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Research Associate
Full report

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Resource

Designing a creative contextualised primary curriculum

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Abstract

This research study examines the development of innovative creative curriculum practice within a sample of primary schools during a period of flux in statutory guidance provided by the government. It draws on observations of classroom practice and interviews with a sample of 32 senior leaders in 21 primary schools, the majority of which were in challenging contexts. It not only identifies a number of examples of creative curriculum practice specific to these contexts but also codifies the generic leadership approaches involved.

The study found that in designing curricula appropriate to their contexts, schools had specific foci on language, mathematics, alternative curriculum experiences, themes and approaches, and offered creative curriculum cameos to illustrate these foci. It also identified generic leadership attributes of school leaders engaged with the curriculum development task as being a focus on basic approaches but also wider learning experiences, a concern for the development of staff and pupil voice, and a desire not only to contribute to national debate and initiatives but also to draw on, amend and personalise their outcomes to fit their specific contexts.

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 national parameters.

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). Through semi-structured interviews with a sample of leaders of primary schools deemed to have designed and implemented outstanding curriculum change it explored the generic leadership implications of bringing about such change. Interviews were further supplemented by classroom observation of creative curriculum activities in action and the views of a networking working group of middle leaders engaged in project development.

It was recognised that curriculum design, organisation and delivery is formed by both national influences of government policy and imposed statutory parameters within a national accountability framework informed by inspection, but also locally through autonomous school leaders and teachers planning innovatively and creatively, yet accountable to the expectations of parents and levels of motivation and performance of pupils. Consequently the research sought to capture the consensus of generic leadership approaches and values required to drive forward successful curriculum change that meets the essential needs of learners in specific school contexts but is also robust and flexible enough to ensure curriculum sustainability and responsiveness to changing national needs.

The research interviews explored:

- levels of awareness of formative influences on the primary school curriculum such as the Rose, Cambridge and Williams reviews and the primary consultations by coalition ministers (DfE 2011)
- degrees of response to changes in statutory requirements and government initiatives
- structures of leadership adopted for successful curriculum innovation
- the impact of curriculum innovation on teacher and headteacher workload
- individual school plans for future curriculum improvements
- accountability to and views of stakeholders such as parents, pupils and the local community to such plans
- benefits perceived, especially for children from more deprived and challenging circumstances

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 in order to inform the wider base of leadership knowledge.

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?

Literature review

The impact of the Rose, Cambridge and Williams reviews on curriculum creativity

In 2006, a review commissioned by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) examined best practice in the teaching of early reading and the leadership and management implications of the co-ordination of this (Rose 2006). It was subsequently further developed into an independent review of the whole primary curriculum (Rose 2009), which examined the central question of what the primary curriculum should contain and how its content and the teaching of it should change to further foster children's differing and developing attributes. The wider Rose Review (2009) recognised the distinctiveness of the primary curriculum, focused on the need not only to develop essential knowledge, skills and understanding, but also to inspire and instil habits of learning that would act as the building blocks for secondary education and later life. It stressed the need for a clear understanding of the distinct but interlocking ways in which children learn and develop, and the consequent requirement for a well-planned and vibrant curriculum that enhances independent learning, engagement with practical activities and the development of empathy through the opportunity of working with others. In short:

> "This means that primary children must not only learn what to study, they must also learn how to study..."
>
> (Rose 2009, 9).

To achieve this, high-quality teaching is required, a point also highlighted by the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander 2008), which sought to identify the purposes, values and learning entitlements of primary education. It concluded that a curriculum is only as good as those who teach it, and that curriculum content must intersect with and be informed by pedagogy, and curriculum overload be replaced by curriculum creativity.

Although the current government has not pursued the findings of these reviews, the discussion of the findings of the Rose and Cambridge reviews created an atmosphere in which the need for creative curriculum change was at the forefront. In particular it was recognised that discrete subject provision offers only one way and not the sole way to enhance learning development, but that equally cross-curricular studies can provide effective alternative learning routes on occasion.

