The creative curriculum

Case study: Secondary
The creative curriculum
Levman High School

Identification of need

Although the GCSE results remained good in league table terms when the headteacher was first appointed (as deputy head) in 1997, they had declined to an all-time low for the school. Also, as a result of over-provision of school places, the diocese was considering closing one of its schools. Parents had taken note of these factors when choosing schools, and numbers were dropping. The pressing need for change was clear, and the senior leadership team (SLT) agreed on the priority of creating a more accessible and engaging curriculum.

The headteacher describes the school’s curriculum change process as having taken place in two distinct phases, both of which resulted in marked improvements in performance measures.

The first phase was in the years leading up to the inspection in 2000, when the school’s overall effectiveness was judged ‘good’. At this point the school became one of the country’s first specialist technology colleges with a focus on science, mathematics, technology and ICT.

The school’s improvement strategy in the new millennium took the school to ‘outstanding’ in 2005, a judgement that was maintained in 2008 when the Ofsted report stated:

The excitement and buzz for learning is immediately apparent to any visitor to this outstanding school.

Hence there was a marked contrast between the school’s curriculum development needs in the two phases, and the strategies adopted differed accordingly.

Evidence of the need for change

The need for change was not in question. The school’s overall outcomes were unacceptable, and pupils’ low aspirations were reflected in poor attitudes to learning. Levels of self-belief and ambition were such that rather than striving to achieve higher grades, many pupils were satisfied not to be bottom of the class. The school’s challenge was to overcome the social factors affecting pupils’ attitudes and to instil a desire to achieve.

At the start of the first phase, pupils’ poor outcomes underlined the requirement for young people to be encouraged and enabled to engage with the curriculum more effectively. As the challenge for second phase was to move from ‘good’ to ‘outstanding’ and beyond, the school wanted not only to look inward and identify opportunities to improve its practice but also, crucially, to research and adopt appropriate elements of best practice from around the world.

One of the initial key improvement strategies was to raise the school’s level of expertise in the use of data. Data analysis provided important evidence relating to the pupils’ performance across the curriculum. Another source of valuable evidence was the curriculum group: its members, selected from across departments as the school’s ‘movers and shakers’, knew the school very well and shared a passion for a proactive approach to improving outcomes for pupils.

Factors influencing the proposed strategy

Literacy was one of the key factors identified at an early stage, and a focus for the work of the curriculum group. There was a growing recognition that through literacy, pupils’ access to and performance in all areas of the curriculum would be enhanced. Similarly, a strategy was developed for improving pupils’ levels of numeracy; both literacy and numeracy had a high profile nationally at the time.

In 2005, the headteacher (having been promoted recently from deputy head) had an experience which had a profound impact on her thinking. On a Creative Partnerships study visit to Boston in the USA, she went to Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Boston Arts Academy (a high school for the visual and performing arts).
At MIT she was inspired by several aspects of the curriculum, particularly the philosophy of pupils working together in multidisciplinary teams on “mindblowing” projects. Pupils begin with a broad range of subjects: for example, a girl in the first year of a chemical engineering course was enjoying an assignment about Clive of India. One of the projects witnessed involved the use of electronics on a disco floor so that it doubled as a gaming console.

The focus on creativity in the curriculum at Boston Arts Academy was also striking and, as a result of what she saw, the head became convinced that creativity should be at the heart of the curriculum in her own school. She was particularly impressed by the extent to which pupils took ownership of their own learning, and by the high levels of self-confidence that they developed as a result.

**Leadership challenge and response**

The leadership challenges were to:

- embed a vision throughout the staff of the future school with an established reputation for high achievement
- secure a culture of high levels of expectation in staff and pupils, in line with the school’s ambition to be world class
- build an understanding of the significance of creativity in developing an engaging curriculum, and of its potential contribution to improved outcomes for pupils across the curriculum
- ensure that appropriate use is made of new technologies to support learning across the curriculum, rather than for its own sake

Since becoming a specialist technology college, the school has endeavoured to remain at the forefront of technological innovation. The use of interactive whiteboards is well established, and all classrooms are equipped with visualisers. Portable personal computers are having an impact, as they can be used anywhere and help to avoid writing being a barrier to learning.

