'it was a very collaborative training, very hands on and we came out the other end of it with the start of a real project' and a Teacher in School C similarly stated:

I'm certainly putting in protocols that I've learned about into my normal day to day teaching now, give me more time to reflect using more peer feedback, getting feedback from you know, with the classroom as well. So it gets a huge impact. I would say (School C, Teacher).

Training was offered to selected members of staff who were chosen internally by the SLT. Through this training, staff were provided with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively implement the components of the Excelerate Investment and the vision the school has set. Exposure to PBL provides staff with real world examples and allows them to see the benefits of the programme.

³ Ford Next Generation Learning: <https://fordngl.com/>

The opportunity to expose your staff to something else, to let them see about the pedagogy that's out there, it's really high-quality learning - that professional learning (School B, member of SLT).

The journey has been very high-quality training. And it will result in us being able to produce very usable resources. And we're ultimately going to produce an oracy toolkit, 20 pages of A4, which isn't an enormous amount. But that's good because that means that we really understood an enormous amount and managed to get it down to a small amount (School C, Teacher).

Most of the teachers interviewed discuss their experiences visiting XP School in Doncaster and how it impacted their teaching practices. They were impressed by the pupils' ability to articulate their learning and the emphasis on transferable skills. They tailored the use of 'Crew' from School XP to their school context which has been a powerful tool in developing teacher-student relationships. At XP schools, each student is placed into a 'Crew' of 12-13 students who will be their school family throughout their time at school. They also admired the ethos of displaying and continuously improving their work, which built resilience in the pupils. The pupils had a genuine connection to their school, which they felt was their own.

Long-term commitment from staff

Long-term commitment from staff is vital for any programme's successful and sustainable implementation. Staff must understand the programme's long-term benefits and be willing to commit the time and effort required for successful implementation. This commitment requires a shift in mindset and practice and requires ongoing support and development from the school senior leadership team.

The main thing that we support staff with is built on the culture. So you know, there's constant messaging from whatever you look [at] every opportunity, about why we're doing this (School C, member of SLT).

The case study schools did not have any expectations but rather a mission to try to adapt and progress practice in the school that best suits the needs of pupils today. With most staff saying that Excelerate was introduced because the SLT thought it was important for the school.

It's not one size fits all. Where we were in terms of learning and teaching, we did have to go back to establish kind of some core routines across the school (School A, member of SLT).

And I saw that [interdisciplinary learning IDL] as being a perfect platform for PBL. And I saw that as being the perfect platform for kind of moving forward with some of the things that we were being exposed to, the learning that we were doing. And that's really been our focus because we had it [IDL] in school. And it was, it was ripe for change (School B, member of SLT).

As argued earlier SLT is key to change, and staff professional development is necessary to develop commitment and skills to implement change. These go hand in hand to ensure staff long term commitment. Each school has proved that it takes time to ensure all staff are committed to the Excelerate Investment's mission, and for successful transformation, staff need to be committed to the process. In School B, it has been accepted that not all teachers are at the stage of implementing PBL in their practice and instead have taken the approach more slowly to suit the needs of their staff.

So some people [staff] can touch on the periphery, and other people are really quite immersed in it. And again, it's still part of our objective to kind of get everybody to there. But again, because I've taken a kind of more of a slower approach, rather than a kind of like a totally fully immersive approach. You know, there is, ... a great deal of goodwill and wellbeing around the people who are associated with it (School B, Member of SLT).

Additionally, the PBL approach itself takes time and patience to influence both teaching and learning as discussed by a teacher in School B:

I think PBL does do that really well because it is that shared accountability, we're in it together and we're doing it for six months, it's not a case of this is a small project that we're doing for two lessons and I know that some of the whole school projects will be for a considerable period of time, so they can see that it's not just "oh we're doing this today", it does have that longevity if you like, and again the more projects that they're doing, the more used to that they're getting working with others and developing these skills (School B, Teacher).

Staff have been reflective of their practice

The Excelerate Investment has allowed staff to be reflective of their practice, which has led to improvements in teaching and learning. Reflective practice allows staff to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and make necessary adjustments to improve student experience and learning outcomes. The investment's implementation has transformed the way everyone works at the case study schools, leading to a change in perspective and practice.

We're now working with them (PBL staff) to say, okay, next year, when you do this project, you might want to increase the amount of feedback they've given or start the project with the driving question. So, staff are constantly topping [up], modelling that with each other (School B, Teacher).

