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National College
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Schools and academies

Research Associate Summary report

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Resource

Designing a creative contextualised primary curriculum

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Introduction

This research has sought to capture how individual primary school leaders have drawn on their professional expertise and collaborated with like-minded colleagues to develop an effective, creative, contextualised curriculum relevant to their school situation during a period of flux in statutory guidance provided by the government.

The research was carried out between 2009 and 2011 during a period of significant change in the political landscape and a national context informed by primary curriculum studies such as the reviews by Rose (2009), Williams (2008) and Cambridge (Alexander 2008). The study explored levels of awareness of such formative influences together with degrees of school response to changes in statutory requirements, and the consequent changes in curriculum practice and curriculum leadership that ensued.

From observation of classroom activities and discussion with individual school leaders, the research sought to capture innovative examples of creative curriculum practice and to identify the generic leadership approaches, values and attitudes required for successful curriculum development.

The primary research questions had a particular focus on schools in challenging contexts and explored:

- what examples of innovative creative curriculum practice can be found within specific contexts and what is their impact on pupil motivation and attainment?
- what generic leadership approaches are used by school leaders engaged in creative curriculum development?

Methodology

A total of 21 primary schools were involved in the research; many faced challenging circumstances and 13 of the schools were drawn from six of the Greater Manchester local authorities involved in the Manchester Challenge initiative. Participating schools were selected because of their good or outstanding curriculum practice as identified by Ofsted reports or curriculum awards.

The predominant data collection mechanism was a total of 32 interviews conducted with headteachers, deputy headteachers and senior leaders using a semi-structured interview schedule. This was designed not only to identify knowledge and awareness of the Rose, Williams and Cambridge reviews and their impact on the development of a creative curriculum, but also to focus on schools' responses to changes in national education priorities and statutory parameters, and particularly the way they were tailored to specific contextual circumstances, and the leadership implications of this.

In addition, in 13 of the schools, children were interviewed and observed in creative curriculum activities and the work of a networking group of 12 middle leaders involved in the development of three mathematics curriculum projects was also drawn on. On occasions, researchers sought the views of other members of staff and some parents.

Findings

The findings of this research study as set out below fall naturally into two categories: details of how schools, being informed by the outputs of curriculum reviews such as those by Rose (2009), Williams (2008) and Cambridge (Alexander 2008), have designed contextualised curricula with specific foci to respond to their local needs, and then the leadership implications of initiating such developments within a context governed by changing national parameters.

The findings that follow first outline briefly a number of cameos of successful curriculum design developed by a number of schools in the study. There then follows an overview of what the school leaders interviewed considered to be the generic leadership requirements of their role in leading such successful curriculum development within a time of change.

1. Cameos of curriculum design

These are the cameos of successful curriculum design that a number of schools in the study had developed:

- Focus on language, with curriculum provision concentrated on systematic language development, for example Gaelic or English for Speakers of Other Languages.
- Focus on mathematics, developing mathematics as a cross-curricular experience across other subjects such as PE, science and economics.
- Focus on alternative curriculum days and themed weeks, with suspended timetable opportunities for specialist off-site activities facilitated by parents and community volunteers.
- Focus on adapting a published topic approach, modified according to context and applied across schools to enable the sharing of resources and good practice.
- Focus on a play-centred approach to learning, building on the conceptual outputs of the Rose and Cambridge reviews and their analysis of the six areas of learning, and broadening this from the Foundation Stage into other year groups, with a reported impact on attendance and pupil motivation.

2. Generic leadership learning: 10 common themes

Although examples of creative curriculum design vary significantly in approach and context, school leaders interviewed were able to identify generic leadership attributes which they had found important in this work. These may be codified as 10 common themes, as summarised below:

1. School leaders value basic skills of numeracy and literacy, but consider that broad and motivational curriculum experiences supported by rigorous teacher assessment are important factors in securing this.
2. School leaders insist that pupils should be motivated to achieve high standards across the board, but consider that such standards need to be applied both within the formal curriculum and beyond it, and that opportunities should be sought to enhance this.
3. School leaders are also good managers, using performance management structures to identify

strengths in teaching and to support those who are struggling.

4. School leaders are good system leaders and system amenders, seeking to contribute to national debate but also draw on, amend and personalise outcomes to fit their own specific contexts.
5. School leaders recognise that good education is cognitively challenging, and seek to design dynamic and creative curricula which encourage pupils to think for themselves, work productively with others and develop approaches of resilience and stamina.
6. School leaders promote an ethos of equality and respect, and value the voice of the child, enabling opportunities for adult-level dialogue with pupils.
7. School leaders facilitate unusual deep learning experiences for pupils, for example using outdoor pursuits, extra-curricular activities and opportunities for reflective journaling.
8. School leaders have a high concern to meet future needs, engaging in networks of support to inform the design of 'future-proof' curricula to enhance key understanding and transferable skills.
9. School leaders are concerned with the development of others, through appropriate distribution of leadership and the encouragement of collaborative continuing professional development (CPD).
10. School leaders are self-reflective and can identify generic leadership traits, involving personal self-awareness and assessment of collective needs.

Conclusion

Brundrett and Duncan (2010, 7) have argued that successful curriculum development is secured when

“a culture of adult learning runs alongside developments in the pupil curriculum so that the skills of leaders at all levels are increased”.

All the schools in the current research sample had leaders considered to be 'inspirational' but were also

full of creative and dynamic practitioners. Such successful schools therefore were not just in the hands of one superhero headteacher, but they bore the hallmark of excellence throughout, for that same enthusiasm was to be found in the classroom assistants, teachers, administrators, cooks and cleaners. Equally, the work of curriculum design was not the responsibility of the headteacher alone. The teachers and school leaders worked together to create a curriculum that motivated not only the pupils but themselves too, and in many of the schools surveyed an enthusiastic and committed group of volunteers involving community groups, parents, grandparents and others contributed to it.

If there is one characteristic that could mark out a successful school in its provision of a creative curriculum, it was the feature that the leadership group knows itself and its community, especially the pupils, and every day matches the learning, specifically and accurately, to that need. It was the ability to treat every day as something new and every child as an individual that it was felt makes the best schools shine through their commitment to rich learning experiences.

School leaders wanted to see exciting and motivational activities available for all their pupils. Whether using another's ideas, adapting published suggestions, devising an entirely new timetable or enlisting volunteers, they contextualised approaches to fit their communities' needs and to impact on learners' future lives. In doing so, school leaders understood that it is not only curriculum content that matters but approaches, motivation and attitude generated through appropriate pedagogy.

For these school leaders, the statutory framework simply set an entitlement to basic provision; the real learning was to be found through layers and layers of professional creativity, to create a curriculum that is totally personalised to the contexts of individual schools, dynamic not static, and responsive not to politics but to their communities' needs.

Acknowledgements

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