Such cross-curricular opportunities for literacy are well developed in the literature (Blatchford and Plewis 1990, Mortimore et al 1988) but rather less so for numeracy. The Williams Review (2008) into the primary mathematics curriculum analysed the most effective pedagogy, design and sequencing that could enhance pupil numeracy and considered the staffing responsibility structures that could best champion this. In responding to this development, a network of middle leadership teachers of some of the schools involved in this research study had felt stimulated to take various ideas from Rose, Williams and Alexander and from untested methods of their own design to come up with lessons for their own classes. Such exemplar creative work supports Brown et al (2000) and views expressed by the Advisory Committee for Mathematics (ACME), the National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (NCETM) and the Primary Strategy website: problem solving is the area that can be most influenced by creativity and in particular through the application of a range of mathematical skills in combination. However, Brown et al and the Williams Report suggest that mathematics lessons in themselves do not often do this, especially where teachers are not qualified at an advanced level, as is often the case in primary schools, where non-specialists usually deliver the mathematics curriculum. Consequently, such self-help collaborative methods can draw on collective experience and support to ameliorate this.

Curriculum creativity to support pupil motivation

Motivation of pupils, particularly those facing challenging personal circumstances, in order to maximise their attainment can be achieved by providing a creative curriculum offering delivered in an appropriately meaningful way (Harris and Chrispeels 2008). Although those circumstances will inevitably create marked differences in the specific curriculum design adopted, the consistent thinking behind the design is that in order to impact on learning, pupils must be engaged and enthused by content and teaching method.

This is particularly the case for children with special educational needs (SEN) who may require a 'moment by moment' differentiation of provision to meet those individual needs. Such groupings of children may require more specifically designed personalised and appropriately responsive learning opportunities, wherein the task of curriculum design falls heavily on the individual teacher. In her National College research associate study capturing the views of SEN pupils, Bishton (2007) identifies how the organisation of the classroom environment and the availability of national resources for SEN learners can be tailored to meet individual needs and so promote the inclusive classroom.

Similar bespoke provision may also be required to meet the needs of pupils from an ethnic minority background who have specific language difficulties. Strand (1999) outlines how specific teacher responses to curriculum provision may be pre-designed from a bank of available material or spontaneously generated to enrich the curriculum creatively, offering to meet specific learner need.

Leadership to promote curriculum creativity

The leadership requirements of such an approach demand a focus on distributed leadership (Bennett et al 2003; Spillane and Harris 2008) and an awareness of both role-specific (Farnworth 1994) and context-specific leadership (Levin et al 2006). It further demands a high level of emotional intelligence displayed in professional relationships (Goleman 1995 2006) to ensure that all feel able to contribute to the process of curriculum design and are able to draw on the benefits of it. Recent research for the National College on Leading Curriculum Innovation in Primary Schools (Brundrett and Duncan, 2010) has indicated that while leading curriculum innovation is challenging and complex, school leaders are confident in taking ownership of the process of curriculum change and would welcome the freedom to innovate creatively provided by looser central control and direction. They see the process as a whole-school activity, which needs to be related to the context of the school, have clear moral and social imperatives, and involve all staff in a joint enterprise of reflection, contextual evaluation and target-setting to deliver a staged process of change, which will ensure enhanced school effectiveness and improvement. If this is to be achieved, the leader must have a specific set of personal and professional attributes, attitudes and values. This research study seeks to codify those attributes and attitudes from the reflections of school leaders as they meet the demands of a range of differing contexts and circumstances and seek to promote creative curriculum responses to them.

Methodology

This research was carried out between 2009 and 2011 during a period of significant changes in education due to a change in national government. During the data collection phase of the research, a total of 21 primary schools (including one independent boys' school and one special school) were involved, with numbers on roll ranging from 34 to 480. 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. Other geographical areas were also represented, including Surrey and Lancashire, together with schools in Cumbria and Scotland to give a rural dimension to the research.