Each school is different and must apply the investment in its own way, finding the right fit that aligns with its vision and goals. The strong reliance on the BSCO has been seen as a relief to teachers because working with employers and real world examples takes up too much time, and teachers have only witnessed the positive effects of the BSCO.

Diluted Vinegar in Chip Shops Experiment

"But to us, the scientists in the science faculty, we looked at PBL and we thought this is science to us because this is how it works. You ask a question, and then you figure out how you're going to answer that question and then you test it and then you can formulate your kind of research, your kind of evaluation. So we've decided, well, let's take some of the things that we do already and flip them around and make them into PBL" (School A, Teacher).

Flipped Task for pupils: A Science Department staff member wrote a newspaper article with outrage that local chip shops have been watering down the vinegar. We're not going to get vinegar flavour on our chips and we need to find out which shops are doing this!

Pupils are seen as the Food Scientists who need to figure out how they are going to test the vinegars to find out which vinegars are diluted. Pupils conducted their own research across chip shops and came up with their own experiments. They then presented their results to show the diluted versus non-diluted vinegars being offered at different chip shops and compared these to supermarket bought vinegar.

"I think it [PBL] makes you look at the way that you teach everything. I've been here for a long time. I've been in school for 18 years. So lots and lots of changes with it. But even now, this is exciting (School A, Teacher).



Theme 2: The Business Community Support Officer (BCSO) plays a key role in supporting teachers

Each school in this study undoubtedly valued the support of the BCSO. The BCSOs are a key part of the investment and are employed by The Wood Foundation. They are essential in locating employer and other community links that staff can utilise in their PBL lessons. The study highlights the crucial role played by the BCSO in connecting schools with local employers and other community organisations. Through their work, the BCSO builds up a database of employers and organisations that the school can work with to create authentic, project based learning experiences for their pupils. This is particularly important as it helps pupils to see the relevance of their learning to the real world and prepares them for future employment opportunities.

In addition to building employer links, the BCSO works with teachers to help them connect their ideas to the wider community. By doing so, they support teachers in creating engaging and meaningful projects that are grounded in real world contexts. Simply having conversations with teachers allows the BCSO to understand the proposed project and search for external experts, employers or community involvement to offer support within different PBL projects. The quote below provides an example of career exposure in School C through links provided by the BCSO:

From S4 to S6 we've got 19 students that are looking at the NHS and jobs within that sector. So, for example, yesterday we had a midwife in. And so you know, she came and did some presentation of careers insight (School C, BCSO).

This collaboration between the BCSO and teachers is critical as it helps to ensure that the projects are aligned with the school's goals and objectives. The quote below from School B, accurately summarises the impression all schools had about the support the BCSO provided to the school and specifically to building relationships among external partners and employers. It was clear that teachers valued the support the BCSO offered with many teachers claiming they would not have the time to build such relationships without the BCSO.

So having [BCSO name] being able to really build those relationships, and be able to use those partners for not just maths, but they can be applied to other areas of the curriculum as well and be able to keep those partners in the school has been a massive, a massive benefit, having crystal clear, and as I said, like she has no boundaries, you give her like, the thing you think is going to be really difficult to get a partner in for and she's just finding somebody, and then [in] a couple of days, you know, and already contact[ed] and built that relationship is just fantastic (School B, Teacher).

In School C the process of developing a project in close collaboration with the BCSO was discussed. Staff have a process in place for planning, meeting with the BCSO and reflecting on the project at the end. One teacher stated that the connection they have with the BCSO is very 'powerful', and allowing the BCSO to have an overview of the project provides another source of input and reflection for the learning that works well.

So when a group starts planning a project and they go to the business communities officer with their [idea], they might have their own ideas of who could be used as a partner, and they might have their own connections. So for the Olympic Project, we have a member of Team GB, who is a personal connection of somebody in this field. But then it still went through the business communities' officer for the protocols, [they] engage with the partners (School C, Teacher).

The BCSO has been initially employed by The Wood Foundation for 32 months. The Wood Foundation team provided an update during the study, that two out of the three schools have TUPE'd (Transfer of Undertakings – Protection of Employment) their BCSOs into their school, with The Wood Foundation now only partially contributing to their salary. Keeping the BCSO employed at the school, highlights the recognition of the

importance of the BCSO's role in connecting schools with employers and the wider community. It also emphasises the need for sustainable funding models to support this work and ensure that schools continue to benefit from the expertise of the BCSO. Overall, the BCSO plays a crucial role in creating meaningful connections between schools, employers, and the wider community, ultimately benefiting pupils by providing them with relevant and engaging learning experiences.

