

Curriculum innovation in schools

This report focuses on curriculum innovation in schools and the factors that contribute to its success. The small scale survey that formed the basis of the report found that the innovations that most of the schools visited had made had improved pupils' achievement and personal development. Successful change relied on strong leadership at all levels, a shared understanding of the reasons and need for innovation, and committed staff who had been prepared and trained carefully to implement change.

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Executive summary

The aim of the survey was to identify the factors which contribute to successful curriculum innovation in schools. Between April 2006 and December 2007, Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMIs) visited 16 secondary schools, 12 primary schools and two special schools that were involved in developing their curriculum. The survey also drew evidence from a focus group of six primary schools as well as from inspectors' discussions with school and local authority staff in three areas where groups of schools were working together on curriculum change.

All maintained schools must meet the minimum requirements of the National Curriculum but they are free to plan their curriculum in the way they consider to be most suitable for their learners.¹ Many successful schools see no reason to make significant changes, confident that they already serve the needs of their learners well. The schools in the survey, however, shared the view that their curriculum provision could be improved or did not give the best possible support to learners' achievement and personal development.

The survey identified four broad categories of curriculum innovation:

- organising the curriculum around themes which drew from different subjects
- reorganising the school day or adjusting the school year to allocate longer blocks of time to activities
- introducing a number of pathways through Key Stages 3 and 4 in order to meet the needs of learners of all abilities and interests
- developing pupils' learning skills.

These approaches were not always new in themselves. However, they were new to these schools. Where they had been tried elsewhere, the schools were careful to research and learn from the strengths of previous practice. School leaders often had to overcome deeply embedded resistance to change because there was a nervousness about making potentially wrong choices, concerns about the costs and sustainability of innovation, and apprehension that change might have a negative impact on results in national tests. In some cases, the concerns arose from a misapprehension that Ofsted favoured a specific model of curriculum delivery and might take a negative view of alternative approaches.

The most successful schools went through a systematic process of investigation, consultation, planning and evaluation. Essential contributors to successful innovation included headteachers' confident, persuasive and visionary leadership;

¹ For further information on the National Curriculum, see: <http://curriculum.qca.org.uk>.

complementary strengths in middle managers; and a committed, collaborative and well trained teaching force. Honest evaluation of the impact on pupils' learning and well-being, combined with a readiness to adapt where necessary, ensured that the demands made on schools by the changes were justified by positive impact.

Key findings

- In most of the 30 schools visited, the innovations led to clear improvements in pupils' achievement and personal development. In two of the schools, although the modified curriculum had increased pupils' interest and engagement, it was not providing sufficient academic challenge.
- The innovations fell into four broad categories: organising the curriculum through themes or inter-disciplinary links rather than discrete subjects; using curriculum time flexibly; providing alternative curriculum pathways; and developing learning skills.
- The principal barriers to innovation included anxiety from staff about a possible negative impact on national test and examination results; concerns about inspectors' attitudes to innovation; uncertainty about longer-term finance and resources; concerns about the reluctance or inability of staff to implement change; possible resistance to change among governors, parents and the local community.
- Successful innovation was linked principally to strong leadership at all levels. This ensured that everyone involved had a clear understanding of the rationale behind innovation and the roles and responsibilities of individuals.
- Other factors in successful innovation included detailed planning linked to rigorous self-evaluation; clear systems, timescales and criteria for evaluating impact that drew on detailed data and information from a wide range of stakeholders; carefully designed professional development programmes for staff to implement the new approaches.
- The most successful schools based their reforms on considerable background research into theories of learning and different ways of approaching the curriculum.

Recommendations

Schools considering significant change to the curriculum should:

- be clear about why change is necessary and its intended benefits
- research widely to ensure changes are suitable, necessary and appropriate to meet learners' needs
- ensure that there is strong leadership at all levels to support innovation and that everyone involved understands clearly the rationale for it

- control implementation and development costs tightly so that the innovation gives good value for money
- provide high-quality professional development and support, matched closely to the requirements of the innovation and the needs of staff
- undertake rigorous and regular evaluation, based on clear criteria, focusing on the impact on pupils' achievement, standards and personal development, and use the outcomes to adjust the new approaches.

