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Research Associate Report

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A better way?

Exploring the challenge of leading curriculum change
at Key Stage 3

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Introduction

Following a period of relative stability provided by the national curriculum, rapid change is fast becoming the norm in the English secondary school system. The opportunity to make changes at Key Stage 3, in particular, is attracting a growing number of school leaders, many of whom have been inspired by the DfES pilot study as described in *A condensed Key Stage 3: Designing a flexible curriculum* (DfES, 2004). Others have been prompted by the DfES's less prescriptive approach, exemplified by the Freedom to Innovate campaign, combined with a growing dissatisfaction with the nature, scope and direction of current Key Stage 3 programmes of study. The drive towards personalisation and the urgent need to prepare the ground for greater flexibility at Key Stage 4 have made Key Stage 3 an attractive place to begin before moving on to more comprehensive curriculum change.

This study sets out to explore curriculum development in five contrasting secondary schools in order to examine the leadership issues arising from radical change at Key Stage 3. Much of the existing literature relating to curriculum change focuses on the mechanics of change; this study explores the impact of school leaders on change within these schools and considers the leadership issues they faced in reshaping Key Stage 3. In doing so, it offers readers contemplating curriculum change the opportunity to consider the leadership lessons from those who have already been on the journey.

Background

The 2001 green paper, *Schools: Building on Success*, proposed a two-year Key Stage 3 pilot. In September 2003, a trial initiated by the DfES began in 16 secondary schools and 4 middle deemed secondary schools to teach the Key Stage 3 programmes of study in two years rather than three. The project attracted a great deal of attention nationally and several other schools joined as associates. Others watched with interest and some began to consider changes independent of the project.

The aims of the project, as set out in *A condensed Key Stage 3: Designing a flexible curriculum*, were to:

- increase the pace of learning and raise standards
- enhance pupils' motivation and engagement
- improve transfer between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3
- increase curriculum flexibility through the use of saved time in Key Stage 3 and throughout the 14–19 phase

The need for increased flexibility at both Key Stages 3 and 4 has become more urgent in light of recent trends towards personalisation and the government's 14–19 agenda. Consequently, school leaders across the country are now considering radical changes to Key Stage 3, many in preparation for changes to come at Key Stage 4.

The literature

By its very nature, literature dealing with curriculum change has a tendency to date very rapidly. Much of it covers the mechanics of change and responds to the latest initiatives.

A good starting point for the purpose of this study, however, was Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution* (Williams, 1965), the conclusion of which, though written over forty years ago, still has resonance in today's rapidly changing educational environment:

"The fact about our present curriculum is that it was essentially created by the 19th century, following some 18th century models and retaining elements of the medieval curriculum near its centre."

(Williams, 1965, p 188)

Despite the arrival of the new national curriculum in 1988, for many school leaders this statement holds true and, as the world develops more and more rapidly outside of school, the pressure to reform becomes increasingly urgent.

John White's study of the aims of the national curriculum, *Rethinking the School Curriculum* (White et al, 2004), reinforces the view that, despite revisions to the 1988 blueprint, schools are growing increasingly out of touch with the world beyond the classroom. He describes schools as being "in the grip of custom" (White, 2004, p 180) and ends by suggesting a number of "general lessons for the curriculum as a whole" (ibid, p 182) which help to illuminate some of the changes undertaken by schools in this study. In particular, he mentions the need to "reverse introspection" and encourage individual subjects to look beyond themselves; he advocates "interconnectedness", suggesting that subjects need to be aware of connections across the curriculum; the "primacy of the practical" is also important, in the sense that students need to be active and independent learners; and the notion of greater student choice, beginning at Key Stage 3, is felt to be vital in order to make education more interesting and more enjoyable for all students.

In terms of the leadership of curriculum change, there are a number of useful models which allow a more structured approach to the analysis of key leadership issues. Michael Fullan's *Leading in a Culture of Change* (Fullan, 2001) offers five themes which map the change process:

1. moral purpose
2. understanding change
3. developing relationships
4. knowledge-building
5. coherence

Similarly, Kotter and Cohen (Kotter and Cohen, 2002) in *The Heart of Change* describe eight stages for successful large-scale change:

1. urgency
2. building the guiding team
3. getting the vision right
4. communication
5. removing barriers
6. short-term wins

7. keep pushing
8. making change stick

Both models provide useful paradigms for the study of the leadership of curriculum change in the schools in this report.

Methodology

The study set out to explore the complex leadership issues surrounding curriculum change, from the genesis of the idea, through the planning and development of the new curriculum, to its introduction and evaluation.

The study centred on five schools, four of which were outside the DfES condensed Key Stage 3 pilot programme, with one loosely attached as an associate. The schools were deliberately chosen from a wide contextual range – middle deemed secondary, secondary, city technology college (CTC) and grammar – in order to explore leadership issues applicable to a variety of schools with Key Stage 3 students.

Each school has embarked on a modified Key Stage 3 curriculum, some more radical than others.

- School A: an 11–18 city technology college with a comprehensive intake offering a distinctive approach in Year 7 based on the competency model. Students focus on skills designed to teach them how to learn and how to become independent learners. Five themes underpin the curriculum:
 - learning to learn
 - lifestyles and health
 - community and environment
 - communications
 - finance and enterprise

This prepares students for the remainder of the Key Stage 3 curriculum, which is delivered in Years 8 and 9.

- School B: an 11–18 rural comprehensive school with specialist arts status. In Year 7, students follow a literacy curriculum: in addition to English, all students take literacy as a separate subject, the key aim being to develop students as effective readers and communicators who will become better equipped to access the rest of the curriculum as they move up the school. Other important changes consolidate the work done in literacy, with new curriculum areas: food and fitness; art and design; and people and places. The elements of Key Stage 3 not covered in Year 7 are condensed into Years 8 and 9.
- School C: a middle deemed secondary school with a comprehensive intake, one of three middle schools feeding a large 13–18 comprehensive secondary in a county town. All students take their SATs in English, maths and science at the end of Year 8, the natural break before moving on to the upper school where a three-year Key Stage 4 is pursued.
- School D: an 11–18 rural comprehensive with specialist science status serving a small country town and its surrounding area. Students in Years 7 and 8 follow a foundation curriculum based on learning skills delivered in blocks of time or ‘zones’.
- School E: a selective rural grammar school with specialist science status serving a wide geographical area where students follow a condensed Key Stage 3 curriculum in Years 7 and 8, with SATs taken at the end of the

second year of study. This leads to a two-year Key Stage 4 and a three-year sixth form curriculum.