Theme 3: Project based learning provides active engagement and learning across staff and pupils

PBL was seen as a new and refreshing pedagogical approach to teaching and learning by many of the staff interviewed across the schools. PBL was seen as a way to make learning more engaging and relevant to real world situations, which helped pupils to build skills that would be useful to them in their future careers. Staff had to think about how they could apply PBL to their own teaching practices and develop links between their teaching and the wider world.

As a result of PBL, staff reported that they saw an increase in student engagement and team working, as well as improved confidence and aspirations among pupils. Teachers were asked about the benefits PBL had on pupils so far. Many teachers cited greater independence among pupils, developing skills in an informal way, greater conversations with teachers, exposure to different careers and developing work-ready skills. Teachers also reported specific changes to their teaching practices, such as using more student-centred approaches, allowing more student voice, and using real world scenarios in their lessons.

I think for me, it's the independence part of it, because I find a lot of pupils come into the senior phase, the moment you know, you let them get on with something there that involves [...] they need some of their hands held sometimes, and it's like, 'You're not going to have me when you go into your workplace or work with you, standing over your shoulder saying do this, do this'. So I think giving the opportunity to actually figure things out for themselves and reflect on their own work (School C, Teacher).



Developing a Board Game in Teams

Both teachers and pupils in School C reflect on the process of pupils grouped together in S1 and S2 building board games and the different skills that they have developed.

At the start of the project there was an immersive event where teachers and pupils spent 100 minutes playing board games. This allowed for feedback on the different features of different board games and which features pupils liked and did not like. Then pupils worked in teams to design a board game, which had to have numeracy outcomes and supported some form of improvement for mental wellbeing. Later in the year they will host a coffee morning and invite people from the local community to get a chance to play the board games they developed and receive feedback on them.

The creativity, making like, a fun board game, but learning as well. You have to find the aspects that work together...but I'd say as well, learn how to communicate with other people (School C, Pupil).

In all the interviews with staff, there was appreciation for the PBL approach across the school. It is seen as an important aspect of the school's curriculum as it gives pupils the independence and choice to explore projects with a wider lens. It allows pupils to have more independence in their learning as described by a pupil interviewed in School C:

So when we were doing [projects], it was like, a really nice change from your normal school subjects, because you were allowed to be a lot [more] independent when doing it and it was taken a lot of different approaches. So instead of writing and writing, you're in control of your own work, which really builds upon your responsibility skills and then the variation between the tasks. So sometimes we'd be in teams, sometimes we'd be on the computers, it was just really all rounded. So you're building on all your skills at the same time, even if you weren't realising it (School C, Pupil).

It makes you reflect on how much you're doing the work and not the pupils. So if that makes sense. So it does make you think, am I doing too much teaching? Are there activities already or is there anything I can do to make it more pupil-led? (School A, PBL Teacher).

PBL also focuses on transferable skills such as communication, [giving] feedback, and creativity, which pupils can use across different subjects. Teachers also stated that the consistency of using PBL in different subjects has helped pupils see that these skills can transfer from one thing [setting] to another. Additionally, in School B, the PBL working group is trying to drip-feed PBL into other faculties to increase the number of subjects that use this approach, demonstrating how each school is adapting the model to how they see it best fits their school. However, implementing PBL was not without its challenges. The opportunities for changes to existing pedagogical practices, which some staff were resistant to at first was challenging. There was also a need for consistency with PBL across different subjects and a willingness from staff to embrace PBL as a new way of teaching.

But there's a lot of people who work here and there's a lot of people who've been doing the same thing for a long time and you know it's been fine, obviously we're trying in a fairly wholesale way to, at some point, fully adopt this kind of approach and certainly it's always a bit of an anxiety. What do you do about the folk who are saying they're not sure about this? (School B, Teacher).

Similarly, it requires adaptability and responsiveness from pupils. In some cases pupils' feedback on PBL courses was integrated.

So the course was set up. I was [in] the first year who kind of did it. And it was very much, I'd say that it was good. Everyone understood why we're doing it. But there was still a lot of input. And what they've done is since then, they've allowed myself and a few other pupils to kind of really have a say, in fact, the whole year, really. If there were things you weren't keen on, that would have been cut and it would be replaced (School C, Pupil).