Curriculum innovation

Choosing curriculum innovation

1. The schools in the survey had different reasons for making changes to the curriculum. However, they all started with the assumption that, through curriculum changes, pupils could enjoy learning and achieve more. There was, therefore, a common focus on finding ways to:
 - improve pupils' motivation and engagement
 - develop their resilience, independence and ability to work in teams
 - raise their attainment.
2. In the schools which had a history of success and high achievement, the innovations often arose from a concern that performance might have peaked. The headteacher of a very successful school described how he and his staff had begun to review the curriculum after a very positive inspection report from Ofsted. They were worried that they would not be able to sustain their high performance and would continue to follow the same approaches 'when the rest of the world had moved on'. The schools saw the challenge of fresh approaches and a restructured curriculum as key to ensuring that their performance continued to improve.
3. The schools where achievement was lower decided to change because their current provision was not meeting pupils' needs:

The headteacher of a secondary school explained that the students arrived 'with a number of barriers to learning which were reflected in weak literacy and numeracy skills, poor organisation, low aspirations, inability to tackle things independently, low self-esteem and limited cultural and life experiences. We felt the need to renew our curriculum in order to meet the needs of our students.'

Challenges and perceived barriers to innovation

4. In introducing innovation, the schools had faced several challenges. The first was to make a realistic assessment of how far and how fast they could go. This

required senior managers to have a thorough understanding of their staff, their skills and willingness to be involved, and the possible impact of the proposed changes.

5. Staff turnover was often difficult to manage, especially where this involved senior staff who were responsible for leading key elements of the reforms. In some cases, the resulting lack of continuity led to a loss of momentum, with innovations faltering or even stopping.
6. All the schools faced resistance to change, which could come from staff, pupils, parents and carers, and sometimes from the local community. Anxiety about changes to working practices was also common.
7. In the high-performing schools, staff were often concerned that innovation might cause a short-term fall in examination and test results because new structures and ways of working would take time to have an effect. There was a similar concern in the less successful schools about short-term impact: staff felt that some initial improvement had to be secured before anything changed, or things might simply get worse. School leaders' sensitive handling of such apprehension was vital in giving staff the confidence to design and implement change.
8. There was a common concern that the changes would be too expensive to sustain and would not give value for money. This fear was overcome by detailed initial costing, linked to whole-school development planning and transparency in allocating budgets.
9. Fear of change was often compounded by anxiety concerning external inspection. Staff were frequently worried that inspectors would not understand or would be very critical of the changes they were introducing. Sometimes they did not understand that inspection judgements are mainly determined by the outcomes for learners rather than the style of curriculum delivery.² In high-performing schools, much hard work was often necessary to convince staff of the rationale for the proposed changes and the potential benefits for them and their pupils. Where this was handled well, staff were convinced of the value of the new approaches. In the end, those in doubt were carried along by the success of the strategies and the enthusiastic involvement of other staff. In one school, the main opposition to change came from middle managers. The senior team worked hard to establish what they described as a 'critical mass' of successful innovation. Once this was in place and most staff were convinced of the value of the changes, the rate of progress increased rapidly.

² See the guidance on evaluating the curriculum in *Guidance for inspectors: using the evaluation schedule* (070188), Ofsted, 2007; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070188.

10. The schools that were most successful in bringing about change maintained a clear and consistent focus on ensuring that the innovations were integral to their work and sustainable. They used rigorous and regular evaluation to ascertain the effectiveness of their actions and modified approaches where necessary, sometimes making changes to development plans.

The enthusiasm for providing pupils with separate curriculum pathways from Years 7 to 11 distracted the senior managers in one school from ensuring that the quality of teaching and learning in the core subjects was maintained. When assessment data started to indicate that standards were falling, the school decided to maintain its original commitment to the innovation but to focus on outcomes as well as the structure of the curriculum.

The types of innovations the schools made

11. The innovations made by the schools in the survey fell into four broad categories:
- curriculum delivery through themes or interdisciplinary links rather than discrete subjects
 - flexible use of curriculum time
 - alternative curriculum pathways
 - a concentration on developing learning skills.

