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Research Associate Report

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Lifting the lid on the creative curriculum

How leaders have released creativity in their schools
through curriculum ownership

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Context: the box

Many schools perceive the existing primary curriculum to be increasingly confined by too much content and not enough freedom (Waters 2006).

The seminal report *All Our Futures* (DfES 1999: 2) argues that to meet the challenges of the 21st century there is a need to nurture a creative curriculum that “develops young people’s capacities for original ideas and action”. Robert Fisher’s article in the *TES* (7 March 2003: 30) goes even further: “... schools with the most imaginative and creative approach to the curriculum tend to get both the best results and inspection reports”. No wonder ‘creativity’ is on the learning agenda. The strategy for primary schools has started to redress this and schools now have the freedom to be more creative in curriculum design.

But what is ‘creativity’? For some it might conjure up images of chaos and confusion in the classroom, perhaps based on a concern that ‘lifting the lid’ on creativity will let out all sorts of problems. For others ‘creativity’ might be a simple question of squeezing in more of the arts into an already crowded curriculum. At the start of this research into ‘leading creativity’ I felt it was essential to have an understanding of what ‘creativity’ actually is.

A review of the field

There has been much work recently on creativity. It can be seen as something of a buzzword and as such has become open to all sorts of debate and discussion. I felt it important as the first part of my research to gain an overview of what creativity in an educational context actually is. To do this I included the following:

- A review of recommended books and articles on creativity, including recent QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) (2003) and NCSL (National College for School Leadership) (2005) materials.
- Interviews with some leading thinkers in the field, for example, Guy Claxton (University of Bristol), Peter Dixon (retired lecturer, poet and educationalist) and Richard Dunning (head of the Institute for Creativity).
- Discussions of definitions of creativity with colleagues locally and nationally both in person and through NCSL's talk2learn (formerly think.com).
- Attendance at a Creative Partnerships conference in London (2006).

A summary of these provided me with a working definition of creativity in learning and the curriculum.

Creativity is about:

- *connecting*: seeing relationships and combining in new ways
- *risking*: having the self-confidence and freedom to fail and keep trying
- *envisaging*: being original and imaginative about what might be
- *analysing*: asking critical and challenging questions
- *thinking*: taking time for reflection and soft thinking
- *interacting*: sharing ideas and collaborating
- *varying*: testing options and trying in different ways
- *elaborating*: exploring and fiddling and doing the unnecessary with love!

Creativity is seen not merely as a bolt on to the curriculum but as central to the whole process.

“Creativity is not just art or music, something else to tick off in our plans for Tuesday afternoon. It is not even an ingredient to add to the curriculum diet but the inspiration and motivation integral to the process of learning. In fact it is the underpinning and expression of true learning.” (Peter Dixon, verbal quote provided in interview, 2006)

The relatively new emphasis on ‘learning to learn’ has creativity at its heart. Guy Claxton (2002: 5) states, “Creativity helps to equip young people with the skills, ability, confidence and attitudes to enable them to work imaginatively, to transfer and apply new knowledge in different contexts and work towards new and valuable goals”. Cropley (2001: 45) shows how a creative approach to learning “will encourage a fascination for task, risk taking, a preference for complexity, a willingness to ask many questions and a desire to display results, consult others and go beyond the conventional”. This broad and inclusive definition resonates with the recent findings by Creative Partnerships (2005: 2), who conclude that creativity “encourages critical and reflective thinking and produces excited, enthusiastic, enquiry driven learners”. This is the purpose and power of creativity and why some of our best schools have encouraged this creative approach that they claim is the reason for their success. The 32 schools that informed *Excellence and Enjoyment* all demonstrated that high standards and a rich curriculum went hand in hand.

Having been involved in some of the national creativity initiatives and as the deputy of a school with a curriculum recognised as innovative and creative, I was eager to

research this area further, and to see if creativity was indeed the way to lift the lid of learning in these schools. I set out to establish:

- what a selection of creative curricula looked like
- what leaders had done to introduce these
- how a culture of creativity is sustained.

Methods: lifting the lid

Having established a working definition of creativity, I then went on to see what creativity looked like in the four selected schools for my case studies. This gave me a context for creativity. The schools were chosen carefully, looking at different phases, local authorities and curriculum models to give both balance and variety. All had received very favourable Ofsted reports in which their broad and creative curricula had been celebrated.

I chose a qualitative research model to gain a detailed and holistic picture in a natural setting, an approach advocated by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2001) and Creswell (1998). Over a period of about six months I was able to take an in-depth look at these four successful but very different primary schools, through:

- interviewing the headteachers to:
 - gain an overview of the ethos and curriculum approaches
 - discover why and how they implemented changes and what impact these had;
- discussions with staff, children and governors to triangulate this;
- observations in classrooms to establish core practices and key initiatives.