The research was conducted between June and October 2006 through a series of semi-structured interviews with:

- headteachers
- deputy headteachers and/or other members of the senior leadership team

These interviews followed the change process from the initial idea to a review of the new curriculum in practice. Each interview began with a discussion of the reasons for change and ended with an evaluation of the entire project. The interviews with deputies or other members of the leadership team allowed for a triangulation of the headteachers' responses.

In addition, data were collected from two other sources:

1. Informal conversations with other school leaders involved in curriculum change in the South West – these provided invaluable background confirmation of the main findings.
2. An element of linguistic analysis of school literature, including websites, prospectuses and handbooks. This was undertaken in order to explore the ways in which each of the schools chose to present its plan to parents and to the wider community.

Findings

The schools in the study were chosen from a variety of contexts and yet, a remarkable degree of consistency in terms of leadership issues emerged.

Several themes emerged from the data and these are set out under the headings below: 'Why change?' looks at the reasons for change and the concerns of school leaders; 'A better way' explores the common themes across the five schools in terms of their aims and objectives; and 'Introducing change' describes how leaders chose their teams and how they thought through the issues.

The report then goes on to consider 'Communicating the idea', which looks at the way headteachers developed their initial ideas and communicated them to staff, governors, parents and pupils. 'Getting staff on board' explores the ways leaders dealt with those resistant to change and the anxieties felt by staff. 'Developing schemes of work' deals with the practical issues surrounding the writing of the new curriculum plans, while 'Checking it's working' covers assessment and monitoring and focuses, in particular, on the headteacher's involvement in the project. This section also considers improvements in progress, behaviour and attendance, and looks at the difficulties surrounding the focus on skills underpinning many of the new schemes of work developed by the schools in this study.

Finally, 'What's next?' looks at the changes made since the initial idea and how the change culture is to be sustained.

Why change?

The responses to this question were remarkably uniform in terms of leaders expressing their dissatisfaction with the current arrangements for the delivery of Key Stage 3. Fullan's "moral purpose" (2001) was clear from the outset: leaders felt that the existing curriculum was not fulfilling their students' needs and they felt compelled to do something about it. The perceived relaxation of the curriculum, exemplified by the DfES's own research projects, added further encouragement. Moreover, developments at Key Stage 4 suggested that changes at Key Stage 3 were becoming increasingly necessary. Kotter and Cohen (2002) suggest that, in order to drive change, leaders need to create a sense of urgency; in the case of the leaders in this study, the sense of urgency was already there. To a certain extent, most of them felt that they were following the zeitgeist: the time for a revised Key Stage 3 had clearly come.

The aims and objectives underlying the various new Key Stage 3 programmes in the study undoubtedly reflect those outlined in the DfES (2004) document, *A condensed Key Stage 3: Designing a flexible curriculum*, and described above. The following issues were identified:

- **A lack of pace.** Far too many students were perceived to be drifting through the Key Stage 3 curriculum with little challenge and, in some cases, low expectations. The Year 8 dip was clearly an issue, but most headteachers were concerned about the learning gap between the end of Key Stage 2 and the start of secondary school. There was strong consensus suggesting that most students could make their way through Key Stage 3 more effectively.
- **Restriction.** The existing curriculum was felt to be too restrictive, allowing for little leeway in terms of personalisation and individual student pathways.

- **Flexibility.** Similarly, the disapplication process was considered cumbersome and not particularly helpful in allowing schools to offer programmes of study felt to be more relevant to their particular contexts. There was also a strong sense that the national curriculum was in need of an overhaul and that it was rapidly becoming irrelevant to many of the youngsters for whom it was originally designed. The pace of change in wider society was also a factor, not just changes in social mores but the challenges created by the pervasiveness of digital technology and new forms of communication.
- **More able students.** For many students of above average ability the Key Stage 3 curriculum was seen to be a limiting factor in their progress. For some it was a matter of pace, with motivated, more able students clearly capable of completing the national curriculum programmes of study in two years. For others, it was a question of not allowing space for the development of skills which would allow the most able to develop fully as independent learners.
- **Less able students.** Lower ability students were thought to be similarly frustrated, with many overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information they were expected to process and others with poor literacy skills simply unable to access large sections of the existing curriculum. The rigidity of the national curriculum was felt not to enable schools to seek more effective, local means of motivating the disaffected.
- **Key Stage 4.** Key Stage 3 was seen as poor preparation for Key Stage 4, an issue likely to become more significant as the notion of individual pathways gathers momentum. The move towards diplomas, vocational education and personalised learning was not considered consonant with such a rigid structure at Key Stage 3. For one school in the study the focus was on Key Stage 5, which was why they looked at Key Stage 3 and, again, there was concern that students were not being adequately prepared for higher levels of learning.
- **The tests.** All those interviewed had serious reservations regarding the Key Stage 3 tests and the disproportionate amount of time devoted to them. Their dominance was seen as a severe constraint on effective teaching and most school leaders, whilst bowing to the pressure of public accountability and recognising the need to drive up standards, felt that the tests exerted an undue influence on the curriculum and thus on students' learning. Most did not see a potential decline in performance in the tests, through introducing revised approaches, as an issue: "I can live with a dip in the SATs results," said one headteacher.

A better way

Most leaders felt it was time for a change and felt confident in being able to offer a more effective educational alternative to the existing curriculum. Headteachers felt strongly that it was part of their role to ensure that the offer for students was as good as it could be and all felt comfortable with the notion of a clearly defined moral purpose.