A thematic approach to the curriculum

12. A thematic approach focuses on a major theme, such as the impact of rivers on the environment and on social and economic development, and enables pupils to explore it from a variety of perspectives, drawing on skills, knowledge and understanding from a range of subjects. It often involves practical investigations and schools adopting this approach saw it as having the potential to contribute to pupils' social as well as academic development. The thematic approach was the one most commonly used by the primary schools. Where it was used in the secondary schools, it was usually found at Key Stage 3.
13. Seven of the 12 primary schools organised the curriculum in this way. The time allocated to each theme ranged from a few weeks to a full term. Allocating blocks of time to the work enabled pupils to focus for extended periods on linked activities. These often involved simulation and role play.
14. All the schools that used a thematic approach also taught subjects discretely for part of the time. This was particularly the case with English and mathematics. However, they planned the thematic work to enable pupils to consolidate and apply their skills of literacy and numeracy and to understand their wider relevance and usefulness. This successfully reinforced their learning in core

subjects; for example, pupils in one school drew on their knowledge of angles and their skills of estimating and calculating to help shape their theories about how the ancient Egyptians built the pyramids.

15. The teachers emphasised the importance of thorough and detailed planning that identified, unambiguously, progression in knowledge of the subject and the development of skills. They also identified clearly how, when and by whom the work would be assessed. In the primary and secondary schools, they often used opportunities for learning outside the classroom to make the curriculum relevant.

In a programme based on the theme of crime and punishment, Year 10 pupils attended a powerful presentation about the anti-social behaviour of teenagers in the town. Through discussion and analysis, they identified the lack of leisure activities as one of the reasons for misbehaviour. They took on the role of 'community safety officers' and worked with local businesses, the police and welfare organisations to raise funds to establish a drop-in centre for teenagers. The project called for careful planning at all levels, as well as strong leadership, rigorous risk assessment and honest self-evaluation. Feedback from local officials and residents confirmed that it had had a direct and positive impact on the community. The pupils felt that they had matured, acquired useful skills of problem-solving and negotiating, and gained a real understanding of community needs and responsibilities.

16. Four of the primary schools maintained a subject-based curriculum and were innovative within this. They focused on providing pupils with a broad curriculum that included rich experiences in the arts. They also made extensive use of visits out of school and invited a range of people to share their skills and ideas with the pupils. The schools offered a particularly wide range of extra-curricular opportunities, including fencing, Latin and Mandarin. In this way pupils were encouraged to explore options not encountered routinely. The element of choice made them feel that, in part, they could shape their own learning and that their personal interests and aspirations mattered. For those who found elements of the mainstream curriculum difficult or uninteresting, the chance to enjoy and achieve in an area they had chosen was highly motivating.
17. Four of the secondary schools focused their Key Stage 3 curriculum on developing pupils' generic skills and competencies rather than on subject teaching. Themes based on cross-subject or inter-disciplinary approaches incorporated the appropriate development of skills, as in the following example.

During Year 7, every pupil completed six projects, each lasting half a term, on the themes of 'journeys', 'identity', 'positive images', 'art attack', 'survival' and 'the power and the glory'. These drew on geography, history, religious education, dance, drama, art, and personal, social and health education. The pupils were able to assess their development

against defined competencies, weekly or in individual lessons. As a result, they gained an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses which provided a powerful stimulus to learning and raising standards.

Flexible use of curriculum time

18. Four of the secondary schools chose to base their curriculum on larger blocks of time rather than on short periods. This gave them flexibility to provide longer sessions for intensive or extended study. In some cases, these were organised for the length of a specific project; in others, each department or year group had an agreed number of extended sessions which they could use as they saw fit, for example to support cross-curricular work, to complete coursework or to pursue a particular theme or project in depth. Despite this flexibility, all four of the schools offered a typical range of subjects and allocated them the same time as might be expected in a more conventional timetable. Organising this was demanding and required regular review.

A secondary school worked with three different timetables. The timetable for Monday to Thursday was the same as in most other schools and based on hour-long subject lessons. On Friday, in rotation, each year group studied a different subject for the whole day. This ensured that, over the year, all subjects were covered. The third element involved longer blocks of time, programmed separately for a variety of purposes. For example, in Year 10, a whole week was allocated to business studies, during which pupils experienced a simulation of life in an office. This included working from nine until five o'clock and having to wear business clothes. The pupils felt that this arrangement enabled them to get 'really involved' with a subject. Those preparing for GCSE particularly welcomed the sessions that focused on coursework since they found it much easier to complete it in school than at home.

19. One of the secondary schools planned its curriculum around three long lessons a day:

The three 90-minute lessons were planned on a two-week timetable for all year groups. Subject areas had considerable leeway to use the blocks of time in the way they thought best. Younger pupils adapted very quickly because this mirrored the arrangements in their primary schools. The longer lessons enabled pupils to reflect on their work, to revisit areas where necessary and to consolidate their understanding. This model continued to be successful even when the school roll grew rapidly. Since its introduction, pupils' progress had improved and standards had risen. Teachers reported that pupils' listening and speaking skills, as well as their ability to organise themselves and work in groups, had improved considerably.