Data was collected in 32 interviews conducted with headteachers, deputy heads and senior leaders using a semi-structured interview schedule (reproduced in the appendix). This was refined and developed as the sequence of interviews progressed in order 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, in particular tailoring them to specific contextual circumstances, and the leadership and workload implications of this. To supplement the data 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, the views of other members of staff and some parents were also sought.

Participating schools were initially selected on the basis of their good or outstanding curriculum practice as identified by Ofsted reports, or Artsmark, International Schools and Basic Skills Awards, together with peer approbation. It is recognised that this has created an opportunity sample and that there remains untapped further outstanding practice and inspirational curriculum leadership, which further research could identify.

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 Rose, Williams and Cambridge, 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. Although the initial research focus was envisaged to be primarily the first of these categories, it became clear within the data collection phase that significant generic leadership approaches had been adopted by the school leaders involved, irrespective of their local contexts, which could be codified to inform those involved in future curriculum development.

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 a more detailed analysis 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. Given the strong consensus on this among the school leaders interviewed, despite their differing contextual circumstances, it is possible to codify these leadership attributes across 10 common themes, which form the second part of this section.

Cameos of curriculum design

Focus on language

The study looked at curriculum provision in a school in Scotland where there was a focus on the systematic teaching and use of Scots Gaelic, which necessitated a particular approach to curriculum design. Generally, the topic approach has become usual in enabling a deep learning experience for pupils by applying learning in different ways to different circumstances. In this school, however, the approach was used in a way that supported the language as part of the children's identity and encouraged them in this by drawing on it in all lessons.

A similar situation was seen in a Manchester school, which has a large number of Pakistani children whose first (home) language is Urdu. Specific mathematics groups encouraged the use of the first language and children were expected to progress in both languages equally. Lessons in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) took place for parents and feedback affirmed that this benefited the whole community as learning was viewed more positively and parents who had previously been somewhat detached from the school were included.

Focus on mathematics

The National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics sponsored a group of mathematics subject leaders in schools in Manchester to work together and devise lessons aimed at delivering mathematics as a cross-curricular experience across other subjects. Work was shared linking mathematics with PE, science, literacy and more eclectic subjects such as economics. The overall consensus of the staff involved was that the experience was valuable and worth repeating, the motivation of pupils was high, with children finding mathematics 'difficult' having no trouble with it when it was 'hidden' in another lesson, and the workload for teachers was felt to be "no more than usual".

Focus on alternative curriculum days

At a three form entry junior school in Surrey, Fridays had been set aside as 'college days'. All other learning was packed into the other four days and on three out of four Fridays the children had alternative learning opportunities. On the fourth Friday they had a range of exciting adventures planned, varying from involvement with a leading London Premiership football club, to offsite visits to local places of interest. The college days were constructed across the four junior years in mixed age classes of no particular size. Parents, grandparents and other community volunteers took groups of children in a three part lesson (each week built on the previous week) and offered classes they could specialise in. For example, a grandad who kept an allotment nearby was able on Fridays to operate the school allotment with a group of willing gardeners. Adjacent to the allotment was a play park where play and decorative furniture structures were hand-carved from wood by children under the careful guidance of a local sculptor.

When the headteacher was asked how the college day approach had impacted on school standards in numeracy and literacy, he was able to show samples of the children's work that showed excellent writing and problem solving approaches. Those involved had found numeracy and literacy were not remote from other learning but used in the college day in relevant ways.

Focus on themed weeks and a themed approach

In a Manchester school with a high percentage of Asian heritage children, curriculum design was determined by a strong commitment to language. Since the children had a strong focus on numeracy and literacy, it was felt that previously other subjects were sometimes lost in the pressure. To overcome this, the leadership team had set aside several specialist weeks in the year when themes or topics were covered in detail. For instance, in Arts Week the children had a variety of activities from plays and drama to engaging with an artist. During Sports Week the local football club, aware of the drive to improve sports provision within the community, set aside a whole week to deliver good professional sports coaching. In Food Fortnight the school made a concerted effort to address healthy eating and all children were encouraged to try something new, whether eating a tomato or baking their own bread.