Following each initial full day visit in each school I recorded these in writing to capture the experience and learn from them by:

- recording impressions in a narrative style in a broad-brush accessible way. Richardson (1998: 28) advocates this 'dynamic' approach as one that makes research 'come alive';
- pulling out themes to summarise clearly the key features of each school using coding and thematisation (Creswell 1998: 164);
- looking for similarities and differences that informed further research questioning.

Having established the definition and context for creativity, the third part of my research was to look in more detail and depth at what the leaders in the case study schools had actually done to facilitate creativity in their schools and how they monitored and maintained it. I sent a schedule of questions in advance to allow for measured responses and continuity and comparison. This second visit comprised:

- a semi-structured interview with the headteacher
- a semi-structured interview with a governor and a member of teaching staff
- further observations around the school in response to the preliminary visit to triangulate information and validate practice.

The fourth and final part of the research allowed for a detailed write-up of these interviews to gain further insights into the leadership of a creative curriculum and analysis to provide some practical suggestions as to what leaders do to make learning more creative, and more importantly how to encourage a culture of creativity in staff. I was aware that analysing qualitative data is complex and open to difficulty but I was researching "for understanding rather than knowledge" (Watling 2002: 266).

In the next section, the schools are discussed in turn as a series of four case studies.

Findings: inside the box

For each school the research focused on the curriculum with reference to construction and creativity and most importantly how leaders had cultivated this. All had high standards in core subject areas but very different approaches to the curriculum; they held creativity as central to what they were about. Creativity was seen not as a bolt on to the curriculum but as central to their whole ethos.

Case study 1: Rooted in reality

“It’s about taking the ordinary and making it extraordinary!” (headteacher)

This is a two-form entry first school in Berkshire. The head for 30 years has recently retired and been succeeded by the deputy so continuity has been maintained.

The crucial aspect of the school is its grounds and a curriculum that connects with this. It emphasises a hands-on, child-centred approach with a significant proportion of learning occurring outside of the classroom. Staff are also encouraged to be learners and the sense of shared vision and ownership is very strong.

The key features of the curriculum are:

- *Use of the outdoor learning environment:* the grounds have developed over many years and incorporate large slabs of stone, labyrinths of willow, ponds, gardens, fruit trees and forts. The whole ethos of the school is rooted in its environment. When the recently retired head first came here 30 years ago, it was a new school with a blank playground and mowed field; just an ordinary place. Over the years, with vision and hard work it has become extraordinary and continues to change. The head explained they had been thinning some of the trees recently and used the cuttings to create a story circle of logs in an arbour. We stepped up into it and she made me sit on the ornate leader’s log. “As you step up you have to slow down. We need to slow down in education. Life long learners need deep roots!” (headteacher).
- *A curriculum based on the natural world and seasons:* the head talked passionately about getting the environment right for learning inside and out, about making sure the curriculum is authentic and rooted in the child’s experience and the natural world. The National Curriculum is seen as a base line, a springboard to be creative from. The school’s mission statement says “we teach the requirements of the National Curriculum but we go beyond this by offering a stream of experiences which anchor education in the real world” (headteacher). Their curriculum is linked inextricably to the natural rhythms of the year. They link the learning to the seasons, to festivals and real events that punctuate the lives of their children and help them make sense of their surroundings. It is this, the school believes, that offers many opportunities to be explored and experienced creatively.
- *Learning by doing and touching:* learning at the school is very kinaesthetic; a display of large photographs in the corridor testifies to the richness of the children’s experience: a Roman soldier taking a census at Christmas, children weaving willow into baskets or knitting with wool shorn from the school sheep, groups having tea parties on top of ‘Schoolhenge’ with fruit picked from their own orchards. A photograph of a dead deer being buried showed children gathered reverentially round to look and talk and touch. Poppies picked from the grounds and placed into a massive cross on the hall floor marked Remembrance Day, and a fire destroying a model of Pudding

Lane in the playground with support from the local fire brigade helped bring 1666 to life: “We try to make the learning memorable here!” (headteacher).

- *Understanding of the importance of play:* play is central to the children’s approach to learning, channelling their natural curiosity: “There’s no such thing as a right answer – learning is daring!” (headteacher). The classrooms exhibited open-ended tasks and exploratory learning and this also extended to playtime. Forts, frames and dens are dotted everywhere. I joined a girl and her fellow chalk artists making patterns on the floor and she told me how much she loved playtime. “We can do anything we want!” she proclaimed.
- *Flexible groupings and freedom:* the curriculum planning here is detailed and complex. Children are in family groups for 40 minutes at the beginning and end of each day. This ensures the cross-phase ethos and pastoral emphasis. They spend the rest of their time in learning groups that can be flexible and focused and allow for an integrated day model where activities can complement each other and teachers can use individual strengths and expertise. Often whole days are given over to projects so the learning can be deeper and extended. “Our timetable isn’t a straight jacket, it’s a springboard – we plan for freedom!” (headteacher). This flexibility and freedom is seen as essential for children and staff to be creative. There is an expectation that as professionals they must allow the curriculum to grow and flourish. “We are created to be creative so we have tried to create a culture where you have permission. It’s all about freedom to be creative” (headteacher).
- *Emphasis on the whole child and spirituality:* *Every Child Matters* has put the child back at the centre of the educational process, something this school has always emphasised. They believe creativity to be something that unifies the learning experience and provides motivation and enjoyment and enhances self-esteem. “Our intention is to educate the school community in a holistic way, joining together spiritual, moral, aesthetic, physical, social and intellectual strands in our everyday practice”, says their mission statement.
- *Involvement of the community:* the school is near a large army camp and their intake reflects the transient population; however, the school enjoys positive links with the community and over the years has been very proactive in cultivating these. There are regular visitors to the school from a local man with birds of prey to the fire brigade, from Morris dancers to basket weavers. The school has an open door policy and parents and friends are actively encouraged to come in and help. “We couldn’t do it without them. They have expertise we don’t have. It’s all about a learning community” (headteacher).

