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Research Associate Summary Report

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Resource

Promoting a creative curriculum and achieving high standards

Primary leadership considerations

Spring 2010

Introduction

The development of a revised national primary curriculum is likely to raise questions for school leaders about how its introduction will best be led and its aims upheld. This study set out to explore in a small sample of schools responses to the question, 'How do schools provide a creative, cross-curricular, skills-based curriculum and achieve high standards?'. The elements within this question strongly resonate with what the revised curriculum has set out to achieve through its emphasis on areas of learning and the essentials for learning and life. The central place of creativity is indeed stated very clearly in Ed Balls's remit letter to Sir Jim Rose (DCSF 2009: 142):

"It must provide all pupils with a broad and balanced entitlement to learning which encourages creativity and inspires in them a commitment to learning that will last a lifetime."

It is hoped that this study's findings, while based on a small sample, might aid school leaders in considering some of the key leadership components required in establishing and sustaining such a curriculum.

Methodology

An initial questionnaire was sent to 10 primary schools in North Hampshire based on knowledge of their cross-curricular approach and identification of high standards as measured by SATS attainment. From this initial questionnaire, three case study schools were identified for further research. This

comprised separate semi-structured interviews with the headteacher and a senior leader with key responsibility for curriculum leadership, alongside a learning-focused 'tour' of each school.

Findings

The questionnaire responses and interviews identified the following six key features of sustaining a successful creative curriculum and achieving high standards:

1. Establishing a clear curriculum vision

"Creativity is vital to enable children to achieve high standards. By being creative children learn to think for themselves, become adaptable and learn key skills for life. It plays an important part in the curriculum by motivating and engaging the children and enabling them to become more independent and confident learners."
(headteacher)

The schools' visions, while developed with staff, were nevertheless strongly reflective of the headteachers' perspectives on what effective primary years learning should comprise. A key role for the headteacher was working with existing staff to secure a whole-school understanding and approach, as well as recruiting teachers who would be supportive of it. Key emphases within these curriculum visions were:

- **Skills development:** embedding learning and curriculum skills that children would likely need in later life.
- **Cross-curricular links that encourage creativity:** establishing links that require children to use their learning and skills imaginatively within applied contexts.
- **Meeting children's needs and interests:** an inclusive approach in which children are able to receive appropriate challenge
 - the use of intervention strategies for children who are underperforming or need additional support; for example in one school 23 different support groups for children were used involving learning support assistants, senior leaders, a play therapist and community volunteers
 - responding to children's interests, for example a project on 'flight' for a class with a high proportion of boys
 - gauging children's starting points and empowering them to influence what they would like to learn about and to exercise appropriate choice
 - having an outcome that is motivating for children.

2. Supporting staff learning

"All together we are making the difference by sharing good practice and working together." (headteacher)

There was a strong emphasis on the headteacher and other senior leaders leading by example and establishing structures that would support curriculum development and reinforce its principles, for example through:

- enabling the sharing of ideas such as through providing PPA (planning, preparation and assessment) time on the same day for year teams, or in one case, the whole school
- promoting thinking and dialogue about the curriculum – one headteacher spoke of staff being at an 'intellectual activity level' that enabled them to effectively develop creative approaches
- senior leaders modelling the expected curriculum approach with staff in classes such as through co-planning, teaching and reviewing
- senior staff delivering curriculum INSET

3. Enabling professional autonomy

This involved empowering staff to plan and organise learning to meet their children's needs within a framework of accountability, for example:

- co-planning might be developed within a year team but was subsequently adapted by individual teachers to meet their particular class's needs
- as the curriculum changes and develops teachers have the autonomy to make any changes they feel would benefit their children

4. Securing accountability

- Maintaining a culture of expectation
 - senior leaders expected the corporate approach to be used and monitored planning, challenging staff if expectations were not met.
- Monitoring pupil progress in core subjects through regular programmed meetings between the headteacher and each classteacher informing intervention planning where required.
- Using teaching and learning responsibility (TLR) posts in one instance to promote developments within the curriculum.
- Whole-school moderation of work.

5. Engaging others

For example,

Parents:

- communicating the curriculum through regular written materials such as curriculum newsletters
- inviting parental contribution within and outside school
- providing opportunities for parents to be an audience for learning

Governors:

- promoting dialogue with governors to ensure they share the curriculum philosophy and encouraging visits to see this in action

6. Creating and maintaining an open, supportive school culture

Those interviewed highlighted the importance of whole-school cultural elements that underpinned their schools' work, including:

- a belief in the importance of the creative curriculum
- positive relationships and a belief that all can achieve
- good communication with all stakeholders
- valuing of individuals' contributions
- encouraging independence and responsibility in all
- high expectations of all

Conclusion

The clear message from the leaders in these schools was that high standards result from an emphasis on creative, cross-curricular and skills-based learning, engendering an enjoyment of learning but with a rigorous emphasis on skills development and progress. Central to its achievement was the role of headteachers and other senior leaders in establishing and sustaining the curriculum model, securing accountability but empowering teachers to shape provision to meet children's needs.

This approach strongly reflects the three core elements of learning-centred leadership (NCSL 2004): monitoring, modelling and dialogue. Those in leadership positions engaged strongly in monitoring and modelling practice and engaged in regular dialogue with staff focused on practice and progress. Alongside this was the development of a positive whole-school culture. In combination, these features were central to their success.

Implications for leadership

Headteachers and other senior leaders implementing curriculum development, including the impending introduction of a new primary national curriculum which values creativity, might like to consider the following:

- How they will develop a shared vision for a curriculum that is appropriate for the children they serve and communicate this to the school community.
- How senior and team leaders will model curriculum development and support its implementation.
- How structures can facilitate staff working together, creating dialogue around creative approaches and the sharing of good practice.
- How professional autonomy can be empowered so that teachers have flexibility to match the curriculum to their children's needs and interests.
- Which accountability structures can be used to help secure high standards.
- How the school's cultural practices will support curriculum development and the achievement of high standards.

References

DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families), 2009, Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum: Final report, Nottingham, DCSF Publications

NCSL (National College for School Leadership), 2004, Learning-centred Leadership, Nottingham, NCSL

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the headteachers, deputy and assistant headteachers – Barbara Cook, Kate Fuller, Alison Wyld, Susan Wall, Ruth Murray and Bev Ross – for all their help.

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