In this school, learning was often centred around an offsite visit. The headteacher was able to describe how there had been a transition from visits simply being days out used to reward children, to a situation where they had become central to school improvement, and how for example Ofsted inspectors had observed and commented positively on the work of Key Stage 1 pupils who had visited a farm with their cameras and clipboards, and were putting together photographs and captions from their visit to deepen their learning.

Focus on adapting a published topic approach

Not all curriculum developments were synthesised totally from the school's own resources; some could be adapted from available published materials to suit local needs. In a Lancashire school, for example, the headteacher was developing an approach to making the curriculum more accessible to her deprived children by taking a topic approach. Using a published model she asked all teachers to plan around a termly theme. In this way, teachers could also learn from each other, not only about learning and planning but also about the particular theme, knowing that appropriate resources were available. This approach meant that teachers felt less reliant solely on their own knowledge and could share ideas and resources.

As an example of such a development, the headteacher detailed a lesson based around a Swedish newspaper she had picked up in Stockholm. With a class of children she simply gave them the copies of the different pages of the paper and asked them where she had been on holiday. A full lesson of learning and analytical thinking with some good examples of teamwork followed, in which the pupils were able to deduce the city, the country, the currency and some of the highlights of the teacher's trip. Inspired by this, the pupils went on to research more about Sweden and the Swedish way of life. This approach is similar to that suggested by the Philosophy for Children (P4C) model (Lipman et al 1980) but draws on the teacher's as well as the children's interest.

In this school, curriculum planning took the form of using a 'hook'; it might be a history or science topic but then all the learning in the school would link through that topic hook to make effective deep learning more experiential. This is similar to the earlier models of topic work that were popular before the implementation of the National Curriculum, but where this curriculum planning differed was in its keen focus on developing the reading, writing and maths approaches associated with the topic in question, and the detailing planning required to cover the essential learning that was envisaged.

Focus on a play-centred approach to learning

The conceptual outputs of the Rose and Cambridge reviews and their analysis of the six areas of learning appropriate from Foundation Stage through to Year Six had been applied by a school in Surrey with a mixed population of children from varied backgrounds to create a play-centred approach to learning. The context of the school included affluent and less affluent communities, ethnic minority and traveller communities. By taking the principles of planning for Foundation Stage across the six areas of learning and developing them into other year groups, there had been a reported impact on attendance and motivation. Children were keen to experience different approaches to learning. For example, it was observed that in one upstairs corridor a tent had been erected and there were lots of twigs and leaves on the floor. "We don't have access to the outdoors from this classroom," the teacher explained, "so we brought it inside." Children were in the tent with clipboards making notes on what they would need for an overnight stay in the woods. An activity to do just that was planned for later in the term.

Generic leadership learning: 10 common themes

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

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 skills 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.

These are now considered and amplified in turn below.

1. School leaders value basic skills of numeracy and literacy

None of the school leaders interviewed in this study opposed the need for a core curriculum of numeracy and literacy, indeed, all embraced the challenge to strive continually for the highest standards for their pupils, and worked hard, prioritising raising attainment in the basic skills. Many of the schools visited were holders of the Basic Skills Quality Mark, which determines at regular intervals their commitment to high standards in the teaching and learning of numeracy and literacy with a strong emphasis on excellence in the use of information and communication technology.

However, there was less agreement on the methodologies to be employed in achieving high standards which were to be measured purely on the outcomes of Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) results. Some of the school leaders who advocated a broad and balanced, creative curriculum, argued that SATs scores did not necessarily reflect the true skills and abilities of pupils, and that it was possible to artificially inflate such scores by 'teaching to the test' or hot-housing in advance of the tests by teaching methods such as memorising word-banks of powerful phrases to include in their writing. Where teacher assessment was used to identify the abilities of individual children against agreed criteria accurately, the curriculum was much more able to tailor learning to create effective thinking and analysis, which gave pupils confidence to engage with wider challenges. Among those school leaders who held the stance that monitoring by SATs results would weed out teachers failing in competency, most agreed that SATs results would not solely in themselves do this.