Furthermore, teachers claim that PBL allows for a shared accountability between staff and pupils which can be seen as a constructive approach to teaching and learning.

I have a couple of experiences where pupils in that category initially struggle with the concept of 'we're working together on a project' and I think that's really valuable for them, because we're then preparing them for the world of work when they leave school, because the reality is when you're in the workplace, you're not just working on your own, you're working with other people so it's about developing those skills of working well with others and teamwork. So I think that's a challenge for individual pupils maybe at that higher end, but it's an opportunity for us to support them with that and I think PBL does do that really well because it is that shared accountability (School B, Teacher).

Overall, PBL was seen as a positive and effective approach to teaching and learning by staff across the schools. The Excelerate Investment helped to facilitate this change, but it was an evolutionary journey that required time and effort from all involved.

I think it makes you look at the way that you teach everything... And that whole kind of big thing that came out of America [Nashville study visit] for me was - they can't be what they can't see. And if we can get people in, [who] do this job and even if it just one little kid goes, 'Oh, I'd quite like to do that.' It's been worthwhile (School A, Teacher).

Theme 4: Developing pupils' oracy skills creates opportunities for pupils to take ownership of their learning

In this study, School A and School C had introduced oracy. For schools that had introduced oracy in their practice due to the Excelerate Investment, staff had very positive comments on the effects it has had on students. This included seeing pupils become more confident in the way they articulated themselves and their learning. The schools are still at the early stages of implementing oracy and therefore are still exploring and experimenting how it applies to different classes to help in developing an overall approach. For example, the use of oracy has allowed teachers to be more reflective of pupils who may have not wanted to speak much in class and therefore teachers try to incorporate oracy techniques to encourage pupils to speak and be involved.

So when they [pupils] come in, they've got a talking point on the board and we're speaking about, like things that relate to them, and we're trying to get them to, like, all join in. I always knew the ones [pupils] that didn't talk but now I'm like making more of a conscious effort to be like, they're not talking, what can I do in my lesson, that's going to get them to talk? (School A, Teacher).

Yet, many members of staff using oracy in their practice stated that oracy and PBL are intertwined and should go hand in hand in pedagogical approaches. Undoubtedly, teachers incorporating oracy across the schools stated the importance of verbal communication and how oracy skills can go a long way in building confidence and career ready young people.

...we just had a couple of kids go off to the Scottish Youth Parliament, we've got a couple of MSYPs [Member of the Scottish Youth Party] and they came back and said we need people who are just confident speakers. We also know that and pupils know because we tell them that there's a very rapidly and significantly changing job market out there... If you don't have interpersonal skills, you're in trouble in the future, you really are in trouble. Interpersonal skills are reliant on verbal communication, speaking and listening. Team working skills are reliant on verbal communication (School C, Teacher).

Oracy provides a platform for pupils to showcase what they have learned. Through both Oracy and PBL, pupils are given the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills to real world problems and challenges. Some teachers note that this provides pupils with a sense of purpose and relevance to their learning, which in turn increases their motivation and engagement. Specifically, teachers in these two schools claimed that oracy empowers pupils and helps develop their critical thinking skills. By working on projects that require problem-solving and critical thinking, pupils can develop these skills in a meaningful and authentic way.

By developing their oracy skills, pupils are better equipped to communicate their ideas and take ownership of their learning (School B, Teacher).

Teachers who have implemented oracy have found that it requires them to change their teaching practices in specific ways to allow or increase engagement among pupils. For example, some teachers have found that giving pupils longer response times during class discussions allows for more thoughtful and reflective

responses, which in turn promotes deeper thinking and engagement. Teachers have also found that it requires a long-term commitment, time and greater resources to develop and refine their practice indicating there are challenges associated with the approach.

...its interesting as well because oracy stuff is already done by a lot of teachers without realising because they all speak to the classes to some extent. It was interesting learning about the theory behind it, and then more strategies that we can try, especially the waiting time thing because we were like, waiting three or so seconds like she said, then it seemed like an eternity. And then we can wait like a good 10 or 15 [seconds]. And it's not that painful (School A, Teacher).

We are the two oracy leads, [we] were not given one minute of additional time to do that. We literally have a job title and we've done training courses and that's it. Everything that we've done is done in our existing non-contact time (School C, Teacher).