There were common themes in terms of aims and objectives for a revised Key Stage 3 across the five schools in this study:

- **Better transition.** In an era of greater collaboration between the primary and secondary sectors transition was seen as a key issue. Most leaders were concerned about the relationship between the Key Stage 2 curriculum and that at Key Stage 3. Most intended to revise the Key Stage 3 schemes of work with a much closer eye on what was happening at Key Stage 2. The middle school was undoubtedly ahead of the game in this respect – having both Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 pupils – but it is interesting to note that one of the secondary schools in the study had employed a primary specialist in order to help make transition more effective.
- **Improved pace.** All the schools studied were keen to stress the fact that the pace at Key Stage 3 would be quickened, whether students were following an accelerated course in Years 7 and 8 or beginning with a foundation year. For many leaders, issues of pace had arisen out of their self-evaluation processes – most specifically concerning the monitoring of lessons – and most were aware that many parents felt that their children should be making faster progress. There was some acknowledgement, however, that the desire to increase the pace of students' learning is perhaps a symptom of an increasingly competitive culture based on tests and public accountability.
- **Preparation for Key Stage 4 and beyond.** All leaders in this study were acutely aware of the changes on the horizon at Key Stage 4 and, indeed, at sixth form level. Most were concerned that the existing Key Stage 3 curriculum was inadequate preparation for the proposed student pathways and that students who had followed such a rigid curriculum were not appropriately equipped to make effective choices further up the school. The lack of encouragement towards independent learning was seen as a key constraint and there was concern that existing arrangements were making it increasingly difficult for students to access the curriculum as they moved up through the school. One headteacher spoke of his intention to blur the distinctions between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, "making the line dotted". A three-year Key Stage 4 was seen by some leaders as an attractive option, with the grammar school making the interesting choice of opting for a three-year sixth form. For the grammar school, a two-year Key Stage 4 was a high-risk option – especially in terms of parental concerns – and the pressure to get Key Stage 3 right was, therefore, that much more intense.
- **Better for our students.** The school leaders in the study were very conscious of the importance of context. Whilst it is clear that the solutions developed by the schools in question share many similarities, they also have differences deriving directly from their own school contexts. Leaders felt that the national curriculum did not allow them to adapt the curriculum to the needs of their particular students and one of the most attractive features of creating a school-specific curriculum was felt to be the ability to tailor it directly to the needs of their own schools. One headteacher, for example, spoke of the move from "an organisational offer to a student-based offer".
- **Innovation.** Most of the leaders were very open about the fact that they enjoyed innovation and its concomitant risks. After careful planning, there was always a point at which the headteacher decided to take the risk. One described this as "shaking the basket up" and spoke of "the need for a shot of adrenalin". This approach would seem to suggest that the predominant leadership style in this study leans towards Goleman's pace-setter (Goleman, 2000, p 82), but it was clear that innovation was not the only goal. The joy of

innovation, however, was clearly seen as an essential feature of sustainable leadership. The headteachers derived energy from the change process and many remarked on the revitalising effect on staff as a whole. This was seen as likely to have a positive effect on teaching and learning.

In addition to these common themes, interviews with senior leaders revealed a number of school-specific aims which, again, suggest that context is a key feature of curriculum change:

- **The sixth form.** One school had embarked on the change process at Key Stage 3 with its sights set firmly on extending and enriching the sixth form offer.
- **Learning to learn.** Two schools had an intense focus on encouraging students to learn the skills necessary to make their learning more effective. Stimulating greater independence was seen as an essential outcome.
- **A natural break.** The middle school was keen to give greater shape to its Year 8 curriculum, with the end of school marking the end of the Key Stage.
- **Literacy.** One school aimed to give greater prominence to improving literacy, thus allowing students to access the rest of the curriculum more effectively. The aim was to improve reading at all levels, allowing the weakest readers the time they needed to catch up and encouraging fluent readers to read with more accuracy and analytical depth.

The headteachers in this study were all very committed to the changes they had introduced and all revealed considerable confidence in embarking on what could be seen as quite radical curriculum change. For one headteacher, the confidence came partly from second headship. For all, however, the conviction that what they were doing was right for their school was a strong driver.

Introducing change

Theorising about change is all very well; putting ideas into practice is much more difficult. Fullan stresses the need to understand change and notes that “the paradox is that transformation would not be possible without accompanying messiness” (Fullan, 2001, p 31). Dealing with the accompanying messiness was one of the most significant leadership challenges faced by the leaders in this study.

Most of the headteachers worked hard to ensure they were able to take the rest of the leadership team with them – with one remarking that “the distributed leadership model is essential for this” – before moving on to convince the rest of the staff by applying this model and cascading the leadership down to middle management level and beyond. Often, it fell to other members of the leadership team to help forge a consensus for change across the school. One assistant headteacher remarked: “My job was to devolve the leadership in order to get everyone on board.” This involved giving specific tasks to those she line-managed in order to secure wider involvement and ownership.

Kotter and Cohen describe this part of the change process in terms of “building a guiding team” (Kotter and Cohen, 2002, p 2), and for the headteachers in the study this was seen as key to the success or failure of the new curriculum. Most headteachers worked closely with senior leaders in the first instance, through

individual and team meetings, before involving other members of staff. For some, the change process was relatively rapid: once the decision to change had been made it was decided to move forward as quickly as was considered practicable; for others, a great deal of planning was involved – three years in one case.

The formation of writing teams to develop new schemes of work was a vital early step, with headteachers choosing either to involve themselves directly – by writing sections themselves – or by monitoring the process very closely. One headteacher spoke of “intervention in inverse proportion to success”. It was clear, however, that all the headteachers were, in one way or another, hands-on throughout the change process and this was felt by all to be essential for success to be assured.

Considerable stress was placed on the need to think through the issues in order to “get the vision right”. “A well-functioning guiding team answers the questions required to produce a clear sense of direction” (Kotter and Cohen, 2002, p 61). For senior leaders facing increasing levels of public accountability, potentially suspicious staff, governors and parents, the need to ensure that the whole idea had been thought through was vital – a point repeatedly stressed during the course of many of the interviews. The impact on students was often exhaustively discussed at leadership team meetings, and many of the practical issues, such as timetabling concerns, were rehearsed or modelled before launching the project to a wider audience. Most leaders were aware that staff, as one deputy put it, “would go straight for the detail”, examining immediately the impact of the new curriculum on their own subject areas. Leadership teams needed to be ready to answer the practical questions; a sound vision was felt not to be enough.

The headteachers all felt confident in dealing with timetabling issues and one of the interesting features of the research was the fact that all the headteachers interviewed were former curriculum deputies.

