

Enjoyment as a basis for learning: the new secondary National Curriculum and the Specialised Diplomas

Nigel Rayment considers the extent to which the new secondary National Curriculum and the Specialised Diplomas might provide opportunities to promote education as described in DEA's mission.

Nigel Rayment is a director of Magnified Learning. He works across the primary, secondary and learning and skills sectors to plan and deliver integrated sustainable development and enterprise learning, related CPD and strategic support.

In a recent *Guardian* column Jenni Russell related the following to illustrate the impact of a school system focused on the attainment of targets rather than the development of thinking:

“a history teacher, in an apparently excellent state school ... finished teaching his 14-year-olds about the first world war on a Tuesday. The following Thursday the class began studying the rise of Nazi Germany, 1933-39. After 20 minutes one child put her hand up to ask what had happened between 1918 and 1933. ‘We really don’t have the time to go into that now,’ the teacher said. So they never did.”¹

Apocryphal though this may be, it nevertheless has a core of truth. Since its introduction in 1988 the English National Curriculum has robbed secondary schools of the time and space, and threatened the profession’s capacity, to engage and develop learners’ appetites for questioning the “why” of things. And developing appetites so this question becomes a matter of habit is crucial for real progress towards DEA’s mission to promote education that puts learning in a global context, fostering critical and creative thinking; self-awareness and open-mindedness towards difference; understanding of global issues and power relationships; and optimism and action for a better world.

Tomlinson’s 14-19 reform report of 2004 advocated a learner-led extended project, designed to engender creativity and “*encourage cross-boundary and/or in-depth learning*”²; personal reviews “*at the heart of the diploma, ensuring that young people integrate what they have learnt from different parts of the diploma, including wider activities*”³ and a reduced assessment burden. Had Tomlinson’s proposals been adopted, they might have gone some way to remedying the current situation, the adoption of a radically new framework impelling government to support secondary schools to reconnect with a more exploratory approach to learning and professionals to abandon their silos and undertake their own journeys of discovery into inter-disciplinarity. Of course, this didn’t happen; perhaps even Tomlinson didn’t really believe it would. Yet vestiges of his thinking persist in the new secondary National Curriculum launched in September of this year and in the Specialised Diplomas, the first five of which will be available from September 2008.

On first inspection, the signs look promising. The QCA's curriculum planning guidance for Specialised Diplomas speaks of consortia having to answer "key" questions such as "*how are global, environmental, enterprise and other dimensions addressed?*".⁴ And the revised National Curriculum includes the six enticingly named Personal, Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS): Independent enquirers; Creative thinkers; Reflective learners; Team workers; Self-managers; and Effective participators. If thoughtfully implemented, these PLTS could complement DEA's mission of "*critical and creative thinking; self-awareness and open-mindedness towards difference; understanding of global issues and power relationships; and optimism and action for a better world*".

Moreover, the QCA trumpets the revised National Curriculum as one designed to "*enable all young people to become: successful learners who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve*".⁵ The prominence here of the enjoyment of learning could hardly be more welcome. England is said to have the most heavily tested school learners in the world, a situation which, according to the Observer, has led schools "*to drop interesting lessons in favour of drilling pupils for exams with a 'spoon-feeding approach' and to 'children as young as nine ... becoming disillusioned with school'*".⁶ Stories such as these have disturbing echoes of the constricting miseries of the nineteenth century school house as satirised by Dickens in *Hard Times* (1854), an environment in which the school's patron Thomas Gradgrind could perceive pupils as "*little vessels ... ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim*".⁷

It is disappointing then, that when the QCA expands upon the qualities possessed by successful learners, "*enjoy learning and are motivated to achieve the best they can now and in the future*" is shunted to the foot of a list of eight, which begins with the comparatively arid "*have the essential learning skills of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology*".⁸ This is not to say these functional skills are unimportant, but rather that for learners to fully realise their learning skills potential, taking pleasure in the processes of learning must surely come first. Moreover, there might even be a pragmatic argument that at least one of these skills areas should not command a position at the head of the QCA's list. Is it, for instance, genuinely feasible or desirable for secondary schools to keep pace with the revolutions in ICT taking place in industry and commerce? Might it not be more worthwhile to develop young people's

ability to adapt to and manage change rather than to instruct them in the use of specific applications likely to be obsolete by the time they reach employment? It is one of the problems with knowledge and with hard skills that, increasingly, they can have a very limited shelf-life. In his keynote address at 2005's UK launch of the UNESCO Decade for ESD, William Scott said the following:

*"is it to be skills? Or knowledge and understanding? Well, it may be both, but it all looks suspiciously neat and tidy, as though we know with confidence what we need to do. Given that we can't possibly know this, maybe we need another approach. There is another possibility for thinking about learning develop learners' ability to make sound choices in the face of the inherent complexity and uncertainty of the future."*⁹

Scott's observations make perfect sense in the context of the economic, civic/social and environmental challenges posed by globalisation and attendant phenomena such as the information revolution. From this perspective it is possible to argue that the development of reflexivity, creativity and holistic systems thinking should take pre-eminence over hard skills and even knowledge. The recognition of the fleeting value of knowledge is nothing new. John Holt anticipated Scott's position in 1964 when he explained, *"since we cannot know what knowledge will be needed in the future, it is senseless to try to teach it in advance. Instead we should try to turn out people who love learning so much and learn so well, that they will be able to learn whatever needs to be learned."*¹⁰

If, then, we concur with Scott's Bath University colleague Stephen Gough that, *"to test for a sustainable society, one of the questions you would ask would be: Are people learning all the time in this society?"*¹¹, the ultimate question has to be how do we *"turn out people who love learning"*?

Clearly there is no simple answer. Professionals may identify a range of barriers, including funding constraints, teaching overload, discipline issues, and initiative fatigue. The latter is particularly significant. Certainly, successive governments have been unhelpful to schools in their restless and uncoordinated introduction of policy. It is equally true, though, that change will be a dominant feature in the decades to come for today's students. Schools need to acknowledge this fact and use their management of

change to become exemplars of learning organisations, so that the enjoyment of learning, which they are now charged with developing, is habitually and transparently modelled by all members of the school community and in all school activities and interactions. In *Creating a Learning School*, Middlewood et al argue that this means “*headteachers will need to concentrate less on being headteachers and far more on becoming headlearners*”.¹² This would certainly be a move in the right direction (though we might be tempted to question its restatement of the hierarchical structure of schools) because as the Independent Study into School Leadership (2007) found, “*school leaders tend to see policy initiatives as separate and compartmentalised, rather than as part of an integrated programme of school reform.*”¹³ For staff this can lead to feelings of disempowerment and disenchantment.

In *Feeling the Strain: an overview on the literature of teachers’ stress* (2002) Wilson cites Fullan’s research which found school changes that are experienced by staff as “*fragmented and incoherent ... problems inherent in any ‘top down’ systemic change in which a vision of the whole may be only understood by a few in key positions*”¹⁴ are a central source of stress. In an authentic learning school, staff at all levels and in all functions would be actively engaged in critical enquiry, reflection and decision making, and would understand that the process of change is ongoing and, moreover, exciting. In other words, they would be adept at what Freire defines as integration, that is, not simply adapting to new realities, but making critical choices and *transforming* those new and emerging realities.¹⁵ The probable outcome of adopting such an approach would be conspicuous enjoyment of the creative opportunities presented by change and a renewed taste for continuous professional development. The certain outcome of not adopting such an approach is continued dissatisfaction with, and low levels of enthusiasm for, organisational change. This will be conspicuous to students, who, instead of understanding change as an opportunity to innovate and as one of the main attractions of the teaching profession, will themselves become resistant to change.

And if schools are not spectacularly successful at engaging staff fully in the processes of change management, they can be less effective still in using policy change as a platform for student learning. Ofsted’s *Food in Schools* report attributes some of the failures associated with the introduction of new, healthier meals to schools’ “*lack of consultation*