20. Two of the primary schools had no fixed timetable. One of these, which had been judged outstanding by Ofsted in its previous inspection, organised the school day around themes. The National Curriculum was used as a point of reference to ensure that all key elements were covered and staff agreed the curriculum and content to be covered by each class. However, each class progressed through those elements in different ways, depending on individual pupils' different learning needs. Themes were developed according to the pupils' interests and abilities. The staff were sure that this arrangement had made a major contribution to the school's success in raising standards.

Alternative curriculum pathways

21. Since 2002, secondary schools have been able to prepare pupils for GCSE qualifications in vocational subjects as well as the more traditional ones.³ Both offer successful routes to further and higher education and, in schools nationally, the curriculum mix varies. Three of the secondary schools in the survey had structured their curriculum so that pupils could follow different pathways from Year 9 onwards. They received careful guidance in making their choices and the curriculum was sufficiently flexible for them to alter their pathways if their priorities changed. One result was that GCSE groups were arranged according to pupils' abilities and levels of attainment rather than age. This ensured that the teaching was closely matched to individuals' needs and challenged them appropriately. The pupils particularly liked having three years to complete their courses. The following is typical of the type of provision these schools made.

The GCSE classes included a mixture of pupils from Years 9 to 11. The pathways were:

- Entry level/level 1: This pathway was designed for pupils who preferred a work-related approach to learning, where they could develop skills in a practical context. Contributions from external providers, including colleges and industry, were an important element.
- Level 1/2: This pathway involved a combination of academic and vocational subjects. It was aimed at pupils working at level 1 in some subjects and level 2 in others.
- Level 2: This pathway was designed to challenge the more able students. They completed the courses in a shorter time than normal, thus covering more subjects over the three years than they would otherwise have done. For example, some Year 10 pupils had already taken two GCSEs in modern languages, one of them in Year 9.

³ See *Developing new vocational pathways: final report on the introduction of new GCSEs* (HMI 2051), Ofsted, 2004; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2051.

22. One of the secondary schools provided Key Stage 3 pupils with up to four different pathways. These ranged from courses designed to provide additional support for underachieving pupils to others that were intended to accelerate the progress of the more able pupils. Two of the secondary schools had introduced a separate Year 7 transition pathway for a small number of pupils who were likely to find the move from primary school difficult. These pupils spent most of their lessons in a class base where they were taught by a small group of teachers who knew them well. This arrangement was leading to improved behaviour, attitudes and achievement.

The Key Stage 3 curriculum in one school included three pathways: 'research', 'enterprise' and 'extension'. The first consisted of a flexible programme of cross-curricular practical enquiries to help pupils who were underachieving to develop greater independence. The 'enterprise' pathway used ICT extensively through areas such as music technology and drama. The most able pupils followed the 'extension' pathway which emphasised the connections between traditional subjects, put a particular focus on language acquisition, and included additional options such as astronomy.

23. Two elements were crucial to the success of this approach. First, the schools had to ensure that students were assigned correctly to pathways. They used a variety of assessments to gain a clear view of students' strengths and weaknesses. They involved them closely in deciding which pathway to follow and in regularly re-evaluating its appropriateness. Second, the schools had to ensure sufficient flexibility to enable students to transfer from one pathway to another if necessary. This proved particularly challenging because it often involved preparing individual timetables. A review of pathway provision had led several of the schools to increase the time for, and emphasis on, a central core of subjects – principally English, mathematics, science and information and communication technology – so that students did not lose momentum in these key areas.

Developing learning skills

24. Ten of the secondary schools surveyed introduced strategies designed specifically to develop pupils' learning skills.

One school had adapted a list of educational objectives and presented it in a way which the pupils could understand.⁴ They used this to analyse what they already knew and to decide how they could extend this further in order to achieve higher National Curriculum levels. Posters around the school summarising the main points reminded the pupils how to apply the

⁴ For further information, see: www.learningandteaching.info/learning/bloomtax.htm

principles in lessons. They were very enthusiastic about the approach and felt that it had made a definite contribution to their progress.