It is interesting to note that, although all the leaders interviewed were anxious to get the details of the new Key Stage 3 curriculum right, some were happy to face the issues presented by Key Stage 4 when they had to. To some extent, this is a feature of the pace of change in secondary education today. Planning for Key Stage 4 was seen to be difficult two or three years in advance because changes were coming thick and fast and there was no real possibility of predicting accurately what the Key Stage 4 curriculum would look like in the future. The grammar school, with its focus on an academic rather than a vocational offer, was able to plan with more certainty. but those schools looking towards more significant change around the new diplomas were forced to adopt a more sanguine approach: “Let’s deal with Key Stage 3 now and work on Key Stage 4 when we know more about it.” This is one response to Gleick’s question: “How do you lead in a culture such as ours which seems to specialize in pell-mell innovation?” (Fullan, 2001, p 1, quoting Gleick).

Communicating the idea

Once the impetus for change had been established and the details explored in depth in the safe confines of the leadership team, the idea needed to be further developed and then opened up to wider scrutiny. The development stage was seen by the leaders involved in the study as perhaps the most exciting and, in many ways, the most challenging part of the whole process. Ideas are inevitably refined as they develop, but there comes a point when any thesis must be tested. The launch of the various new curriculum plans to the staff, and then subsequently to governors and parents, was seen as a daunting and at the same time energising prospect. When describing the communication of the vision and strategies, Kotter and Cohen talk of

“simple, heartfelt messages sent through many unclogged channels” and emphasise the fact that “deeds are often more important than words” (Kotter and Cohen, 2002, p 4). The leaders were well aware that their convictions were about to be tested.

One headteacher spoke of a tipping point: “Things began to change when it became inevitable that we were going to do it.” The conviction of the headteacher was seen as vital in terms of holding the line and pushing change through. Inertia is a powerful force and needs to be tackled head-on. In many cases, staff didn’t need too much convincing of the need for change, but they needed to see that the leadership team was committed and determined.

In some cases, it was clear that things were in danger of being rushed and time-scales were altered accordingly. One headteacher delayed the project by a year; another allowed the idea to develop over three years. Others pressed on straightaway, worried that any delay would mean that plans would be suspended and the momentum lost. All leaders were well aware, however, that a sense of urgency was vital if their ideas were to come to fruition. There is a fine balance here: leaders must present their ideas and allow time for reflection, but they must also judge when the time is right to press on.

Getting the whole staff on board is, of course, essential and it undoubtedly takes skilled leadership to ensure that the task is accomplished. Without the support – indeed, the whole-hearted commitment – of the staff, systemic change is likely to fail. As Fullan points out when emphasising the importance of effective relationships in organisations: “The role of the leadership... is to ‘cause’ greater capacity in the organization in order to get better results (learning)” (Fullan, 2001, p 65). In presenting a new curriculum to staff, the conviction of the headteacher was put to the test.

Interestingly, consultation with the wider audience of parents, governors and students was seen as less challenging. The role of governors as critical friends was acknowledged, but headteachers felt confident of their support. In addition, key governors were often involved in the initial discussions and most of the leaders in the study had discussed curriculum development in some detail at the various governors’ committees. Public accountability was always the issue for governors but headteachers felt able to deal with this once the support of the staff had been secured. Governors’ confidence in the leadership team was also a strong factor and the leaders involved here were clearly effective professionals trusted by their governing bodies.

Most headteachers felt that parents would be happy to accept the new curriculum provided it was introduced professionally and effectively. Whilst some discussed their ideas with parental focus groups, or with the Parent–Teacher Association (PTA), most tended to play down their innovations in case their ideas were seen as too radical and thus not in the best interests of the school. One interviewee highlighted the fact that parents of secondary school pupils are often somewhat distanced from the development of school policy and consequently seem to place a considerable degree of trust in the headteacher and the leadership team. There is not the same degree of contact as in primary schools, where parents at the gate often provide a useful testing ground for new ideas.

Only when things go wrong in secondary schools does the situation change, with parental involvement taking the form of direct complaints about specific issues. Surprisingly, given the radical nature of some of the reforms introduced in the schools described above, there was very little evidence of parental concerns being

expressed. One assistant headteacher summed up the situation thus: “As long as we didn’t touch literacy and numeracy, parents didn’t mind what we did to the rest of the curriculum.” In schools where literacy and numeracy were the key focus areas, they were seen by parents as being enhanced and support was therefore enthusiastic.

The most positive reactions often came from the students themselves. Those leaders who took their ideas to their school councils often found enthusiastic support for curriculum change. The only negative reactions described centred on the fact that council members would not benefit from the changes themselves as they were often too far up the school.

Given that schools inhabit a culture where self-promotion is important, one would expect that leaders would wish to promote their new ideas as widely as possible. In the business world, innovative practice is generally seen as positive and progressive, and often linked to quality. An interesting paradox emerged: radical change resulted in understated literature. Headteachers were keen to share their ideas with colleagues from other schools – and all of the schools described here had hosted numerous visits by other interested school leaders – as well as with external agencies such as the DfES, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. However, all were wary of presenting themselves to parents as innovators. The general feeling was that parents strongly support the status quo, which they align with standards, and are thus suspicious of change. In a culture of almost constant educational change, they don’t want their children to be guinea pigs. Therefore, the leaders felt they had to pull off the clever trick of introducing fairly radical ideas into the curriculum without alarming parents. Improving standards resulting from curriculum developments would therefore be seen as evidence of firm, unwavering leadership rather than innovation.

A brief linguistic analysis of the literature sent out to parents – whether in newsletters, prospectuses or in website comments – confirms this idea. Simple, factual statements are favoured. For example, one prospectus entry reads:

“Students complete Key Stage 3 in two years. The GCSE programme extends over the usual two-year period. Students commence AS and A2 in Year 11 and complete Advanced Study over a three-year period.”

The simplicity of the language is quite striking and clearly meant to be reassuring. The use of the word “usual” stresses the commonplace and the repetition of “complete” emphasises the fact that students will indeed finish the course.

Another prospectus includes reference to an innovative curriculum but it is presented in the very positive setting of an Ofsted inspection quotation commenting on the school’s practice:

“There is an innovative curriculum and the richly diverse range of lunchtime and after-school activities enhance it well.”