The key features of its leadership are:

- *Shared vision:* the vision is broad and expansive not myopic, focused only on results and league tables. We talked about the standards agenda and quality not quantity. The fact that the head for 30 years handed over to the deputy for 10 reflects a firm shared leadership and clear succession planning. “We all know that the children are the centre of everything that goes on here, they are our vision!” (headteacher). This is shared with new staff and parents explicitly in brochures and meetings but implicitly in the day-to-day dealings.
- *Open debate and collaboration:* the school emphasises the contribution of staff to decision making: “There isn’t a leader, it’s everybody!” (headteacher). The lunchtime briefing illustrated this collegiate approach. An arts week

discussion enabled both creative ideas to be generated and genuine debate and real sharing of concerns. “The leading is in the letting go!”

- *Sustainable and organic approach to initiatives:* the staff emphasise encouraging one another in new initiatives, for example, adding elements to the grounds or the latest software to their interactive website. However, there is a measured approach to this so that the pace of development is sustainable: “We need our schools to be less motorway more country lane if we want creative life long learners in our classrooms and in our staff rooms! It’s all about sustainability...” (headteacher).

Conclusion

“It’s the coolest school I’ve ever been in!” said one of the many army children they have as we finished the day going to feed the foxes. Obviously the grounds were unique and hard to replicate elsewhere without time and money but what stood out even more as its bedrock was the shared sense of vision. It was the community as much as the curriculum that was the solid foundation of this school. Everyone felt ownership and therein lay the creativity. “It’s ours, what shall we make of it?” (headteacher).

Case 2: Proof of the pudding

“We must teach the basics but like food it’s all in the presentation.” (headteacher)

The main ingredient of this school is the connections made in its curriculum. Learning is seen as a seamless whole and links are made explicitly in all it does. There is an emphasis on creating a learning environment that is both rich and interactive. The school is a one-form entry primary with a mixed catchment area. The head had been in post for two years but had been its deputy for three years previously. Before that she had been a curriculum advisor in London and had brought with her some innovative cross-curricular topic flows that she had developed.

The key features of the curriculum are:

- *Two-year rolling programme of curriculum flows:* the curriculum is designed to give cohesion, meaning and motivation, developing the curiosity and creativity of each child. This has been done through painstaking planning, linking the individual subjects of the National Curriculum into a meaningful whole called ‘curriculum flows’. These ‘flows’ take generic titles such as ‘The Tudors’ or ‘Our Locality’ to include the programmes of study and learning objectives for all the different subjects. They have taken the strands of the National Curriculum and contextualised it in their own curriculum. Year 1 and 2 work together, 3 and 4 and finally 5 and 6 in two-yearly rolling programmes of topics. “Suddenly the children were talking about what they were doing, the parents noticed too and the curriculum came alive!” (headteacher).
- *Cross-phase activities:* the school enhances what is already a broad and exciting curriculum with what they call ‘Day Ten’. This happens for a morning every other Friday when children are mixed up in small cross-phase groups and work with an adult on a creative theme or idea. It could be mask making, animation or devising an African dance; whatever it is it gives them a chance to work collaboratively and creatively in different groups. The Day Ten model also enables them to arrange Gifted and Talented sessions when every child can pursue and extend his or her particular strength. (The school believes all children have gifts or talents so do not subscribe to definitions regarding

Gifted and Talented pupils, for example, those provided by the Department for Education and Skills.) “The school is constantly seeking ways to make the curriculum exciting for all pupils” (Ofsted).