While the school leaders in the sample all generally agreed that teacher assessment was more accurate than SATs for providing results for children, they also agreed that it was more difficult to administer and to monitor, and that the workload for schools was significantly more than the SATs testing model with its external marking. Headteachers did, however, welcome rigorous monitoring of teacher assessment, such as that of local authority moderation currently effective in Key Stage 1, but felt that the pressures of achieving externally imposed targets could prove difficult in an internal assessment model. School leaders agreed that giving children accurate and precise measures of their true attainment over a longer period of time, with each child's personal ownership of why and how a grade was awarded (assessment for learning), provided a much better picture of their individual ability.

There was widespread caution over suggesting that a broad and motivational curriculum in itself could automatically lead to higher literacy and numeracy test results, although all the headteachers were fully committed to raising standards of literacy and numeracy in their schools and felt that broader curriculum experiences were an important factor in achieving this.

2. School leaders insist that pupils should be motivated to achieve high standards across the board

All the school leaders in the sample agreed that children need to be motivated by exciting and dynamic activities in order to achieve their full potential. All believed that for children to learn and improve in literacy and numeracy they needed a broader approach and different way of learning than simply 'work for work's sake'. Many were concerned to motivate pupils to excel through the provision of exciting learning wherever it could be found. For example, one school applied 'writing for purpose' opportunities to conduct a school-wide debate on playground development, which they found was far more motivational and effective in engaging pupils in scripting, editing, presenting and responding than generating a piece of writing for an assessment. It was also very effective in engaging the school's governors and senior management team in providing a budget and a strategy for meeting the hitherto unnoticed need. The local press reported the pupil council's proactive and dynamic leadership, and several of the children responded with letters to the editor praising their school and their peers.

One of the recurring themes from headteacher interviews was that high standards should not be limited to academic achievement. Headteachers talked about the Standards Agenda as being the attainment of each pupil in numeracy and literacy, but they also spoke of high standards being evidenced in the manner in which young people conducted themselves in everyday life. They expected high standards of behaviour, good personal grooming and tidy dress, respect for other pupils and adults, including visitors to the school, participation in worship and/or school assemblies, and a good attitude to all learning, whether art, music, drama or more conventional academic subjects.

3. School leaders are also good managers

All the school leaders interviewed for this study stood out as being both dependable and dependent on other people, systems and structures. Headteachers who know their schools well have strong management systems to back up the day to day operation and personal effectiveness of all staff. Performance management structures tended to be seen by strong leaders as a means to set the highest standards for learners and were generally regarded as being rigorous in their usefulness to identify strengths in teaching and in supporting those who struggle. In some of the schools in this research performance management was provided in order to target weak teaching, but always with the aim to bring improvement, highlight training needs and provide structure to support school improvement at all levels. Where curriculum innovation was set out as a structured target, teachers previously struggling with behaviour management in the classroom often reported that behaviour improved with the new curriculum as children became inspired and motivated. Systemic reporting by senior leaders on such anecdotal evidence informed self-evaluation and external evaluation through inspection.

4. School leaders are good system leaders and system amenders

Rather than simply responding to government directives and external pressures as they impact on their schools, many of the school leaders interviewed have sought ways to be involved in advisory dialogue with government and external organisations in order to seek to shape national policy. Although some feel this takes them away from their fundamental purpose in directing their own schools, others actively embrace the opportunity to influence and mould national developments in order to ensure that they are influenced by the professional viewpoint of leaders who will have to implement the changes on the ground. The current government has used internet consultation to engage with consultations on curriculum content and assessment and this was welcomed by headteachers interviewed, who had valued the opportunity to offer consensus responses through professional associations as well as individual opinions.