The phrase is well chosen in that it acknowledges the new curriculum but attention is quickly diverted to the “diverse range of lunchtime and after-school activities”. Later, the prospectus is keen to point out in the curriculum section that “in Years 7, 8 and 9, or Key Stage 3, our curriculum complies with the government’s legal requirements for a broad and balanced ‘national curriculum’.”

One school, however, was more assertive about its curriculum and the word innovative is certainly stressed:

“We have taken the innovative step of replacing the national curriculum with our own Competency Curriculum.”

This is quickly qualified, however, by more reassuring language:

“It is our view that students will be better equipped to meet the challenge of KS3, GCSE, AS and A2 as well as higher education as a result of this introduction to our learning programme.”

Parents who might be cautious of words such as “innovative” and “replacing” would likely be reassured by the comforting list of recognisable qualifications.

Most leaders were open about the fact that they tended to play down the changes. One remarked: “I was telling parents about the accelerated curriculum but I kept it low profile. I was aware that we were open to the accusation of hot-housing, so we looked for words which were different to acceleration.” Another said: “I hoped the parents would trust us; in the end they did.”

In virtually all cases, whether there is reference to the new curriculum or not – and two schools barely mention it in their literature or on their websites – the main aim seems to be to play it down. Leaders were aware that some reference needs to be made but they did not feel the need to justify it in any depth. Papers presented to staff and governors, however, all clearly identified aims and objectives, often in quite exhaustive, supporting detail.

Getting staff on board

Inevitably, there will be some resistance to change and this is most likely to come from the teaching staff, especially those who will be expected to plan and deliver the changes. No matter how thorough the planning, or how convincing the leadership team, leaders recognised that universal support is unlikely. Headteachers were acutely aware of the range and degree of support they were likely to encounter when introducing radical ideas. Interviews alluded to the fact that in any institution there will be those who delight in innovation, those who need some persuasion and those who naturally resist change. Effective leaders are able to anticipate and deal with resistance without losing sight of their goals.

Kotter and Cohen offer a concise summary of the most common responses faced by leaders in this study:

“When we communicate about a large-scale change, common responses are: ‘I don’t see why we need to change that much,’ ‘They don’t know what they’re doing,’ ‘We’ll never be able to pull this off,’ ‘Are these guys serious or is this part of some more complicated game I don’t understand?’... and ‘Good heavens what will happen to me?’”

(Kotter and Cohen, 2002, p 84)

These are exactly the kind of comments described in the interviews on which this study is based. There were individuals in all of the schools in question who were initially very suspicious of the leadership team’s plans, those who felt that the headteacher had a hidden agenda, teachers who were worried that the new plans were misguided and those who were concerned about the impact on themselves.

Such unrest, however minor, could not be ignored:

“In successful change efforts, a guiding team doesn’t argue with this reality, declaring it unfair or illogical. They simply find ways to deal with it.”

(Kotter and Cohen, 2002, p 84)

Of course, leaders might value this kind of opposition, using it as a check to ensure that they are on the right lines. Schools with flatter management structures, or where distributed leadership is strong, might often have a tradition of encouraging dissent. Some headteachers might actively recruit staff to challenge them:

“By supporting the like-minded, leaders trade off early smoothness for later grief. If you include and value naysayers, noise in the early stages will yield later, greater implementation.”

(Fullan, 2001, p 75)

The key skills for leaders here centre around what Fullan calls “knowledge-building” and Kotter and Cohen “communication for buy-in”. Acknowledging and addressing concerns is the first step; talking them through in sufficient detail is the next.

In staff meetings, headteachers worked hard to ensure that staff felt they could have their say and that their concerns would be listened to. Some felt, however, that the case for change was so strong that very little opposition could be expected. One assistant headteacher described the positive impact made by the headteacher when he turned concern about the new curriculum on its head by declaring: “If anyone can think of a reason to keep Key Stage 3 as it is, come and see me.”

Headteachers spoke of a range of concerns expressed by staff which fell into the following categories:

- A lack of knowledge: some felt the plans lacked detail and that they weren’t given sufficient information to make a considered judgement.
- Workload: there was an understandable suspicion that the headteacher’s new idea would mean lots of work for the foot-soldiers.
- Accountability: in a culture where all staff are acutely aware that standards must be maintained, some were hesitant in case the curriculum changes impacted on their ability to achieve good grades.
- Protectiveness: some subject areas were worried that their subjects would be sidelined or lose status. In some cases, there was genuine concern that subjects might disappear altogether, and this inevitably led to fears of job losses.
- Comfort: some staff were happy as they were and did not want to be forced out of their comfort zones.
- Insecurity: others felt they did not have the appropriate skills to deliver aspects of the new curriculum.

Most leaders expressed frustration with staff who “just didn’t get it”, no matter how much discussion took place. This was especially the case when great efforts had been made to anticipate the kinds of questions that would be asked and the worries

expressed. One deputy headteacher spoke of “black-cap thinking” when describing the amount of time spent by the senior leadership team working through worst-case scenarios and possible pitfalls.

Some headteachers felt they should have allowed more time for talking; all were convinced that the most effective means of winning over the naysayers was by providing them with the details. The least opposition occurred in those schools where staff felt that the whole thing had been thought through thoroughly.

All leaders interviewed were sympathetic to the anxieties of staff – and some shared those anxieties themselves. The goal of improving the system for the students was never lost sight of, however, and, once reassured, most staff were happy to get on board provided there was sufficient support. This could take the form of INSET time or training, or simple encouragement by the leadership team.

The school leaders reflected on the need for some staff, however, to be directed to take part and even the most consultative leaders in this study were not afraid to confront opposition when it became clear that talking had not worked: “Be supportive, that’s your job,” said one headteacher to a teacher in his school. “You can sit out year one, but you’ll need to be involved next year.” He offered two options: “Adapt and adopt or move on – a hard message alongside a lot of discussion.”

Developing schemes of work

There was concern amongst leaders that an idea can be discussed in so much detail that a sense of inertia builds up around it. At some point, there has to be action. Judging the right time to move forward is another decision to test the leadership skills of the guiding team. Leaders were aware that moving from a general outline, which expresses the initial vision, to the sort of detail necessary to be able to teach a new curriculum in classes across the school requires considerable momentum.