- *Art and display a high priority:* display is considered an important contributor to their ethos. Posters, motivational statements and interactive displays celebrate children’s work and invite viewers to engage with it: “Art and craft is the key to unlock the learning here” (headteacher). Each class had a little museum of artefacts and work relating to their topic and the children were active agents in creating the learning environment around them.
- *IT is an important tool:* the school have a set of 30 laptops and are about to buy another set. Each class has a chance to use them for a 20-minute session each day. They use them for individualised learning in Maths and English, practising skills and progressing through a carefully monitored programme. Each class has an interactive white board, which is well used. I saw one class being tested on work covered on the Egyptians with a tailor-made version of ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire’. The computer suite is to be phased out and integrated into the classrooms. “Technology is a tool to enhance learning creatively, not dominate for itself” (teacher). Year 6 recently devised interactive books for the younger children. There is much sharing work between phases here and children provide real audiences for each other.
- *Talking about learning:* this is a feature for both pupils and staff. They told me how each week they would have a key question to explore. This means the classrooms can become focused centres of learning. They share the focus between year groups and phases and the whole school becomes a learning zone for all children and staff. “The children ask better questions, seek their own answers and gain deeper understanding than they had before” (teacher).
- *Longer chunks of time for depth:* by linking subjects, timetabling is simpler and more flexible. There is more time for children to gain hands-on experiences, have more problem-solving tasks and learn in depth. Year 4 were learning about the Tudors. In this classroom there was evidence of Design Technology (Tudor furniture), Geography (maps of the explorers), Art (portraits in frames) and Science (Tudor food). Linking these they were talking about the trencher of bread and setting the challenge of making a healthy Tudor meal ready for a banquet; an opportunity to link the learning with literacy, drama and music. “That’s the brilliant thing about this way of learning, it allows for elaboration, exploration and choice and keys learning into experience making it creative and memorable” (headteacher).

The key features of its leadership are:

- *Clear pedagogy:* the head has a very passionately held belief in a cross-curricular creative approach, which she shares with her staff. She introduced this integrated approach with just two classes at first, linking the children’s learning in topic-based teaching that combined the creativity of the past with the rigour of the present. She described how the children in the pilot classes were more motivated, better-behaved and achieved higher standards. “Soon everyone wanted to do it. It was contagious!” (headteacher). Within two years they had introduced it across the whole school. The head was delighted that her firmly held philosophy and practice was so transferable and transformational.

- *Shared vision and teamwork*: the head leads by example. She has her own class for three days a week and feels this is the key to sharing the vision practically. “I don’t feel like I ever needed to get people on board, the children did that! Teachers see how inspired children become when they teach creatively and who wouldn’t want to teach children who want to learn, behave and achieve!” (headteacher). The head and her staff lead in-service training on their creative approach for other schools. This is part of their Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and ensures an assimilation of the vision together as a team. She told me of a school they went to in Devon that wanted to try the curriculum flows. She said how much they loved it. The teachers who had been reticent to try this different approach were won over. “It’s changed our lives!” is what they’d reportedly said to her. “We all want to come to school now!”
- *Collaborative planning*: this thematic teaching encourages teamwork and detailed planning. Teachers are able to develop and alter the plans and make them their own. The deputy said how he had just rewritten the curriculum flow for this term, adapting and adjusting the same learning objectives to a different theme. “It’s easy once you’ve got that mind set that connects learning. It’s just a question of finding something else to hang it on!” (headteacher). Teachers as well as children have more ownership of their learning and therefore feel a greater sense of motivation.
- *Focused professional development*: performance management and staff development encourage creativity and professionalism. They have a demanding four-week improvement cycle of agreed target setting that is teacher-driven and practical. The staff all choose something they wish to improve. This may be to plan a key text with someone or watch a colleague teach. This open and supportive approach to staff development is seen to be powerful: “We all really benefit from it” (deputy head).
- *Long service and retention*: the staff have nearly all been appointed by the head. She has been able to build a young team that share the cross-curricular vision. The assistant head became the deputy when the deputy became the head. The continuity was important. “The staff love coming to school as much as the children!” (governor). Every teacher spoken to confirmed that statement and it was the creative curriculum and their enjoyment in teaching it that inspired them to be so committed to the school and each other.

Conclusion

The school believes strongly that standards are raised by a celebration of achievement in a broad sense. This is reflected in their emphasis on display and the breadth of the curriculum. “The parents really believe in what we are doing, we’re really getting the enjoyment back into things” (headteacher). Over the three years since they introduced the cross-curricular approach their SATs results have improved substantially. In Key Stage 1 level 3s had risen by 54% and in Key Stage 2, level 5s by 42%.

Creativity is what drives the curriculum model and there is a high degree of ownership and flexibility among staff and pupils in the learning experiences they plan. The cross-curricular approach is the bones to hang the body of learning on. Clear and careful cross-curricular planning gives cohesion and purpose to their studies. Their curriculum flows are detailed and comprehensive, showing learning opportunities and emphasising the links but they are also documents that develop and grow depending on centres of interest and time; they are a structure.

“Teachers can be more creative in their planning, making connections. It’s how the brain works. It’s how we learn best. Now that’s back to basics!” (headteacher)

Case study 3: It ain’t what you do

“Our teachers aren’t afraid to risk and go deeper.” (headteacher)

This Church of England primary school in the rural South West is an advocate of the specialist teacher and learning is subject-based and very focused. The emphasis is on skills and children are timetabled in flexible groups of different sizes appropriate to their needs and the learning. The head has lead the school for 10 years and the school is acknowledged for its curriculum initiatives.