One challenge with implementing oracy within the classroom is that it should be seen as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, traditional teaching methods. PBL and oracy should not be seen as a separate entity, but rather as part of a broader approach to teaching and learning. Overall, teachers adopting oracy approaches in their classroom state that it provides a platform for pupils to showcase their learning, empowers pupils and helps develop critical thinking skills. Teachers acknowledge they need to be willing to make specific changes to their teaching practices to allow for increased engagement among pupils.

In terms of how it benefits the teachers it simply provides a structure to take things that teachers are already doing, and getting them to the issue that is the next level. That's what it does. As with so much professional learning among teachers, what you're wanting is to reassure people that they're okay just now and to support them in getting better (School A, Teacher).

Theme 5: The Excelerate Investment helps schools bring learning closer to the real world

The Excelerate Investment has provided schools with the necessary training and resources to implement PBL, real world learning and Oracy in their classrooms, helping to define their remit and incorporate these teaching methods across subjects, including areas like IDL and Pathfinder in some schools. This has allowed teachers to engage with their pupils in new and exciting ways, encouraging critical thinking and developing problem-solving skills and empowering pupils to take ownership of their learning. Although it is a long-term commitment, the majority of teachers have a shared view of the overall impact the Excelerate Investment aims to achieve.

One of the meanings, obviously, of Excelerate somewhere in our school, we've got a banner [...] it's all about the pupils feeling more engaged, inspired, and motivated in their learning and empowered. So these are all tools that we're going to give them and no matter what type of learning experiences they're having in the school, in individual subjects or in PBL, these are going to, obviously, give them the tools that they require to be successful (School C, Teacher).

The investment has brought schools closer to their local communities, with many staff members mentioning this impact in their interviews. Schools have been able to build stronger relationships with community members and organisations, creating new opportunities for pupils to learn and grow outside of the classroom. This has helped to foster a sense of belonging and connection within the community, while also providing pupils with valuable real world experience and skills.

The big part of being part of the Excelerate programme is that we are more in touch with our community and our community knows more about us as well, by bringing these partners in, you know, a loving parents, pupils, partners and staff to all influence how we are developing as a school (School B, Teacher).

While the investment has had many positive impacts, there have been challenges along the way. Some teachers have struggled with changes to their pedagogy and teaching practices, while others have been hesitant to fully engage with the investment. It is important to note that schools voiced the importance of implementing PBL and Oracy together at the same time to illustrate the significance of both. In School C, PBL was the first intervention introduced through the Excelerate Investment followed by oracy. However, oracy teachers stated that although oracy exists outside of PBL, if they were introduced at the same time this would elicit the best learning experiences for pupils. The Wood Foundation noted through their learning from their first cohort of schools, the new and future cohorts of Excelerate schools will be encouraged to introduce PBL and oracy at the same time.

...the dialogic classroom, confidence and group work. That's what, really, I think the goal is [of Excelerate]. That's what Pathfinders is that's what squad is. And that's what oracy does. I don't think, we can go back to like to the old 50-minute lessons. We could go back to stand up just basic subjects, and still oracy would be the thing. Yeah. And it would get that but PBL helps us boost it and implement it and tie it all together. I think that's where we want to get to with oracy. But it's a journey (School C, Teacher).

The leadership team at each school have also reflected on their practice and progress, focusing on what is best for their pupils. The Excelerate Investment has encouraged schools to be reflective of their practices and to continually strive for improvement. This has led to a greater focus on student-centred learning, where pupils are empowered to take ownership of their learning and teachers act as facilitators. Overall, the staff and leadership at each school have seen a positive impact on their pedagogy, school development, student learning and connectedness to the real world as a result of the Excelerate Investment.

It [the school] is more buoyant because the staff are confident. And if you've got staff that are confident, that are willing to take risks, that have a can-do culture, then impact in terms of learning and teaching and our young people's learning experiences is far, far greater, it's enhanced (School C, member of SLT).

I like that it's not just the plans or model on top of the school, like we do take the time to figure out what you're already doing and then try and make things work bespoke for your school (School A, member of SLT).

Community Connected Learning through Music, Memory and Storytelling

In School A pupils reflected on a project in IDL that allowed them to connect with their local community. Pupils were shown how older people could access their memories through different music. They witnessed videos taken of some older people listening to music and got to see their reactions.

Pupils looked at what made a good song or tune for a party for older people and explored the features of some of their favourites. They learned how music can form part of therapy and can be used to benefit health. Pupils explored ideas and suggestions of how they could use music to have a positive impact on others. Then pupils were able to identify their own preference to develop a final product that could be shared with others.