None of the leaders in the study were oblivious to the fact that curriculum change necessitates a huge amount of work; it was not simply a matter of saying “let’s do it” and expecting it to happen. Planning a single lesson can be quite a daunting undertaking; planning a new course is a major piece of work. Moreover, all were aware that they must be involved throughout, if only to deflect the criticism that the leadership team is full of good ideas but they don’t get their hands dirty when it comes to the real work. The headteachers were so committed to their ideas that they needed little encouragement in order to get involved.

Setting up the writing teams for the new schemes of work in the schools was an important task because, in many ways, the success of the whole project depended on the integrity of the new courses. In some schools the writing teams were subject departments, in others groups of teachers drawn from across a range of curriculum areas. Although a potentially long and demanding process, the early work of the writers tended to galvanise the various projects and gave them an infectious momentum that often spread to the majority of the staff. Early drafts of the new schemes were usually circulated to others, producing what Kotter and Cohen describe as “quick wins”:

“These short-term wins are essential, serving four important purposes:

1. Wins provide feedback to change leaders about the validity of their visions and strategies.

2. Wins give those working hard to achieve a vision a pat on the back, an emotional uplift.
3. Wins build faith in the effort, attracting those who are not yet actively helping.
4. Wins take power away from cynics.”

(Kotter and Cohen, 2002, p 127)

As the new schemes of work began to take shape, headteachers were able to see whether their ideas would really work in the classroom. One of the headteachers actually wrote a substantial part of one of the schemes of work himself in order to explore personally the details of the original vision. This had the knock-on effect of reassuring staff that the headteacher would be fully involved and, although seemingly a minor point, the fact that the headteacher had provided the template and a model was seen as incredibly helpful. Staff were able to take the model and adapt it for their own subject areas and specialisms; “It acted as a kind of kick-start,” said the headteacher in question.

The appearance of the first few schemes certainly boosted the confidence of the leadership team and the subject leaders involved, giving them the enthusiasm to carry on and finish the job. Others not directly involved became caught up in the projects and a clear sense of unity amongst the staff was reported by all the leaders involved. Kotter and Cohen’s final assertion that “wins take power away from cynics” certainly proved to be the case as the naysayers began to find themselves increasingly isolated and thus anxious to join in.

Most of the headteachers were delighted by the quality of the work produced:

“I was reassured by the schemes of work. There was clearly a good balance in the writing due to the quality of the people involved. There was some deep pedagogical thinking. Most seem to understand the reasons behind the idea.”

At this stage, the focus moved away from the initial vision to the work being done at departmental level: “All development was now bottom-up,” said one assistant headteacher.

Another impressive feature of this planning stage was the co-operation across the school. The radical nature of the changes proposed often called for staff to work in cross-curricular teams, or, indeed, across phases. In one school, where new subject areas were created – art was linked with design; physical education with food and nutrition; geography with religious studies and history etc – staff felt that one of the most positive effects of the new curriculum was the opportunity to work with a much wider range of colleagues than was usually the case. This cross-fertilization was seen as remarkably empowering.

Schools drawing on the expertise of colleagues in different phases found that this offered a refreshing new perspective and emphasised the interconnectedness of the new curriculum, something which most felt lacking before.

The school acting as an associate to the DfES pilot scheme was able to use the exemplar material provided and this added another layer of confidence for the staff involved. Many of the most interesting debates reported from the planning stages revolved around what could be left out of Key Stage 3.

Ironically, the middle school writing teams were concerned that by condensing the Key Stage 3 programmes of study into two years there would be more teaching to

the tests, something which the other schools were trying to get away from with their new curriculum plans. The freedom gain would be seen in the upper school and this was perhaps a difficulty for some teachers who wouldn't get to experience the benefits of the work they were doing.

All the schools studied noted the amount of repetition that takes place both across the Key Stages and within Key Stage 3 particularly. Leadership team members often commented on the liberating feeling of being able to remove some of this repetitiveness and thus produce more coherent pathways for students. All felt that the Key Stage 2–3 break is an artificial divide that needs further exploration.

One of the key questions to emerge during the writing of the schemes of work was the notion of challenge. Those schools condensing three years into two were conscious that an accelerated curriculum could be very demanding on some students and a great deal of thought went into addressing this issue. Sometimes, however, the question was: "Are we being challenging enough?" As one headteacher put it: "Acceleration is not just about doing things faster."

Most leaders were acutely aware of the need to allow time for proper development work: managing significant change requires a good understanding of just how much work is involved. Although most teachers clearly enjoyed the challenge of the various projects, they were worried that they would not be given enough time to do a good job. There was a feeling in the interviews that the culture in teaching often leans towards neglect: "I'm sure you'll find time: you always do." This, the headteachers acknowledged, can lead to disaffection and resentment. Frequently, headteachers were keen to stress that they put a considerable amount of money into training and all were anxious to ensure that staff had the appropriate amount of time to plan. Inevitably, they were conscious that there is never enough time – and this was particularly felt in those schools which moved quickly to full implementation – but the fact that the leadership team was clearly aware of the training needs of staff made a difference. Most teachers were then prepared to go the extra mile if they felt that the demands on their time were not unreasonable.

Above all, leaders commented on the enthusiasm created by so much collaborative activity. Collective enthusiasm led to collective working.

Two headteachers also identified an interesting feature of the change process in relation to staff reactions to the new curricula: many saw change orchestrated from within the school as much more positive than externally imposed change. Teachers and leaders are so used to what Robert Hill calls "the treadmill of change" that innovations from the top are generally treated with considerable scepticism. "So school leaders – as leaders in other public services – know they have to be adept at understanding, filtering and managing change," (Hill, 2006, p 55). In the change scenarios described in this study, however, the fact that they were not government-driven was seen as a huge bonus. Staff enjoyed working with the leadership teams to do something for themselves, to get it right for their students in their schools.

Checking it's working

Of course, there was universal concern to ensure that the new programmes of study were effective. One of the strongest barriers to change is the fear that the new idea may not actually work. The schools, however, all expressed the conviction that there were so many reasons to change that change had become a given as opposed to a risk.