In their responses to system initiatives such as the Rose, Williams and Cambridge reviews, headteachers showed their ability to mould such national initiatives to suit their own school contexts. They felt that the reviews all make some excellent claims and strong statements about excellent provision for learners.

However, they argued that the success of schools comes not from government reviews, reports or initiatives, but from school leaders, convinced by years of experience about what works for them and their communities, secure in their convictions, energetic in their leadership, undaunted by criticism and backed by the pupils and parents, who see generations of thinking, articulate and responsible learners enjoying the best possible education. Headteachers are also fully aware that nationally and internationally others can benefit from their expertise and they are willing to offer themselves as examples. When asked specifically about structuring a curriculum that followed government directives headteachers interviewed responded in a number of ways, from the dismissive ("I'll call it what they tell me, but we'll do it our way"), to one showing heavy involvement ("As a member of ACME [the Advisory Committee for Mathematics Education] I'm pushing to get this branch of maths into the curriculum earlier since we do it in our school in the infants"). Although differing in approaches to working with national initiatives, they still continue to enjoy autonomy and would be equally unwilling to relinquish it in the face of a national, excessively prescriptive curriculum.

Most headteachers in the study shared concerns about the quality of mathematics teaching across the profession generally, recognising that primary teachers were rarely specialist mathematicians; however, they all felt they had secured sufficient expertise in their schools to provide well for pupils of all ages. When asked specifically about the proposal of the Williams Review (2008) to provide a mathematics specialist in every school, the consensus was that the numeracy co-ordinator was already fulfilling that role, and in one school the headteacher's response was "That'll be me, then!"

Although headteachers were confident in their curriculum provision and certain of their position regarding statutory duties, they were all very interested in the reports, recommendations and possibilities for adaptation to their schools and teachers. None of the headteachers of these successful schools were static in their approach. If there was a common thread to their response to the national initiatives such as the Rose, Williams and Cambridge reviews, it was in a real hunger about how they could improve their curriculum and take the best findings to fit their own context, and make improvements that they could manage well and which would have demonstrable impact.

5. School leaders recognise that good education is cognitively challenging

The focus on skills development has been central to the creative curriculum approach that has been emerging over the last few years. Far ahead of the Rose and Cambridge reports, school leaders felt they were already exploiting some of the best ideals of curricula such as the Baccalaureate and the Early Years' Foundation Stage. They argue that children being able, not just knowledgeable, is at the root of their definition of success. In order for children to be educated, they felt, it is desirable that they can not only remember and recall information, but also process and apply principles of thinking to the challenges they encounter. Whatever the content of the curriculum might be, that it is delivered in a way that fosters these approaches is key to its success and to a real learning experience. All the headteachers were committed to making the learning experience deep and lasting through pedagogical measures that would ensure children were skilled, not just retentive, by providing cognitive challenges to permit children to think for themselves, to sort and rationalise information, and to test and practise confidently their own ideas.

In order to engage children in cognitive thought, pupil motivation must be strong. School leaders who had developed a dynamic and creative curriculum felt that that they were best situated to provide this challenge as they argued that such a curriculum gave children the opportunity to think for themselves, to work together to achieve a wide range of goals and to develop the mental skills of resilience and stamina to achieve beyond their previous best.

6. School leaders promote an ethos of equality and respect, and value the voice of the child

The 'children should be seen and not heard' mantra has given way to a concerted effort on the part of school leaders to engage with pupil voice. Provision of a creative curriculum that encourages pupil independence of thought through engagement in cognitive challenge carries with it an expectation that young people can have valuable opinions and are prepared to voice them. An example was observed in the staff room of a successful primary school where a Year Six girl sat patiently waiting for her headteacher, who was engaged in conversation with a visitor on the possibilities of his school taking on an academy status.