We did one [IDL project] about music memory and storytelling on how older people could get their memories back and more vision of memories in their head with the music that they were elaborated to, so that was very interesting to do (School B, Pupil).



Conclusion

The Excelerate Investment was launched by The Wood Foundation in 2019 within a supportive Scottish education policy context of the Curriculum for Excellence (CoE, 2010). This policy environment embracing institutional change and curriculum change to improve learner experience has been utilised by The Wood Foundation and consequently by the Excelerate schools. The overarching aims of the Scottish Curriculum policy (curriculum entitlements), the Excelerate Investment and the participating schools overlap. All aim to equip young people with the skills and competencies needed to thrive in the 21st century world of work and society (Humes, 2013). The Scottish Curriculum has created space for school autonomy and flexibility to innovate and collaborate.

The Wood Foundation is aiming for system level change and works together with those schools where the environment is ready to introduce and commit to transformational change in their school context. The Excelerate Investment is not a pre-defined programme but rather it promotes underlying principles. These include offering pupils' high quality and diverse pathways, strong collaboration among internal and external stakeholders, and continuous professional development for SLT and teachers (Excelerate Learning Hub, 2022). The ways in which these principles are interpreted and implemented in the case study schools vary. Excelerate acknowledges the importance of local context and the individual approaches of schools to content and timing.

Transformational, systemic change in schools can only happen if supported by the SLT. In the case study schools SLT demonstrated qualities, such as risk-taker, driver, motivator, collaborator, leader and manager that all needed to start change at school level. It is evident that change has to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary in order to get wider support of school staff, parents and local community, and make it sustainable.

The introduction of changes is not without challenges. Not all staff are convinced to introduce change into their often well-established practice. In each school a very first step was aimed at buy-in from the SLT and from staff. Information was provided about the whole Excelerate Investment with its potential benefits and responsibilities were identified for individual staff. Staff development via school visits and CPD courses were offered. Visits to the Academies of Nashville and School XP in Doncaster offered an insight into a whole-school approach and were considered highly motivational, while CPD on project based learning and oracy were more specifically targeted elements of Excelerate.

PBL and oracy were often discussed together and considered to work well together as pedagogical approaches. Consequently, both PBL and oracy training were considered essential even though they were reflected on as challenging to comprehend and to effectively put into practice. However, both were perceived positively by the interviewees, they all recognised what pupils can achieve by engaging with PBL and developing oracy skills. This recognition made interviewees more determined to develop a better understanding of PBL and oracy, which should lead to better implementation and practice in pedagogy. Both approaches are resource intense and need long-term commitment to make it valuable and effective.

It was also suggested that PBL and oracy should be seen as part of all pedagogies rather than as individual entities. It is evident that they are embraced by the case study schools but with room for further development. Additionally, it was important to identify already existing examples of good practices within the schools, such as the interdisciplinary learning and Braveheart Challenge, and recognise ways in which they and Excelerate mutually benefit each other through PBL and oracy.

The Wood Foundation has recognised that Excelerate, with its emphasis on collaboration with employers and the local community, and through PBL and offering pupils real world experiences to prepare them for work and future lives, has to be supported by all staff. They offered to employ in each school a BCSO for three years who are fully integrated in the school. BCSOs were considered invaluable help and support in establishing, maintaining external links with employers and the local community and helping teachers to deliver PBL in particular. It was generally acknowledged that the new pedagogical approaches can only be fully realised by the support of the designated BCSO. Teachers do not have the capacity and resources to take on this role, which is fundamental to success.

The participating case study schools provide excellent examples for how they interpreted and implemented the different elements and principles of the Excelerate Investment, suiting their local context and how these different approaches were utilised for their schools' benefit. The story of the three case study schools also displays the collaborative effort needed to develop something new and different. Where programme implementation has been successful and led to transformative changes, it also led to changes in perspectives and practices of school staff. Time will tell when (if) this leads to culture change.

Variations in school approaches and distance and speed travelled in relation to Excelerate to date are significant to note as they may inform and influence future schools' engagement with Excelerate. The experiences of existing Excelerate schools offer helpful lessons to learn whether these are successful practices or what the challenges are to overcome. The case study schools offer rich experiences of creative ways of making Excelerate work for them while pursuing the ultimate goal to develop 'Engaged, informed and empowered young people' (Excelerate Learning Hub, 2022).

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