An issue that needed careful consideration was the need to make sense of the changes at Key Stage 3, and each school's particular curriculum model, against a background of widespread change across the school. As Fullan (2001, p 109) puts it:

"In schools, for example, the main problem is not the absence of innovations but the presence of too many disconnected, episodic, piecemeal, superficially adorned projects... Schools are suffering the additional burden of having a torrent of unwanted, uncoordinated policies and innovations raining down on them from hierarchical bureaucracies."

It becomes the job of the leadership team to work as "coherence-makers", helping to make sense of the change processes and ensuring that the school stays focused.

Each leadership team worked hard to ensure that effective methods for evaluating the success or failure of their projects were in place and, as in other aspects, there were clear patterns across all the schools. The evaluation methods used can be divided, in the words of one headteacher, into "soft and hard indicators". The hard indicators tended to draw on examination results and tests; the soft on less tangible evidence such as staff morale and student support.

Modern leaders have to be adept at handling data and all leaders in this study had thought carefully about how they might measure the success of their innovations in statistical terms. Fullan talks about the fact that "assessment literacy is crucial":

"In sum, through focusing on outcomes (what students are learning), assessment literacy is a powerful coherence-maker. Focusing on outcomes clarifies for teachers and principals what they are trying to accomplish and drives backward through the process towards moral purpose. It helps schools produce more coherent action plans."

(Fullan, 2001, p 117)

The hard indicators discussed by members of the senior leadership team included:

- Key Stage 3 test results – though many leaders expressed a considerable lack of confidence in the tests and were not particularly concerned if they indicated a slight decline in performance as a consequence of implementation.
- Teacher assessments – many leaders felt that these gave a more accurate indication of pupil progress and offered a simple way of tracking progress across the year.
- Attendance data – if the new programme was working then it should be more attractive to students and therefore more likely to encourage them to attend school. Those schools into the second year of the new curriculum noted improved attendance rates with considerable pleasure.
- Behaviour referral data – exclusions and other measurable behaviour records such as detentions and de-merits. Again, schools in their second year noted improved behaviour and, in one school, very significant gains in this area.
- Reading tests – either comparing the performance of students following the new Key Stage 3 curriculum with those the year before following the

traditional national curriculum, or in-year tests designed to measure reading gains across the year.

The soft indicators included the following:

- Informal surveys of staff – how were teachers reacting to the new curriculum and how did they feel that students were responding?
- Student voice – in most of the schools, students were asked to give their views, either via the school council or through surveys and questionnaires. In one institution, the school council worked with a local authority adviser, conducting a series of interviews at the beginning of the year to measure pupils' responses to questions about their reading habits, and another set at the end of the year to see if their answers were more positive.
- Parental response – either through questionnaires or informal conversations.
- Governor response – with governors visiting lessons to observe the new curriculum in action.
- Lesson observations – monitoring of teaching and learning enabled headteachers and members of the senior leadership team to ensure that standards were high and rising. In one school, which uses a particularly sophisticated system of graded lesson observations, this data would be considered to be a hard indicator.

A number of schools were keen to involve external agencies or advisers in order to obtain a more objective view of the changes introduced. These ranged from local authority advisers to national organisations such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), NCSL and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust. Headteachers also noted that visitors attracted to the school out of interest often provided invaluable support by adding another point of view from outside of the institution.

For many leaders, the monitoring function became a key ingredient for ensuring the success of the change project and most were keen to elaborate on their role in overseeing and guiding the process in their interviews. Peter Senge, in *The Dance of Change*, neatly encapsulates the strategies discussed:

- “Appreciate the time delays that are involved in profound change.
- Build partnerships with... leaders around assessing the assessment processes.
- Learn to appreciate progress as it occurs.
- Make assessment, and developing new abilities to assess, a priority among advocates of change.”

(Senge, 1999, pp 287–289)

One area identified by a number of headteachers as a difficulty, both in terms of monitoring and consistency, was the skills element of the new programmes of study. As is clear from the brief outlines at the start of this report, many of the new curriculum plans have a particular focus on developing learning skills, in addition to the new curriculum content. These skills covered competencies, thinking skills and features of learning to learn. Although staff had clearly worked hard in many cases to ensure that the appropriate skills were written into the new schemes of work, it

became clear that many teachers are still “wedded to content”, as one deputy put it. Asking staff to change the content of their teaching turned out to be much more straightforward than asking them to focus on particular skills.

The shift in thinking required to move from a content-driven curriculum to one which is skills-based was acknowledged to be significant and this is certainly one area where leadership teams may have underestimated the complexity of the task. Teachers were being asked to approach lessons sometimes in a radically different way in order to encourage the use of particular skills and it became clear that this amounted to quite a significant culture shift. In practice, the skills tended to get neglected in favour of the new content, and though teaching was still nevertheless considered good – in the context of the schools’ regular lesson observations – it was not observably different. A number of headteachers highlighted the teaching of skills as an area for further development as the new schemes of work became embedded.

This specific difficulty illustrates the importance of the need for the leadership team to ensure that it remains fully involved throughout the change process. A dramatic push at the start was not considered enough and there was a real danger of many of the new ideas being lost in a drift back towards more traditional, and perhaps more comfortable, former practices. The headteacher’s involvement in particular was vital for the momentum to be sustained and most leadership teams saw the headteacher as a key feature of the potential success of the project. As one headteacher put it: “Really innovative schools are the ones where the headteachers are hands-on.”

What’s next?

A project such as a new curriculum cannot be introduced and then forgotten; there is a clear imperative for further development:

“In successful situations, people build on this momentum to make a vision a reality by keeping urgency up and a feeling of false pride down; by eliminating unnecessary, exhausting, and demoralizing work; and by not declaring victory prematurely.”

(Kotter and Cohen, 2002, p 143)

In other words, don’t let up.

Headteachers were clearly aware both of things that were not quite right and things that needed to be done to take the learning to the next stage of development. In addition to the difficulties described above surrounding the introduction of new skills, there were a number of areas that headteachers felt needed further work:

- Pace and challenge – either a lack of challenge or, in some cases, too much. It was clearly important to get this right for the pupils concerned to ensure that effective progress could be made. Most headteachers were anxious to ensure that they were stretching the most able and supporting the least able, and most felt that there were still things to be done in this area.
- Elements of the curriculum – some parts of the new curriculum worked, others did not.
- Literacy and numeracy – were they getting the basics right?
- Assessment – was the new curriculum being properly assessed?
- Progression – are the progression routes clear and appropriate?
- Inconsistency – the danger of slipping back to what had been left behind.
- Resources – in some cases, resourcing issues had been underestimated and there was clearly a need to provide more.