The key features of the curriculum are:

- *Subjects are taught by specialists:* all the teachers are specialists and many of them work part time. The curriculum is subject-based and children move from teacher to teacher in a system akin to one found in secondary schools. The headteacher wants to make each learning experience as positive as possible for the children and having an expert enthusiast leading the learning will, she believes, maximise this: “Children deserve the highest quality learning experience and the best way to do this is by specialist teaching. I want champions teaching them each subject” (headteacher). So she has developed a subject specialist approach to the delivery of the curriculum because that was what the teachers wanted. Teachers have a registration class but then teach their specialism across the key stages in flexible groupings. Teachers might have one specialism or a few but are not responsible for all the learning in their class. “Often class teachers aren’t skilled enough to go where the children are leading in some areas. Specialists aren’t afraid to risk and go deeper” (headteacher).
- *Children are in flexible groups:* the question asked is what is the most efficient and optimum size for the particular learning activity. Two hundred and fifty children can enjoy a singing lesson but 10 or 12 is best for Maths. “What would be the perfect size for Science or Italian or Games? We ask the questions others dare not and we offer the answers and then provide the solutions too” (headteacher). They have tailored the groupings to suit the different needs of the subjects and learning objectives. This involves flexible groupings with detailed timetabling and space allocation. Half classes and smaller are grouped by ability for Maths or literacy. The system the school operates enables not only groupings favourable to developing children’s academic ability at their own pace but it also facilitates personalised learning and relationships that nurture confidence and motivation and grows self-esteem. Children see different teachers in different situations and everyone gets to know each other. Staff teach across key stages and children can be moved between groups when required. It happens a lot and sometimes a Year 3 could be working with a Year 6 if they needed to be challenged.
- *Skills-based learning:* this approach, although the antithesis of the cross-curricular model, is potentially just as creative and child-centred because teachers have the expertise and freedom to be flexible and extend the learning in exciting and new ways. The head went on to say she was not passionate about any particular curriculum model but was passionate about learning. For her it is the skills that count: “Each subject has its own particular skills; knowledge and content are but the servants” (headteacher). She felt that often a thematic approach led to impoverished learning – broad meaning diluted. She felt that often the links teachers made in the learning experience

were tenuous and artificial and that children have an amazing ability to link the learning for themselves.

- *Creative curriculum weeks:* they have curriculum weeks regularly where they have chunks of time devoted to areas as disparate as marathon running or opera, cycling proficiency or Science. “Because of our time efficient approach we have trouble filling our curriculum.... These weeks are great fun and part of our 20% free from the National Curriculum” (headteacher). The teachers enjoy these weeks as much as the children and there is a lot of freedom to be creative. A recent Design Technology week involved the whole school in a cooking project.
- *Emphasis on music and languages:* the children learn five languages: Spanish, Italian, French, German and Chinese. The learning is as much about culture as about language and is taught in a creative way. Performing Arts is a very important part of their broad curriculum and the school holds music soirees twice a term. A large percentage of the children take part, as do staff and governors: “It’s a real family affair. Everyone joins in. Being creative is a social experience” (headteacher). Every child in the school learns the violin and also has an opportunity to learn brass or woodwind. Developing expertise is an important part of the school’s philosophy and the curriculum model they use reflects and magnifies this.

The key features of its leadership are:

- *Professional trust:* the important thing about the approach here is the professional trust the head gives to the subject specialist, her ‘champions’. She provides the structure, appropriate size teaching group and careful timetabling; the champion is expected to provide the rest. “They have total freedom to deliver an exciting and challenging learning experience! I expect little assessment and allow individual planning” (headteacher). Here the teachers are trusted and empowered.
- *Ownership of the curriculum:* the head has grown a culture of professional respect that engenders a feeling of ownership. “The curriculum is owned by the staff, it’s theirs not mine so they buy into it. I don’t drive the system they do” (headteacher). An example is a new Maths system they are trialing from Hungary; it introduces concepts very early so that they will be tackling algebra in Year R. It’s a revolutionary approach and uses the internet so parents can support the learning at home. The point is that it was an initiative the staff were keen to try out so they were allowed to. They take risks. If it does not work they will try something else. “It’s not a one size fits all culture here”, she says. It applies to the staff and the children. The ability groupings apply to Maths and English. They work well in those subjects but when they tried it in Science it did not. So they scrapped it and returned to mixed ability groupings. The philosophy is one of maximising the learning potential and building ownership.
- *Communication and responsibility:* as the teachers all teach across the phases, communication has to be excellent. Staff are able to discuss issues of behaviour, special needs and learning styles when allocating children to groups and teachers. Both children and parents are also consulted. It is all very open and transparent and learning is constantly being monitored and adjusted. Everyone feels responsible for the SATs results, not just the Year 6 teachers, because everyone teaches across the school. Staff can change and develop a portfolio of expertise. Many will be specialists in more than one subject and can branch out if they want to. The head sees her role as

professional facilitator. “No one is pigeon holed here. If someone wants to do something they only have to ask” (headteacher). Each year she consults the staff not only on what they want to teach but also the hours they want to do and when they want to work.