After some time the youngster politely interjected a point about the impact of commercialism on the children in the classroom. The visitor looked startled as the headteacher responded with further questioning and brought some counter arguments; in reality drawing the child into the debate without patronising or overriding her opinions. As the conversation grew it became apparent that the child had engaged in debate with her own and other parents from the school, her classmates and members of the school council. Entirely of her own derivation, the girl had some serious concerns about branding, marketing and 'chain school image' not only for herself and her school, but which she could also apply to the wider sphere of more challenging communities.

A child sitting in a staff room may be a contentious concept for some schools, but this particular scenario demonstrates the culture of a school where children are not segregated from the adult world, not ignored in the presence of adult conversation and not patronised when attempting to contribute. This may be seen as a positive result of providing learning opportunities beyond the classroom and conventional curriculum. It is not the suggestion of this research study that the staff room door should be open to all, but that the possibilities of adult-level dialogue with pupils can be fostered in a school culture which accepts this possibility.

7. School leaders facilitate unusual deep learning experiences for pupils

School leaders suggest that some of the best learning comes from experience outside the school classroom, and attempt to draw from this to enrich the learning experiences of their pupils. Consequently they seek to provide a wide range of extra-curricular experiences for their pupils; this often comes through an offsite visit programme or the opportunity for outside learning experiences. For example, in rural Cumbria, a school with a very small intake of pupils was enjoying outdoor playtime. The children (of mixed primary ages) had gone up a hill in the grounds and built a den out of old PE mats and other resources, which had been stored ready for dumping. The headteacher was on duty and was directing the rubbish collection, giving the children permission to use or not use the collected rubbish. At no time did he suggest what they could do with it; he saw his job as just janitorial! By the end of the day, the whole school had abandoned the last lesson and the pupils were out enjoying the den they had built. Pupils in one class had video cameras and were filming the occasion while a girl with a clipboard was writing a newspaper report. Three boys inside had a torch and were rigging up lighting while a teaching assistant decided she would join some little ones inside with a big book for story time.

Experience of reflective journaling also provides a deep learning experience for pupils even of primary age, as it permits the articulation of learning gains. In one school in the study, a Creative Partnerships inquiry project encouraged children at the end of each workshop session to record in their own way their reflections of their learning and to cite evidence of what 'went well' and what would have been 'even better' from every aspect of the project. The teachers in the project considered the children's reflections as being of the utmost importance to the success of the project since one of the main outcomes was their ability to recap and recall details of the sessions much better than they usually did in other lessons. The children reported that they particularly enjoyed the reflective sessions as they had learnt all sorts of personal ways to reflect and evaluate their experiences, from journaling to drawing and including mind maps, computer blogging and collecting magazine clippings. Two boys of massively differing academic ability worked in partnership 'interviewing one another' and were able to re-enact their interviews to create a video afterwards. The reflective logs were never meant to be marked, yet became some of the most treasured and talented samples of work those children owned.

8. School leaders have a high concern to meet future needs

School leaders are concerned to ensure that their schools are not isolated institutions but continually work in partnerships and collaboratives, sometimes formally, frequently informally, using many vehicles from personal friendships to networks and national bodies to remain 'connected' within the expanding world of educational development. City Challenge families, local clusters, Faith School conventions and so on all provide opportunities to network. By such means, school leaders can find support for their ideals, expression for their creativity, and hence the freedom to take the risk of innovation. They are able to see at first hand what works for others and what doesn't and in turn can help, guide and support others, while gleaning the best of good practice and spotting pitfalls on the way. They know, too, where to turn for help and where to get an unbiased second opinion.

They see themselves, in essence, as being within a family of school leaders where they can grow and learn themselves, without putting their schools and themselves at unnecessary risk.

They are then able to build on these networking opportunities to design appropriate and effective 'future proof' curricula containing key understanding and transferable skills, along with engendering appropriate attitudes to dealing with unknown and emerging situations.