These concerns are reflected in Ofsted's *Evaluation of the two-year Key Stage 3 project*:

“Less successful features included:

- Too little opportunity for a significant minority of pupils to consolidate or practise what they were learning.
- Lessons with too little talk from, or active learning by, pupils because teachers tried to cover content too rapidly.
- Assessment that was too slow to match the different rates of learning.”
(Ofsted, 2006, p 1)

In more general terms, the key development priorities identified by leaders in this study were:

- Changes to schemes of work.
- Plans for changes in other years: those schools with new Year 7 curricula were now focusing on the impact of the changes on Years 7 and 8; those with a condensed two-year Key Stage 3 were looking at Years 9 to 11; and so on.
- The relationship between the school's new curriculum and externally imposed changes already in the pipeline, for example, specialist diplomas.

Above all, leaders were keen to ensure that they were able to sustain the change culture in order to bring about further improvements.

Implications for others

It is clear from the findings that leadership played a key role in successful curriculum change. Strong leadership from the headteacher was essential if a project as fundamental to the life and future of the school as a new curriculum was to succeed. However, all the headteachers interviewed were aware of the importance of a strong leadership team capable of distributing tasks across the school.

Similarly, members of the leadership teams spoke of the need to ensure that middle leaders were supportive of the changes and fully in sympathy with the overall vision. In some respects, it is fair to say that it is the middle leaders who end up with the bulk of the work: it is they who write the schemes of work; they who monitor lessons; and they who actually do the teaching. Their accountability is also very high in that they have to deal with colleagues on a day-to-day basis asking questions about the practical application of what they perceive to be the headteacher's grand plan.

At the other end of the spectrum, headteachers need to be assured of support from governors. Though the headteachers were clearly very experienced and, therefore, were able to benefit from considerable professional freedom in terms of their relationships with their governing bodies, all were aware that it is ultimately the governors who are responsible if things go wrong.

The ultimate conclusion is that commitment at all levels is essential: pupils, teachers, middle leaders, the senior leadership team and governors.

Common strands were noticeable in the schools studied and these may be of use to others contemplating curriculum change, both at Key Stage 3 and beyond.

Moral purpose

- All the leaders felt that curriculum innovation was likely to lead to improved pupil progress, not just because of the effects of the changes themselves but due to the revitalising effect of the changes on teachers and pupils. This effect was summed up by one of the assistant headteachers who said that staff saw the new plans as “an amazing opportunity... not stressful, a challenge”.
- Leaders were clearly prepared to take risks if they feel that what they are doing is right and in the best interests of the pupils in their schools. They were also prepared to risk not looking too far ahead.
- The schools in the study have all attracted a significant number of visitors, suggesting that interest in the reform of Key Stage 3 is strong. The high degree of interest also serves to boost leaders’ confidence, helping them feel that what they are doing is right.
- Fear and anxiety needs to be considered and planned for. “Providing a sense of security about expectations was a key factor in persuading people,” said one headteacher.
- Headteachers need to have the confidence to deal with resistance – “adapt and adopt or move on.” (Headteacher)
- Based on the evidence of the schools in the study, leadership teams get stronger; teaching staff teams feel closer.
- Having a greater moral purpose can divert the mind from day-to-day trivialities and make the job of teaching seem, once more, significant and rewarding.
- The inevitability of change was identified as one of the most powerful levers in convincing staff that it was time to rewrite Key Stage 3.

Ownership

- Creating a sense of ownership of the new curriculum for all staff is vital: teachers and heads of department need to be empowered virtually to take over the project and make it their own. Once the initial vision has been established development from the bottom-up is vital to its success.
- Innovation must be bottom-up as well as top-down.

Collaboration

- Collaboration and sharing is an important message: lots of schools are working in similar ways but in isolation. The schools in this study worked largely independently and yet they followed very similar paths.
- Working with primary feeder schools is really important, ensuring that the new curriculum is coherent and relevant to what has gone before. In most cases, leaders were able to remove significant repetition between Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. It is also important, of course, for colleagues at Key Stage 2 to

be aware of where their pupils are heading if they are to prepare them appropriately.

Self-evaluation

- Monitoring and assessment is essential both in order to check that the new curriculum is working and to ensure a coherent approach across the school.
- Targets for improvement need to be reasonable and achievable.
- None of the headteachers here thought that the Key Stage 3 tests were a significant issue and all were prepared to accept, as a potential consequence, a slight fall in results.

Managing implementation

- The involvement of the headteacher and members of the senior leadership team in the delivery of the courses was seen to be important.
- There should be a strong focus on skills: these can easily drop out of schemes of work in favour of content. That's the culture teachers are used to.
- Resourcing issues should not be underestimated. Curriculum change has a significant impact on all subject areas, demanding a huge range of new texts and materials. Similarly, staff training is potentially a significant draw on the budget. Staff need to be given time to work through the vision in the early stages, and later the time to write the new schemes of work.

Conclusion

Finally, there are two key ideas emerging from this study which anyone contemplating curriculum change should bear in mind.

Firstly, despite the similarities across the schools considered here, one of the most important things to consider is the local context. One headteacher summed it up very clearly:

“Curriculum change must be contextual: you can’t impose another school’s model but the principles are the same.”

Secondly, the excitement generated by innovative practice is a powerful school improvement mechanism. All the leaders commented on the rise in their energy levels and many noted the positive atmosphere created right across the school. The excitement of teams of teachers striving for something better for their school was felt to be almost tangible and, of course, hugely beneficial to the pupils in their classes.

In *Leadership that Lasts* (Hill, 2006), ten principles of school leadership are identified which are thought to be essential if leaders are to continue developing. This study suggests that number eight, which states that sustainable school leaders renew themselves, (Hill, 2006, p 79), is perhaps one of the most important and powerful features of leadership today. The excitement of conceiving a new idea and then generating enough enthusiasm to see it realised seems to give schools and their leaders a significant and long-lasting positive charge which surely must be to the benefit of teaching and learning in schools.

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