Conclusion

The head has managed change carefully and given ownership of the curriculum to her ‘champions’. This trust has allowed individual creativity to develop and practice has spread through collaboration and communication. Everyone is valued and listened to. Although individuals teach as specialists they plan together and the creative vision is worked at together. “It can be very painful to be truly collaborative, you won’t always get your own way! It’s all about choices and growing together and building self-esteem then doing what you do best better” (headteacher).

Case study 4: Vessels and flames

“The central idea is the path but we have freedom to explore. The enquiry points are student driven. We really encourage them to wander. I love teaching like this, it’s so creative!” (teacher)

This independent school in Surrey takes pupils from the ages of 3–18 and has children from countries all over the world. They follow the International Baccalaureate (IB) throughout the school and, in the primary years, the IBO’s (International Baccalaureate Organization) Primary Years Programme (PYP). Its principles are that the school is seen as a community of learners, and teachers as much as students engage with their own learning. There is a commitment to enquiry, how best to learn and the application of effective assessment. Secondly, this learner-centred academic approach is augmented and underpinned by personal and social education that is central to the PYP approach.

The key features of the curriculum are:

- *Enquiry-led learning*: the curriculum offers a dynamic balance between the acquisition of essential skills and knowledge and the search for meaning. By starting with the students’ prior knowledge and connecting with their search for meaning they are able to promote real and deep understanding. “It’s all about ‘backward design’. The activities come last. You fit the activity into the learning and not the other way round” (headteacher). The head explained how this makes what they do much more “focused and authentic”. He used the phrase “pupil-driven”. There are six units a year each lasting six weeks. The central idea is prescribed like ‘Animals’ or ‘Our Body’ but the children and teachers together generate enquiry points. Effectively they write their own programme of study and pose the key questions to answer. Having established this they then devise the activities that will lead to answering those questions. This is the ‘Backward Design’ the principal talked about and is the core concept of the PYP. Once the activities are conceived and completed the pupils can then take the studies deeper at their own level, individually or in groups. These projects are planned and investigated with teacher support but encourage independent learning. At the end of the unit the children present their work to their peers or other groups and it is assessed.
- *Focused assessment tasks*: rooms are set up with a number of interesting activities based around their area of enquiry, for example, ‘Animals’. The key questions for each area of enquiry have to be assessed for each child at the

end of each topic. "It's the key to progress. The success criteria are made explicit at the start so assessments are easy to manage" (headteacher).

- *Emphasis on presentation skills:* pride in outcomes seems an essential ingredient of the curriculum and display is very important at the school: "It's important to celebrate learning together" (deputy head). A large collaborative jungle display, for example, had been completed in just 15 minutes as part of an assembly on teamwork. Each child had made a contribution and the results underlined the ethos of individuality but also showed that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. They worked out that if a single person had undertaken the same work it would have taken 22 hours.
- *Citizenship and global dimension key:* the IB school is non-religious but there is an emphasis on reflection and moral choice as well as learning. The school is concerned with the whole child and their place in the wider world. Multiple intelligences and learning styles are used as tools to promote a sense of community, creativity and personal growth: "Being caring or open-minded are qualities more highly valued than being clever and attitudes like respect or curiosity more greatly prized than exam success" (deputy head). The whole idea underpinning the IB ethos is one of moulding the global citizens of the future and this is a central part of their curriculum.
- *Dynamic independent learning:* one Grade 5 classroom had been turned into a newsroom and the children had chosen roles for a Times Education News Day. "They are really connected with their learning. The PYP is all about that. I first came across it in Berlin and I was hooked! The kids just love to lead their learning" (teacher). A child showed me his project on religion and how he had used a computer program called 'Inspiration' as a planning tool to write a file about Buddhism. "It's interesting to learn here! I like it that we don't do worksheet, worksheet, worksheet, instead we do activities that make learning fun. We can chose. It's our decision!" The final unit of Grade 5 has an even greater emphasis on presentation. They call it 'The Exhibition' and once a broad theme is decided the children in groups spend the whole period with teacher support working towards an interactive display to which the parents are invited. This is the culmination of the Junior years.