25. Some of the schools focused on developing learning skills within each lesson; others devoted specific lessons to it. One of the schools gave as much time in Key Stage 3 to developing learning skills as to teaching English and mathematics. As a result, pupils were given opportunities to develop research skills and sophisticated information and communication technology competences, as well as personal and social skills such as teamwork, negotiation, independent thinking, decision-making, self-review and target-setting. The pupils placed a very high value on this approach: 'It's what we've taken away from it and use. We've learnt loads of computer skills, how to communicate and how to present ourselves.'
26. All the primary schools visited focused, to different degrees, on the discrete development of pupils' learning skills. The schools felt that the activities had helped pupils to become aware of how they themselves learned effectively. One of the schools had developed a tailor-made programme to support pupils of varying ages who had similar learning difficulties. This had been very effective in developing social skills as well as key skills for learning.

In a series of lessons on rivers, Year 4 pupils were given considerable control over their own learning. Guided by the teacher, they identified the key questions and decided how they might find and record the answers. They were also asked to decide how best to organise their time. In the first week, they decided that everyone would work on the same question. In the second week, they modified their approach so that different groups worked on different questions. They then evaluated both approaches and came to the conclusion that they were most effective when they all worked together on the same question. The teacher's records showed that this process had prompted some very mature thinking about how best to approach the process of learning.

Collaboration with other schools and agencies

27. In three of the areas visited, groups of schools were working together on curriculum change. They were also receiving support from other providers, including external consultants. These area-wide developments built on earlier initiatives where the schools had already experienced the challenges and advantages of working collaboratively.
28. In two of the areas, the changes were prompted by a shared view that the curriculum lacked excitement for many pupils and that teachers had too few opportunities to be creative and to apply and develop their skills. Collaboration provided a valuable opportunity to share expertise and consider curriculum change from a wider perspective. In the third area, the changes were prompted by the local authority, as part of a large-scale restructuring of provision. In each

area, the collaboration focused initially on primary schools, with some involvement from secondary schools.

29. The particular focus of innovation differed in all three areas. In one, the focus was on creativity and the arts, particularly drama, to stimulate writing. Links with the Creative Partnerships initiative provided valuable opportunities for teachers and pupils to work with a range of artists and performers.⁵ In another area, the schools worked together to develop cross-curricular projects on themes, such as the proposal for a barrage across the River Severn. Each school chose a different theme but adopted a common approach, based on extensive use of role play, collaborative work and extended writing. There was some sharing of curriculum materials and ideas, but each school focused on creating a curriculum that met its pupils' particular needs. In the third area, the schools and the local authority worked together to increase curriculum flexibility and choice and to ensure a greater focus on skills-based learning.
30. Discussions with the teachers showed that contributions from carefully chosen, high calibre external consultants had been essential in informing their thinking. They had also benefited greatly from the training provided and from the opportunities to share ideas through local networks and working groups. A number of staff referred to this as 'contagious professionalism' and felt that it had boosted their morale, enthusiasm and teaching skills.

The impact of innovation

Teaching and learning

31. Inspection evidence, observations by senior managers and feedback from pupils showed that the successful innovations had had a significant impact on teaching and learning. The teachers were committed and enthusiastic and appreciated the opportunities they were being given, through the innovations, to develop professionally. One secondary school had combined with five others to establish a 'learning network'. Through this, expertise and strategies for teaching and learning were discussed and disseminated within the schools to strengthen planning and curriculum delivery. The teachers welcomed the way that this training matched their needs and circumstances.
32. In the schools that used curriculum time flexibly, the teachers spoke very positively about the advantages of being able to concentrate on a particular project or topic for an extended period. Reducing the number of times pupils moved from one lesson to another meant less disruption, more time for

⁵ Creative Partnerships is a national initiative, funded by the Government, to develop pupils' potential, ambition and imagination. It focuses on building sustainable partnerships between schools, creative and cultural organisations and individuals. See *Creative partnerships: initiative and impact* (HMI 2517), Ofsted, 2006; www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2517.

teaching and improved concentration. The extended blocks of time required careful planning from teachers, very good subject knowledge and a wide variety of teaching methods to maintain pupils' motivation and interest. Most of the teachers relished this challenge and the pupils were emphatic about the benefits. As many of them said, 'The teachers know you better.'