9. School leaders are concerned with the development of others

When asked who gave them the most support in their role and the facilitation of their vision for change, school leaders all responded with positive statements about someone in their leadership team, most often the deputy headteacher. These senior leaders are often engaged in a teaching commitment as well as a senior leadership role and therefore are the first and commonly the operational lead in introducing curriculum changes and new ways of working. They are therefore well placed to advise the headteacher on workload and impact. However, distributing such leadership carries with it a concomitant obligation to ensure that it is properly supported and developed.

In distributing leadership, headteachers recognised that ownership of change is essential if that change is to be sustained and effective, and therefore they share the responsibility with emerging and established organisational leaders. Headteachers in this position are prepared to take risks and allow others to learn by trial and error to gain a greater understanding of their role as leaders of learning. Devising curriculum change is one of the most common leadership tasks that headteachers share through distributed leadership, since it is classroom based and utilises existing teacher strengths and expertise of teachers in a way that other school leadership requirements such as those relating to finance, buildings and staffing do not. Although some school leaders said that sharing responsibility for initiating and promoting curriculum development was not easy, all agreed that, when successful, emerging teacher-leaders are often the best influences on their peers and can enjoy very visible success with children and parents.

Successful distributed leadership requires an appropriate input of continuing professional development (CPD) and school leaders in this study recognised that such CPD should operate on at least two levels: development in the interests of the organisation, and for the betterment of the individual. School leaders drew on a wide range of CPD opportunities ranging from in-house coaching and mentoring relationships to nationally accredited qualifications to secure these twin developments. In addition, support from larger schools could help smaller schools by sharing ideas, cameos of working methods and practice and resources, including subject specialist staff. Equally, facilitation of collaborative planning time through simultaneous release time for planning, preparation and assessment can yield results in securing effective professional development.

10. School leaders are self-reflective and can identify generic leadership traits

All school leaders interviewed for this study could describe qualities which they felt gave them the ability to influence their staff and school community effectively in order to secure change and achieve successful curriculum development. When asked to describe how they approached teachers with the need for change and how they ensured implementation of agreed practices, they used many of the descriptive phrases below to describe how they and their senior leaders facilitated and empowered that change:

- commitment to high standards
- engagement with pupils and teachers
- approachability and at least some of the time having an open door policy
- patience
- willingness to take risks and willingness to fail
- resilience
- empathy and the ability to manage their own emotions effectively
- communication: dialogue and repetition offered willingly and clearly

- insistence and persistence
- structure, organisation, systems and simplicity; the ability to be methodical
- a commitment to putting the children first
- listening and responding to concern
- self-reflection; a knowledge of self and accurate self-evaluation of the school
- a 'coaching' approach to understanding self and enabling the development of others
- situational intelligence
- emotional and social intelligence
- open-mindedness; able to learn from others
- flexible, able to adapt, change and stop
- optimism and a real sense of enjoyment of work
- analytical and strategic in response to analysis
- able to justify ideals, plans and actions
- a sense of purpose; ability to inspire the same in others
- positive about working relationships
- a clear set of personal values, unwavering
- integrity
- authenticity

Conclusion

The above findings and the cameos of creative curriculum design previously described support a four-fold model of curriculum development involving researching, ethos-building, trialling and implementing, as identified by Brundrett and Duncan (2010). The schools studied had engaged in researching a detailed knowledge of their context and explored and drew on expertise from within and beyond the school. They were concerned to develop an ethos for evolutionary change that encouraged experimentation within a supportive environment. They had built in opportunities to trial and review small-scale curriculum innovations and to share the resultant good practice. Implementation was secured against clear timelines and accountability structures. Above all there was the establishment of

> "a culture of adult learning (which) runs alongside developments in the pupil curriculum so that the skills of leaders at all levels are increased"

(Brundrett and Duncan, 2010, 7).

Consequently, all the schools in the current research sample were found to have not only leaders considered to be 'inspirational' but also many 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 also themselves, and in many of the schools surveyed, an enthusiastic and committed group of volunteers including community groups, parents and 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 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 though 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.

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