**Direction-setting**

When results were at a low ebb and the school’s future was in jeopardy, there was only one possible direction – hence the task of securing commitment was not a particular challenge.

When in the second phase it came to convincing staff that creativity was the key to engaging learners, this was more difficult, especially in those subjects not normally associated with creativity. Enthusiasm, determination, presentation of the evidence from the Boston trip and dedicated professional development time all contributed to the process of direction-setting. There was also an element of colleagues being convinced through their experience of the impact of the creative curriculum.

The school’s status as a specialist technology college was exploited to ensure that colleagues embraced the principle of pioneering the use of new technologies to enhance learning.

**Creating a positive climate for change**

The curriculum group played an important role in establishing a positive climate. As its members were carefully selected, the group’s priorities were discussed around the school, and the most influential and respected colleagues were leading advocates of the change agenda. The ripple effect ensured that the staff as a whole came to identify with the priorities and engage with the change process. The school’s track record of year-on-year improvement as changes have been implemented has been a significant factor in embedding the culture of change and maintaining momentum.
Making the change

At the start of the process, the fact that pupils had little faith in their potential to succeed led to the prioritisation of literacy and numeracy, so that they could access the curriculum. Although this was not in itself a particularly ground-breaking decision, the principle behind it set the tone for much of the later thinking about the curriculum. Whereas some schools concluded that wholesale changes should be made to the curriculum to make it more accessible to young people, the principal focus at Levman High School would be to ensure that pupils were equipped to rise to existing challenges.

Much of the available case study evidence in the early days of the school’s improvement drive suggested that the adoption of a range of vocational courses, some of which had high values in terms of GCSE equivalence, was the best improvement strategy.

This issue was debated by senior staff and the curriculum group. The conclusion of this debate was that the best interests of pupils should take priority over the school’s position in league tables; hence a limited number of double-award vocational courses (eg, art, health and social care, ICT) were adopted, but the majority of the Key Stage 4 curriculum remained GCSEs.

The school has a strong ethos of taking notice of young people. The school council formed a teaching and learning group to provide feedback and advice to teachers on the effective use of creativity to enhance learning.

Establishing success criteria

Initially the priority was to improve pupils’ learning, and the success criteria were the school’s key performance indicators at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. Challenging but achievable targets were set each year against which to measure progress. Attendance and behaviour were unsatisfactory at the start, and this was felt to reflect the lack of engagement with the curriculum. Targets were set and strategies for monitoring attendance and behaviour were put in place.

In order to establish a baseline with respect to teachers’ creativity, a self-assessment audit was carried out at the start. With some exceptions, the audit revealed that on the whole, teachers judged themselves to have low levels of creativity.

Collaboration and reflective practice

Through the curriculum group and the staff professional development groups (see below), staff from different disciplines routinely work collaboratively on the whole-school improvement agenda. Thus best practice is continually explored and shared. The pupils’ teaching and learning group extended this collaboration to ensure that pupils were integral to the improvement drive.

Self-evaluation is well established and the school is committed to action research, so reflection on the effectiveness of practice is routine and feedback from pupils is integral to this process. On the basis of information gathered, lessons are learned about what has gone well and what could be done better. Systems are in place to ensure that the curriculum is improved continuously.

Maintaining momentum

Professional development is an important factor in maintaining momentum, and teachers planned the meetings cycle so that it would be productive in terms of both curriculum development and continuing professional development (CPD). There are six staff groups, each with a different focus, and every teacher is required to join one of them. Group members decide the agenda and senior leaders attend, but do not lead. Membership is limited to one year to ensure that groups do not stagnate, and to ensure that staff gain breadth of experience.
There is a culture of high expectations across the staff. No one wants to be a weak link, and all want to be well regarded by pupils. Established systems provide a powerful incentive to continually seek ways of doing things better, and the momentum is self-perpetuating.

As the school has become recognised for its good practice, it has become more outward-facing, and staff have engaged increasingly in work supporting other schools in the city and across the country. The school’s expertise has led to a role working with other highly successful schools in moving beyond ‘outstanding’. This has provided a further boost to momentum as a result of the impact on the teachers involved, and of the good practice that they bring back into school.