33. Thematic teaching was more common in the primary schools visited than the secondary schools. The activities seen were exciting, well constructed and focused very effectively on developing clearly identified skills. The pupils felt they had been fully involved in the changes and could explain the reasons for them. There were excellent examples of collaborative work where pupils helped each other to learn and worked together to refine and develop their ideas. They also made important contributions to their teachers' thinking, as the following example illustrates:

The pupils in a primary school used a 'thinking wall' effectively to write short notes in which they gave feedback and shared their ideas with the teacher. They were confident and honest in expressing their opinions and concerns. The teacher checked the notes regularly and discussed the comments with the authors in order to make best use of their ideas. Because they could see how the lessons were being adapted in response to their suggestions, the pupils felt they were more involved in and responsible for their learning.

34. In all the schools visited, the teachers thought that it was essential to establish good relationships with the pupils, to encourage them to be more involved in their learning and to take greater responsibility for it. One secondary school had a particularly successful approach to this.

There was an exceptionally positive rapport between the pupils and staff in this school. A number of 'pupil ambassadors' regularly contributed to the teachers' professional development programme to help staff understand the impact of their actions on learners. These ambassadors fed back what they had learnt to the rest of the school community. They also contributed with what the headteacher described as 'courteous and constructive ruthlessness' to evaluating teaching strategies and classroom management. Their engagement in the process of teaching and learning was a major factor in the school's medium- and long-term planning.

35. In some schools, the innovation was confined to one key stage or year group and therefore not all staff were involved. Occasionally, this caused problems. Staff who were unfamiliar with the new developments did not always capitalise on the pupils' improved learning skills, with the result that the pupils sometimes felt uncomfortable when they returned to what they described as the 'old type' of lessons. In one school, for example, the pupils had become used to ready access to their wireless laptops as part of a research-based approach to learning. This encouraged them to work independently and think more widely

about aspects of their work. In lessons that did not use the same approach and relied heavily on exposition from the teacher, the pupils became restless and their concentration faltered. This highlighted the importance of ensuring that all staff understand the benefits of new approaches and are able to meet pupils' higher expectations.

Impact on learners' achievements and personal development

36. In all the schools visited where innovations had been well planned and delivered, evidence from lesson observations, data on pupils' progress, and feedback from teachers and pupils showed that the innovations were having a positive impact on pupils' achievement and personal development. In five of the primary schools and six of the secondary schools, the innovations had contributed to improved test and examination results. There had been particular improvements in the Key Stage 4 results in three of the secondary schools. In many of the schools, the innovations were relatively new and it was therefore too early for the impact on test results to be seen. However, other evidence pointed to a positive impact on pupils' learning. In all but two of the schools visited, pupils were making good or better progress in the lessons seen. Comparisons with evidence from earlier inspections showed clear improvement since the innovations had been introduced.
37. In a small minority of cases, pupils had poor social skills, exceptionally weak levels of literacy and numeracy and very challenging behaviour. In these circumstances, the schools had decided to concentrate on improving pupils' personal development and learning skills initially rather than focusing closely on external tests. In these cases, too, there had been improvements.
38. The most successful innovations focused on developing a range of essential skills and attitudes for pupils' personal development, which underpinned their ability to learn effectively. The pupils who discussed their work with inspectors during the survey often described ways that specific initiatives had enabled them to develop skills that they could apply across several curriculum areas.

Year 10 pupils described how, in Key Stage 3, they had been introduced to a wide range of learning skills and techniques. The efficiency and rigour with which these various approaches had been taught meant that the pupils now had a 'mental toolkit' which they could apply confidently across the curriculum. This had been a major contributor to their present success.

39. The two special schools visited faced particular challenges in developing a curriculum that was relevant to their pupils' interests and their particular learning difficulties and/or disabilities. In one of the schools, innovation developed from seeking to measure students' progress accurately, create incentives and reward achievement. It made personal, social and health

education its own core subject and linked the curriculum plans and targets to specific personal goals for the pupils.

One of the school's key strengths was its emphasis on what each pupil could, rather than could not, achieve. The teachers refined and extended the established P scales to provide clear, realistic milestones on which they based their planning for and assessment of progress.⁶ All the pupils, including those with profound and multiple disabilities, were challenged and supported to use their skills of communication, numeracy and information and communication technology to maximum effect, through a combination of methods, including signing. The school placed considerable emphasis on ensuring that all pupils increased their personal independence and received advice on all the opportunities available. As a result, a significant proportion of them progressed to further education, training or employment.

