FORUM
Volume 53, Number 1, 2011
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

Curriculum Autonomy through Curriculum Expertise

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ABSTRACT The author argues that the decisions primary teachers make about the curriculum need to be informed by well-developed expertise in the subjects they are planning and teaching. This expertise is necessary when teachers are exercising professional autonomy in areas such as curriculum design, securing breadth and balance, and managing curriculum content. The importance of subject expertise is presented against a backdrop of uncertainty about the primary curriculum, the removal of structures and systems that teachers have become used to and the legacy of years of insufficient training for teachers in the non-core subjects. In conclusion, he suggests that professional development needs to build on, rather than discard, curriculum planning used for many years by identifying the principles on which it is organised so that teachers are able to move their practice forward from a secure base.

Curriculum Vacuum

Whole curriculum development is currently on hold in many primary schools in England. In the prevailing climate of compliance where schools have become accustomed to waiting for the next Government strategy, framework or initiative, there is an understandable reluctance to spend time and effort re-shaping the curriculum only to find that things will have to change at a later date.

Following the abandonment of Rose's proposals for the new primary curriculum, we have now entered a further round of National Curriculum review and consultation. The revised 'core subject' programmes of study that emerge from this process will be implemented in schools in September 2013, with programmes of study for other subjects due for first teaching in September 2014. On top of this, central funding and support for the National Strategies is being withdrawn in April 2011, and organisations such as the Qualifications

and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) and British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta) that have traditionally provided curriculum leadership and guidance for schools will either reduce in size or be abolished. At a local level, there will also be a significantly reduced capacity in many local authorities to support primary schools with curriculum development.

With so much that has become familiar to primary schools being withdrawn, there is a strong sense that curriculum 'vacuum' has been created. However, it is equally clear that this will not be filled by centrally prescribed curriculum content across the full breadth of the primary curriculum. The Government is unequivocal in its education White Paper (DfE, 2010) that it expects a dramatic shift in the relationship between schools and the state. The intention is for much of the control and power that has resided at local and national levels in recent years to be transferred directly to schools:

> It is our ambition to reduce unnecessary prescription, bureaucracy and central control throughout our education system. That means taking a new approach towards the curriculum. At over 200 pages, the guidance on the National Curriculum is weighing teachers down and squeezing out room for innovation, creativity, deep learning and intellectual exploration. The National Curriculum should set out only the essential knowledge and understanding that all children should acquire and leave teachers to decide how to teach this most effectively. (DfE, 2010, p. 40)

In relation to pedagogy, the general expectation is that schools, working both individually and collaboratively, are best placed to make decisions about how children are taught; restoring the principle that the 'how' of teaching and learning is a matter for schools rather than Government. Similarly, for the curriculum, the onus will be very much on schools to make their own, independent decisions about the range and depth of what children will learn. Although there will be a requirement for all schools to secure breadth and balance across the curriculum, the new National Curriculum is likely to prescribe statutory content for only part of this. A new era for primary education will require some fairly radical re-thinking by schools: a paradigm shift where the notion of the 'school curriculum' becomes increasingly important.

Brave New World

How will primary schools review, revise and implement a balanced and broadly-based curriculum in a post-Rose, post-National Strategies, post-QCDA environment? The language of the White Paper sets the scene for a new, hands-off approach from Government in its relationship with schools. It makes numerous references to professional 'autonomy' and to school 'freedom' which

are seen as central to raising children's achievement. But on what basis will these independent decisions about the curriculum be made?

Some schools have been using the increasing autonomy available to them to address key issues with their curriculum planning – but with mixed results. In a quest to inject increased creativity and manageability into the curriculum, a number of schools have already invested heavily in 'off-the-shelf' curriculum packages, sometimes discarding them when they fail to deliver what was expected. Under the banner of the 'creative curriculum', an even greater number of schools have organised the non-core subjects around topics and themes in order to increase children's levels of engagement and motivation. However, evidence from Ofsted (2010) suggests that, when not well planned, this approach can have a negative impact of children's learning, marginalising some subjects and limiting progression in knowledge and skills. In both cases, schools are clearly making use of the freedoms at their disposal to fix weaknesses in the curriculum, but the impact on the quality of teaching and learning has sometimes been negligible or even counterproductive.

Subject Expertise

Purchasing ready-made curriculum packages or developing more creative approaches to curriculum planning inevitability entails some risk. In fact, whatever strategies schools use to develop or re-design the curriculum, there are never any absolute guarantees that they will succeed. However, decisions about the curriculum are far more likely to have a positive effect on children's learning if they are made against a backdrop of agreed aims and principles, solid evidence about what works well and a good level of subject expertise. Whole-school aims and principles, backed by strong leadership, have always been essential in securing children's entitlement to the breadth, balance and high quality that they need; driving the curriculum with aims and principles will become even more vital when National Curriculum statutory requirements are slimmed down. Research-based evidence and professional experience are equally important in helping to configure the curriculum in ways which will create the optimum conditions for children to achieve.

Well-developed subject expertise can also be deployed to great advantage when making decisions about the curriculum. It enables teachers to thoroughly dissect commercial curriculum packages prior to purchase; it enables them to critically evaluate the quality and integrity of whole curriculum planning models developed by their own and other schools; and it ensures that the progression, coverage and depth of essential aspects of children's learning are maintained when using a cross-curricular approach. In addition, subject expertise is key to addressing three questions that are central to the effective functioning of every primary school. How can a genuinely broad and balanced curriculum be achieved? How can the curriculum be made sufficiently manageable within the constraints of the teaching time available? How can the curriculum be taught in a way that engages and motivates children?