The key features of its leadership are:

- *Professional trust:* like the other schools in my study there is a high level of professional trust here. The management require no lesson plans or detailed paperwork from the class teachers. They prefer to give them the freedom to use their time and energy more productively within the framework of the PYP. The deputy says everyone is so motivated that the main performance management task is to tell the staff to go home! "They work too hard, but they enjoy their work. They have the freedom to make it their own" (deputy head). The teachers (and pupils) feel ownership of the curriculum. It is the hallmark of the PYP of course and pays dividends; the staff all expressed great enjoyment and job satisfaction.
- *Ownership of curriculum design:* in the PYP model leaders are expected to put the learning initiative into the hands of the learners. They have to allow the freedom to let teachers and pupils own their curriculum, ask the questions and create the areas of inquiry. The teachers are expected to see themselves as facilitators. The teacher-pupil relationship is one of co-experience. "Real creativity is a learning process where teacher and pupil are located in the same individual" (deputy head). Leaders here are able to encourage creativity by making space and time for the staff and children to own their learning, to

ask the questions they want answered, to explore and discover their own realities together. The structure itself provides the freedom.

- *Teachers as learners*: the deputy explained how “teachers are learners too” and have an integral staff development programme. In addition to internal staff inset, IB teachers are expected to attend regular PYP courses. The deputy and others were soon to be going to Warsaw for a conference on classroom techniques. “The international ingredient adds to the flavour and spices up the motivation and professionalism of the staff” (deputy head). The deputy said how often the private sector could become inward looking but in the IB school there was a lot of accountability and inspection; schools were compared to similar schools across the world.
- *Collaboration and planning in teams*: organisation and teamwork is one of the keys to success. The teachers meet twice a week when the children have specialist PE. One meeting is for curriculum and the other pastoral. Single subject teachers come to input and draw out topic links. There is a collegiate approach and although there is a team leader for each grade everything is done by consensus. The deputy’s role is to oversee the whole thing. “My job is to support and encourage rather than to evaluate” (deputy head). This facilitates the sense of professional openness and teamwork. “Everyone is a learner here!” said the deputy. Something else that facilitates the teamwork is an internal email system called ‘First Class’ that enables and ensures a high level of communication outside the grade meetings.
- *Advocacy with parents and community*: the dialogue and partnership in the learning that leaders have encouraged has communication as the key. The frequency of curriculum information, meetings and workshops keeps parents informed and on side and allows creativity to flourish. This mirrors the involvement of children in their learning. The partnership of child, parent and school is illustrated in the termly conferences where individual children sit down with teacher and parents to discuss progress. “These are frank and honest dialogues”, explains the head of the school. “The children are very honest and direct. You should never have a parents’ conference without the kids” (headteacher). This sense of community and communication is an integral part of the dynamic creativity of the school.

Conclusion

The ethos of the PYP is that teachers and pupils engage with their learning and have creative control over its direction. This sense of ownership coupled with the strong international dimension promotes the acquisition of skills within a meaningful context.

Like kindergarten learning about water and each devising experiments about ice, “If you put salt in it melts quicker”, a child informed me, “I found that out by myself!” Creativity is linked inextricably with motivation. “Knowledge is constructed by the children. It’s not poured in to their heads. We as teachers have to set up meaningful learning situations to engage and challenge them, after that it’s easy!” (teacher).

Leadership implications: different but the same

Lifting the lids on these four different schools revealed just how different they were. The surface feature of each school is the curriculum; the lid, if you like. It is what you see and what I saw was very different in terms of content, organisation, delivery and outcomes. However, the more I looked inside the boxes the more I was able to see the similarities of what lay within.

Curriculum commonalities

- Each school was genuinely *child-centred*. Relationships were at the heart of the learning. The curriculum was as much about developing community and care as about inspiring curiosity and creativity. The teachers spoke with sincerity about how the individual child was right at the centre of everything they did and this showed itself in the way they interacted and related. In each school I witnessed an inclusivity that underpinned the learning and built self-esteem as the central pillar in the construction of the curriculum.
- All four schools explicitly put learning to learn above what was learnt. There was a universal emphasis on *skills before content*. The staff believed that it was not what you did that was important but the way you did it, that children had to be equipped with the skills and the ability to apply them in different situations. They encouraged critical and reflective thinking and recognised the existence of multiple intelligences and were aware of how learning styles needed to be catered for in the classroom.
- There was a belief that quality in the curriculum takes time and that a *slow and organic approach* reaps lasting growth. Each school gave time to consolidate learning and allowed for depth. This involved careful timetabling and allocation of space and resources to maximise effective teaching time. The breadth of the curriculum was seen as an opportunity to go deeper in chosen aspects and areas, enabling choice and freedom. All the schools talked about the importance of finding time to celebrate work and reflect on it. The feeling of satisfaction at the end of a job well done was crucial to the success of the creative curriculum.
- Creativity was a central feature of all the schools and was talked about and valued. The curriculum was *flexible and dynamic* and always open to change and modification. New initiatives were actively encouraged and supported. Staff felt confident to try new ideas and adapt old ones. There was a sense of curriculum excitement. Children were often in cross-phase groups for special events to help make learning memorable and challenging.