40. The other special school catered for secondary-aged boys with complex social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. They entered the school with low levels of literacy, often feeling that education was irrelevant to them. Innovation stemmed from the school's need to create a curriculum that would engage them and help their personal growth, in an atmosphere of respect and trust.

As far as possible, lessons were taught off-site, were practical, and focused strongly on providing pupils with essential experiences that many of them had missed during their lives. They all had access to the core and foundation curriculum, although they did not generally realise this. Lessons were planned around a series of relevant themes. 'My passport', for example, developed basic skills of literacy, numeracy and communication. 'My body' incorporated a range of science topics. 'My future' focused on vocational and work-related learning. The school's records showed that this approach had resulted in an increase each year in academic and vocational attainment. The pupils' appreciation of what was being done for them was unanimous. They had clear ideas about what they wanted to do in the future. The previous year, pupils' destinations on leaving included direct entry to employment, enrolment on college courses and acceptance on to apprenticeship schemes.

41. The curriculum innovations in the survey generally provided strong support for pupils' social development. From early on, they had many opportunities to work collaboratively, in pairs and in groups, and to develop the skills of teamwork and leadership. They also had rich opportunities for discussion and debate, often with representatives from the wider community and business. This was

⁶ For further information on P scales and P levels, see:
www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/secondary/keystage3/issues/focus/pscales/what/eyfs/

more than an academic exercise, since they tackled real issues with real people. There were also further advantages:

The introduction of a skills-based curriculum into Year 7 had led to a significant improvement in pupils' behaviour. They found the work relevant and interesting and could see for themselves that they were making progress. Although the skills-based lessons accounted for almost half the curriculum time, they accounted for only 8% of the total number of referrals for misbehaviour. Significantly, the focus on teamwork and group work provided them with the skills to defuse inflammatory situations and to negotiate solutions to disagreements.

42. The schools had to develop new ways to assess progress where innovation focused on developing skills and attitudes. The following was typical of the good practice found in the survey:

A group of schools had worked together to produce a framework to assess improvements in pupils' learning skills and their attitudes to their work. One of the schools applied the framework to assessment in a newly introduced course in Year 7. The results showed that the pupils were making rapid progress compared with their peers in this and other schools. The main reason was that they understood the framework very well and were able to use it to set themselves targets for further improvement.

Successful innovation

Evaluating the success of innovation

43. The schools that were most successful in introducing innovation had effective, well established systems to judge its impact on pupils' progress and attainment. They regularly scrutinised data from internal and external tests and examinations and used the information to adjust what they did.

In one of the schools, a very effective system of frequent, detailed assessments called 'the flight path' involved teachers assessing pupils' effort, as well as their academic performance, to determine the extent to which one affected the other. They used the information for detailed discussions with the pupils and their parents. They agreed a 'flight path' towards a series of challenging targets and plotted each pupil's progress. The school's evaluation showed that the approach had helped pupils to make progress in their learning.

44. The schools often used questionnaires to gather the views of pupils, teachers, middle managers, parents and carers. Parents were usually positive about innovation, once they were convinced of its value:

After hearing his Year 8 son present a self-review, one father commented: 'School has a new meaning now. The portfolio presentations were something else! To see your child excited about what he is doing thrills me. He has grown so much in just two terms!'

45. To evaluate the impact of the changes, some of the schools used external review through partnership with other schools or by using consultants, universities and other agencies.

The changes in one school were based on an action-research model. At each stage, representatives from higher education and other outside agencies provided external assessments of progress against defined outcomes and measures of impact. The school modified its approach in the light of feedback. This led to a detailed understanding of what did or did not work and to a continually evolving methodology.

46. Two schools in the survey tracked the processes of change, but did not consider its impact on achievement and standards sufficiently. As a result, pupils' performance in national tests declined. There was a danger of the same thing happening in two other schools. However, through robust self-evaluation, they identified the problem early enough to make the necessary changes.
47. The most successful schools related the monitoring of specific innovations to their overall self-evaluation. As part of their contribution to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's co-development network, the staff in one school helped to design a model to review key areas of its work.⁷ Four criterion-referenced levels were used to determine how well each department or subject area was performing in relation to each of the key questions on Ofsted's school self-evaluation form. Having refined the model, the teachers applied it to testing the impact and effectiveness of specific innovations. Other local schools also used it very effectively for similar purposes.