Breadth and Balance

Despite numerous demands and pressures in recent years, most primary schools aim to provide a wide of range of learning experiences in key stages 1 and 2 and this is important because evidence gathered by the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2009) suggests that schools who achieve the highest standards in the 'basics' of English and mathematics often have a broad, balanced and well taught curriculum. This is put succinctly in the Review's final report: 'The evidence could not be clearer. If breadth is attained, so are standards. If breadth is sacrificed, so are standards.' (Alexander, 2009, p. p.215) But without sufficient expertise across the curriculum the range and quality of activities that teachers actually carry out in the classroom can be severely curtailed. In these circumstances, the curriculum is broad and balanced on paper, but much less so in practice. As the review asserts 'a truly 'whole' curriculum is one where the quality and seriousness of the teaching are consistently high across all its aspects, regardless of how much time is allocated to them. Breadth and balance are about the quality of provision no less than the allocation of time.' (Alexander, 2009, p.243)

Curriculum Manageability

From the outset, Sir Jim Rose put at the centre of his proposals for a new primary curriculum the question of curriculum overcrowding and manageability. Indeed, the problem of how to fit the content of the current National Curriculum as well as other key aspects of children's learning into the time available continues, almost universally, to be recognised by primary schools as a barrier to effective curriculum design. Rose famously referred to the dilemma as 'quarts into pint pots'. However, Alexander (2009) suggests that this problem is less to do with the content of the National Curriculum than the availability of expertise required to turn the programmes of study into viable projects, units of work and lessons within the resources and time available: 'In all the talk of a divided and unmanageable curriculum, one possibility is rarely mentioned that the problems may relate to expertise as well as logistics.' (Alexander, 2009, p. 244) Whilst the Cambridge Primary Review found that the current National Curriculum is probably overloaded with content, it was not 'inherently unmanageable'. This is proven by those schools that do manage to fit the entire National Curriculum into the available time, using a blend of strong, principled leadership, flexible approaches to curriculum planning and the insistence that all subjects are taught to a high standard.

What the Children Say

Evidence gathered by the Cambridge Primary Review suggests that children also place considerable value on teachers' subject expertise. Amongst a range of characteristics, they expected teachers to 'really know their stuff', to tell them in advance what the lesson was going to be about, to be able to give clear,

understandable explanations, to have lots of energy and enthusiasm, and to give them help when they were stuck. The Review sums up these sought after qualities as those of an 'enthusiastic expert'. All of which poses a major challenge to schools because almost all primary teachers are generalists and it is difficult to imagine how any teacher could be the 'expert' in relation to all subjects and aspects of the primary curriculum, however much enthusiasm is employed. So if we accept the hypothesis that expertise across the curriculum supports breadth, balance and manageability, and is a key factor in engaging children in their learning, how can this be achieved without the unlikely introduction of specialist or semi-specialist teaching models in primary schools? Answers to this question need to take account of the immediate history of primary education, and in particular, the limited *range* of professional development opportunities and high level of *prescription* experienced by many teachers over recent years.

Culture Shock

The success of the generalist model for primary teaching depends, fundamentally, on the development of a wide range of subject expertise: through high quality Initial Teacher Training (ITT) before entering the profession and through regular Continuing Professional Development (CPD) thereafter. But with the relentless focus on English, mathematics and high stakes testing over recent years it is not the diet of professional development that most teachers are used to. Training opportunities in the non-core subjects, in particular, have been extremely sparse. We are now facing a new environment for primary education where:

- teachers can expect to have greater autonomy over what is taught and how it is taught;
- evidence suggests well-developed subject expertise is pivotal to achieving breadth, balance, manageability, high standards and children's engagement.

Paradoxically, at the same time, there is a generation of primary teachers who have:

- operated within a culture of compliance to Government formulae, frameworks and strategies;
- experienced ITT and CPD which only partially addresses the curriculum they will be teaching.

Building Bridges

The anticipated change of culture in primary schools, emphasising greater professional freedom and scope for curriculum innovation must be accompanied by ITT and CPD that broadens and deepens curriculum expertise. How can

those who support teachers' professional development help to build the capacity that is needed to take advantage of this autonomy?

For experienced teachers, perhaps the most effective way forward is to ensure that training connects with the curriculum planning that is currently in use and puts in place the 'scaffolding' needed to bridge the gap between what teachers have become familiar with and the possibilities that the promised freedoms will provide. Design and technology is a typical example of a non-core subject where primary teachers can lack confidence through limited opportunities in ITT and CPD. Whilst the QCA scheme for design and technology (QCA, 1998) has provided a backbone to the subject for more than a decade, teachers often follow it too slavishly. For this reason it is sometimes criticised, as are QCA schemes for other subjects, for being too prescriptive, suppressing standards and teachers' flair.

In the case of design and technology, rather than moving away from the QCA scheme completely, a more productive approach has been to help teachers identify the essential or unique learning in each unit of work and map out how units build progressively on each other. This approach is consistent with inspection evidence from Ofsted (2009, p. 5) who found that across all the subjects it surveyed 'the best teaching showed that teachers understood the particular demands of individual subjects in relation to pupils' learning'. This approach to professional development builds expertise and confidence by starting with tried, tested but typically self-limiting units of work and draws out the key learning on which they are based, thereby liberating teachers to adapt, amend and ultimately move practice forward; to borrow a phrase from the Cambridge Primary Review, 'working towards principle rather than prescription'. (Alexander, 2009, p. 511)

At the same time, it is important to ensure that teachers have access to CPD to develop the range of subject-specific knowledge and skills necessary to provide high quality support for children's learning, so that they no longer feel obliged to follow the recipe of activities specified in each unit. Given the scarcity of CPD opportunities in recent years, even a limited amount of well-focused training, combined with primary teachers' legendary tenacity and resourcefulness, can help to build the subject expertise needed to gain autonomy over the school curriculum.

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