Leadership lessons

- All four headteachers had a *strong sense of professional confidence and autonomy*. They spoke passionately about their vision and how government initiatives were scrutinised and only introduced if considered of value to the children. Each head was committed to reducing paperwork so that teachers were free to teach and children to learn. They all talked about trust and how important it was to give staff the freedom to develop confidence in themselves as proactive professionals.
- Staff had assimilated and internalised a *shared vision*. All the staff bought into the aims and ethos of the school and shared the same approaches and methodology. There was an active consensus of belief about what they were

doing and why. Teachers articulated this and felt real ownership. In each institution I detected an evident pride in the organisation.

- All the schools displayed a high level of *communication and open debate*. There was a distinct collegiate feel to the organisations. There was an emphasis on shared ownership of decision making and individual contribution was actively sought and encouraged. Staff meetings and staff rooms were places where staff felt valued and everyone spoken to felt part of the team. Each school had a flat distributed leadership model, indeed the heads in all four schools considered everyone to be a leader. Certainly a common feature was the way heads included everyone and saw this as essential in promoting professional commitment.
- Headteachers encouraged their staff to be creative by giving *ownership of the teaching and learning process*. Staff were empowered by the freedom they had to devise meaningful learning opportunities for their children. Space and time were given so that teachers could plan together and respond to the needs of the children.

Recommendations: beyond the box

A box is a container. The structure it provides is essential for its function. A school is like a box. The four schools from the case studies provided the structure for creativity to be exercised and this was not confined nor stifled by the box. For other leaders wishing to develop a creative curriculum, key messages would be to:

1. Focus on *curriculum creativity*. Enable pupils and staff to develop opportunities to nurture their own creativity by:

- encouraging imagination and originality
- making time for them to reflect critically
- allowing space for thinking and choice
- giving freedom to fail with the confidence to try again.

2. Create a culture of *collaboration*. Ensure an effective and creative learning culture by:

- sharing values and ethos with the whole school community
- promoting the importance of talk and collaboration in consolidating learning
- ensuring everyone has the opportunity to learn from others
- promoting teamwork and detailed planning
- developing a distributed style that shares the ownership and the load and draws others into the organisation.

3. Emphasise *cognitive approaches*. Promote a creative learning experience in each classroom by:

- advocating a range of teaching strategies and learning styles
- promoting the importance of learning across the curriculum
- encouraging teachers to:
 - make children active partners in their learning
 - structure tasks and pace of learning to make it challenging and enjoyable.

4. Make a real *commitment to the community*. Forge creative links with the parents and others by:

- promoting the importance of dynamic partnership
- involving parents and carers at every opportunity
- focusing on the importance of the learning environment
- extending involvement into the local community and beyond.

5. Balance *continuity and change*. Value commitment to the organisation by:

- positive and productive performance management
- inspirational and interactive CPD
- making staff feel valued.

Leaders saw the strength that comes from a stable staff that are not stale.

6. Promote *child-centredness*. Each school celebrated the centrality of the child in the organisation by:

- promoting personal, social and spiritual aspects of the curriculum to be as important as academic aspects
- encouraging teachers to:
 - develop each child's confidence, self-discipline and understanding of their learning
 - make learning vivid, real and meaningful with many first-hand experiences.

Building your own box

“They enjoy their work because they have the freedom to make it their own”, said one head. But this all needs time. All the heads agreed that time is the missing ingredient in education. They asserted that there is too much rushing frantically from task to task, new initiative to new initiative, demanding performance and perfection but often only getting mediocre results and frustration. As one stated: “We need to break this circle of frenzy if we are going to reclaim the creativity and job satisfaction we crave!”.

By focusing on a creative curriculum, leaders of these four schools gave their staff time to:

- *teach*: less paperwork so they could concentrate on learning
- *enjoy*: less pressure so they could find space to celebrate together
- *imagine*: less prescription so they could plan creative lessons
- *motivate*: less pushing so they could connect with the individual's needs.

If leaders want to go further along the path towards the self-realisation of their own schools they need, on the basis of this study, to:

1. Think with staff about how children really learn best
2. Decide which curriculum model best promotes creativity in children and staff
3. Try individual initiatives to excite learners and staff
4. Reclaim time and space in the curriculum for creative thinking
5. Be brave and individualistic.

Conclusion

In lifting the lids on these four schools it was obvious that the concepts of excellence and enjoyment very definitely go hand in hand. The teachers and staff in the four schools talked a lot about enjoyment. They talked about the fun they had learning or teaching. The catalyst for this was creativity. They talked about a pleasure through the process and in the product.

Both the children and staff reported ownership of the curriculum. Staff were given the freedom to develop and design learning activities that they considered would resonate with the child's world. The leaders had given them the freedom to do this but it was not the freedom of anarchy, a 'do what you like' freedom that abdicates responsibility. The leaders in these schools had an understanding that creativity flourishes when it is free from fear and set in the context of a school community. They had provided a structure that encouraged and celebrated creativity and teamwork and enabled children and staff to express themselves in an individual way and develop the skills to do that more confidently and effectively.

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