with pupils and parents about the new arrangements".¹⁶ Higher hopes are inspired by the recent publication of the DCSF Carbon Detectives' Kit¹⁷, which hands a significant role in schools' carbon auditing and action planning to students. One concern about the DCSF eight doorways for sustainable schools framework is that it risks importing the silo mentality of schools to the realm of sustainable development.¹⁸ The Carbon Detectives' Kit could prove a helpful tool in building students' capacity for "cross-boundary learning" within the sustainability themes, for instance those of food, transport and community. This could bring organisational and community change with significant implications for students, avoid for them the dissatisfaction provoked by Fullan's fragmentation, and generate enjoyment of learning and the nourishment accruing from effective participation and the attendant rewards of self-determination. All the same, the potential of the QCA's Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) and the promotion of enjoyment of learning are dependent on very significant capacity building and professional development for staff. Real impact will be achieved only if teachers demonstrably enjoy holistic and systems thinking and are able to explicitly draw out the rich implications of this type of learning for students, society and the environment. DCFS has allocated one extra day's funded training to prepare schools for the Specialised Diplomas and a package of "face-to-face", online and hard-copy support for the new National Curriculum. It is not clear from this that government appreciates the extent of development work required to achieve the effective implementation of its new frameworks.

The prospects for the Specialised Diplomas are further threatened by a self-defeating instrumentalism. An important role in shaping the content of the Diplomas has been played by the CBI. And what the CBI wants is that the *"skills infrastructure should be streamlined, and public funds focused on the economically valuable skills employers need"*.¹⁹ The purpose of this is to *"enable us all [sic] to prosper in tomorrow's competitive global economy"*.²⁰ Leaving aside the evident tensions between such a vision and the sustainability of planet and communities, Richard Layard's work has amply demonstrated the futility of pursuing economic wealth as a path to personal happiness. In the decades following the Second World War, a *"golden period of economic growth"* for the North, depression soared.²¹

We have a choice. On the one hand our schools can continue to respond in a piecemeal fashion to centrally determined policies, acting as servants to an acquisitive, outcome-driven functionality. On the other, they can develop their own strategic integration of new and emerging realities, celebrate the deep psychological rewards to be found in the apprehension of connections and gestalt - or wholeness - and embrace learning as a joy.

Jenni Russell's history student sought to know how World War One and the post war settlement, influenced developments in Europe in the years that followed. As things stand, it may be a forlorn hope that either the revised National Curriculum or the Specialised Diplomas will do much to inspire students to question what went wrong in the years following World War Two and to reflect on what this means for their future.

¹ Russell J, "This education system fails children by teaching them to parrot, not think" *The Guardian* 25 September 2007 <http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/comment/story/0,,2176606,00.html>

² DfES, 14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform: final report of the working group on 14-19 reform, 2004 p 33

³ *Ibid*, p11

⁴ QCA, *Design for Success: shaping your curriculum to incorporate the diploma* (2007), p15

⁵ QCA, "The aims of the curriculum", 2007, http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/uploads/aims_of_the_curriculum

⁶ Asthana A, "School stress hits new peak as exams loom" *the Observer*, 20 May 2007

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/sats/story/0,,2084533,00.html>

⁷ Dickens C, *Hard Times* (1854) Penguin Classics, 1995, p 9

⁸ The Aims of the Curriculum (2007) QCA

⁹ ESD: what sort of Decade? What sort of Learning?

William Scott Centre for Research in Education and the Environment; University of Bath
Keynote address at the UK launch of the Unesco Decade for ESD December 13th 2005 p6

¹⁰ Holt, J, (1964), *How Children Fail*, Penguin

¹¹ Gough, S (2003), in *Learning the Sustainability Lesson, tenth report of session 2002-03, Volume 2*, House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, EV 20

¹² Middlewood D, Parker R, Beere J *Creating a Learning School* PCP 2005, p37

¹³ DfES, *Independent Study into School Leadership*, (2007), p27

¹⁴ Wilson V, *Feeling the Strain: an overview of the literature on teachers' stress*, The Scottish Council for Research in Education, July 2002, p10

¹⁵ Freire, P *Education for Critical Consciousness*, (1974) Continuum Books, 2005, p4

¹⁶ Ofsted, *Food in Schools: encouraging healthier eating*, October 2007, p4

¹⁷ <http://www.carbondetectives.org.uk/content/home/index.html>, May 2007

¹⁸ DfES, *Sustainable Schools for Pupils, Communities and the Environment: an action plan for the DfES*, 2007

¹⁹ CBI, *Shaping up for the Future: the business vision for education and skills*, April 2007, p10

²⁰ CBI, *Shaping up for the Future: the business vision for education and skills*, April 2007, p4

²¹ Layard R, "Happiness: has social science a clue?" first Robbins Lecture LSE lecture 27 February 2003, <http://cep.lse.ac.uk> p20