The SLT does not believe that there is a tension between creativity and rigour, and experience has only strengthened this conviction. Creativity is used to ensure that lessons are engaging, and that pupils achieve the planned learning outcomes.

Teachers at all levels have the confidence to take risks and this is important to the philosophy of continually seeking further improvement. However, with a constant focus on what is best for pupils, and routine evaluation of the effectiveness of learning, creativity is used as a lever to increase rigour.

**Evaluating impact**

As the quality of the school’s data improved, analysis produced reliable information through which to target individual pupils for intervention. More relevant in terms of curriculum development was the big picture that analysis provided with respect to the levels of performance of different groups of pupils in different areas of the curriculum.

**Learner outcomes**

Data is monitored carefully, and analysis has grown increasingly sophisticated, enabling the impact of curriculum change to be evaluated with considerable precision.

The upward trend in pupil outcomes, which started in 1997, has continued year on year, confirming that the changes are having a positive impact. For example, the proportion of pupils gaining five grades A*-C at GCSE, including English and mathematics, and those gaining five grades A*-C at GCSE in any subject had reached 82 per cent and 99 per cent respectively by 2011. At the time of writing, the outlook was promising for continued improvement in 2012 and beyond.

**Opportunities offered to young people**

Attendance, a key indicator of the culture change that there has been in the school, has now reached 96 per cent (the highest figure of all the schools in the city). Pupils’ experience of the quality of the opportunities that the school offers is now such that they are keen to attend, and there is high demand for the wide range of extracurricular activities as well as extra classes after school and on Saturdays.

Behaviour, which was an issue at the start of the improvement drive, is now excellent. There is mutual respect between pupils and staff. The headteacher has confidence that pupils will not let the school down, wherever they may be.

Another indication of the impact of the curriculum on young people is the overwhelmingly positive (and unsolicited) feedback from local employers about the pupils with whom they engage through work experience or school–business partnerships. Reports focus on pupils’ skills and abilities as well as their personal development.

The high quality of the curriculum and learning has been recognised in the school’s ‘outstanding’ Ofsted judgements.
Professional practice

The results that the school achieves and its ‘outstanding’ Ofsted judgement confirm that teachers’ practice is of the highest standard. The commitment that teachers demonstrate through their engagement in school development and their own professional development show that they are fully engaged in the creative curriculum.

When the staff audit was repeated three years after the start of the drive to embed creativity in the curriculum, the outcomes were markedly different. Teachers had come to regard themselves as highly creative.

Sustainability

Ensuring that all staff and pupils were engaged in the change process was critical. This led to a culture in which every individual had a stake, and everyone could identify with the whole school’s learning community.

Intrinsic to the culture is forward thinking and finding better ways of doing things. Thus a positive approach to continuous improvement is embedded, and the school is always seeking strategies for moving onwards.

Lessons for the future

The school’s core business is learning, and the head’s key role is the leadership of learning. It would be easy for a headteacher to be out of school a lot of the time or to become immersed in office work, and it is important to avoid these pitfalls. By being seen around the school, getting into lessons frequently and engaging with pupils and teachers, the head makes sure everyone is aware of her passion for learning. Pupils are keen for her to visit their lessons and love to show her what they are doing. She remains a teacher at heart.

The head says:

It is vital for any leader always to remain true to their moral purpose and ensure that it is reflected in all planning, in all they do and ask others to do. For me this means doing what is right for the children.

In my experience, all teachers want to do their best for the young people in their charge, and a common moral purpose provides a powerful motivating force for all to pull together.

She adds:

It is also important to encourage and model risk-taking. Being too cautious can lead to stagnation, which is never satisfactory – particularly in an organisation committed to creativity.

Continuous review

The head intends that the school will continue to do what is right for the children, developing the curriculum as appropriate in line with identified need. The self-evaluation processes are well developed, and the effectiveness of the curriculum is constantly under scrutiny.

The school’s gains of recent years have resulted from the school’s commitment to creativity, and this will not change. However, the head acknowledges that the school is not impervious to external influences, and must consider the impact of factors such as league tables and the English Baccalaureate.
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