Leading and managing innovation and change

48. Successful curriculum innovation was linked to strong leadership. Senior leaders had a clear vision, underpinned by an understanding of current educational thinking, national and international practice, and by a detailed knowledge of their schools. This gave them confidence to be bold where necessary. Through regular communication and consultation with governors, staff, parents, carers and pupils, they ensured that the rationale and aims of the innovation were widely understood and therefore more likely to be supported.

The experienced headteacher of a secondary school reached the conclusion that 'you can do a lot more in less time than people think'. His

⁷ The network aims to bring together schools that are developing their curriculum to encourage mutual support and challenge. See www.qca.org.uk/qca_16820.aspx.

conviction gave impetus to his school's innovative approach to timetabling and use of resources, with a very positive impact on results, attendance and behaviour.

49. Effective leaders had a clear understanding of the extent of innovation which was likely to be successful in their school at a given time. Although another member of staff might be responsible for leading a particular innovation, success depended very heavily on the headteacher's clear direction and support to ensure that barriers to change were minimised. Implementing a new curriculum required sensitivity, care, and purposefulness without undue haste.
50. The most successful schools put considerable emphasis on developing effective leadership across the school. Even those with a largely thematic curriculum had robust structures and processes to ensure that subject areas were effectively led and coordinated and that there was close monitoring of quality and standards.
51. Planning in these schools was thorough. There were clearly defined baselines, unambiguous criteria for success, and detailed identification of responsibilities for implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Because they had been involved in devising the plans, all the staff understood them and what was expected. This ensured that bureaucracy and paperwork were kept to a minimum.
52. The schools put considerable emphasis on rigorous professional debate. One described itself as a 'community of enquiry'. Well focused training gave them the necessary skills and motivation to deliver the changes effectively. Support from senior staff gave them the confidence to take risks and try new approaches. In this way, the schools created a strong culture of innovation which was supported by existing staff and quickly absorbed by newcomers. Those involved were able to reflect honestly on their work without feeling threatened. As one teacher commented: 'There are no fragile egos here.'

Notes

Between April 2006 and December 2007, Her Majesty's Inspectors visited 16 secondary schools, 12 primary schools and two special schools that were involved in developing the curriculum in new ways. The inspectors also gathered evidence from a focus group of six primary schools, and through inspectors' discussions in three areas where groups of schools were working together on curriculum change.

Further information

Annex: Sources of evidence

Schools visited for the survey

Ashton-on-Mersey School, Sale*

Balsall Common Primary School, Solihull
 Bealings School, Woodbridge, Suffolk*
 Bishops Park College, Clacton-on-Sea, Essex*
 Bridgemary Community Sports College, Gosport, Hampshire*
 Champion School, Northampton
 Chafford Hundred Campus Secondary School, Thurrock*
 Cramlington Community High School, Cramlington, Northumberland*
 Fernwood School, Nottingham City*
 Filsham Valley School, St Leonards-on-Sea, East Sussex
 Glyne Gap School, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex
 Greasby Junior School, Greasby, Wirral
 Harewood Junior School, Gloucester*
 Hollingworth College, Rochdale
 Horden Nursery School, Durham
 Ian Mikardo High School, Tower Hamlets*
 Kesgrave High School, Suffolk
 Leasowes Community College, Dudley*
 Lydney C of E Primary School, Gloucestershire
 Malvin's Close First School, Blyth, Northumberland
 Montgomery High School, Blackpool*
 Quilters Infant School, Billericay, Essex
 Redbridge Community School, Southampton*
 St Catherine's RC Primary School, Manchester
 St John's RC First School, Norwich, Norfolk
 St John's School and Community College, Marlborough, Wiltshire
 The City Academy Bristol, City of Bristol*
 The Tyrrells School, Chelmsford, Essex
 Top Valley School, Nottingham City*
 Westmeads Community Infant School, Whitstable, Kent.

*Schools involved in a Qualifications and Curriculum Authority curriculum development project.

Further sources of evidence

Primary schools contributing to the forum group meeting:

Argyle Primary, Camden
 Cannon Lane First School, Harrow
 Claremont Primary, Tunbridge Wells, Kent
 Dulwich Village C of E Infant, Southwark
 Grafton Primary, Islington.
 Lauriston Primary, Hackney
 Westmeads Community Infant school, Whitstable, Kent

Inspectors also held discussions with representatives from:

Gloucester Excellence Cluster

Wirral Local Authority
Northern Ireland Education Boards.