

Leading curriculum innovation in the primary school

Richard Howard, Chair of NET, introduces the seminar.

“In 18 years I’ve been at the cutting edge three times”

The somewhat obtuse title that I have been given for this introduction refers to one of the many headteacher retirement events that I have attended over the years. This was in a primary school which would be judged no more than satisfactory at best, and whose headteacher had worked there loyally and with considerable parental support. Receiving a euphoric speech of thanks and many gifts, he said “I’ve been the headteacher here for 18 years and I have always done the same things, but on at least three occasions I have found myself at the cutting edge of educational change”.

The message is obvious – what goes round comes round. But in wanting to welcome a return to a more personalised and child-centred curriculum, I’ve been concerned to hear – and I’ll be interested if you also have noticed this – that there is a tendency in some areas of primary education to suggest that, at last, schools can go back to how it used to be – that the romantic illusion of how it was 30 years ago can be restored by tenuously sourced headlines such as “Creativity is back – official”; “Primary schools to restore topic work”. In many respects nothing could be further from the truth but, in other instances, there is now space and room for primary school leaders to consider and exploit the fact that positive change is in the air.

This is what this seminar is about and the challenge before everyone is that set out in Michael Fullan’s words:

“If change is everywhere in the air, we might think that the greatest pressure a headteacher feels is to bring about some major transformation of the school. But the air is not the ground, and on the ground many heads experience (and some people may say they too easily accept) precisely the opposite – pressures to *maintain stability*.”

And not only stability: the league tables resulting from national tests drive even the best schools to practise examination techniques in Year 6 to the detriment of their children having a final exciting year of learning in primary

school. To be a school leader at a time when this country's education service is the most regulated, assessed and inspected in the world doesn't sit easily with the inspiring curriculum research and development being promoted by QCA, nor the stimulating opportunities for school leadership provided by NCSL. But that is the challenge today to set before some of the country's most effective and inspirational primary leaders. The challenge contains at least three main issues.

The first is about the absolute and central responsibility to provide children with the dignity of becoming literate and numerate. What seems now to be the challenge is for every successful primary school – and at least 60% of them are in this category – is to ask if more of the same will continue to improve standards in literacy and numeracy. The answer is probably 'no' and there have been dozens of unheralded examples of good practice where schools have managed the best principles and targets of the Primary Strategy. They plan and organise for integrated studies which involve language and number but set securely in a context of primary sources, first hand experiences, local interest or child-initiated ideas. It is these experiences which are likely to make learning memorable.

We have no evidence that these qualities have influenced better primary-secondary transition to ensure that the first years of secondary education really build upon the best of primary. As yet – although figures can be provided to indicate improvements in basic standards, and these are championed annually - we are not certain that we are creating more young people who will continue to love learning; to handle accounts, investments and budgets; to be a lifelong reader; to engage in further study, research or work-based learning.

Secondly, the legislation for "Every Child Matters" has changed, and I think properly so, the landscape for every school. Most commentators suggest that primary schools are best placed to meet the challenges set to engage with families and relevant professionals in providing a rich diet of opportunity for the child and the family or carers. Opportunities for residential study visits, learning within and from the local community, out-of-school activities, effective links with lifelong learning with the secondary, FE and HE sectors and, possibly above all, a local facility for early years and family development: all of these are crucial aspects of the 21st century primary school.

“OFSTED found that children, young people and families benefited from enhanced self confidence, improved relationships, raised aspirations and better attitudes to learning where their school or children’s centre was providing access to extended activities.”
(DFES 2006)

The third issue, as I see it – and of course you will have many more – relates to values. The extent to which a primary school is able to promote these values is set within a range of principles:

- how adults will care for themselves and each other
- the emotional literacy of adults
- the needs of the pupils
- the way pupils are treated

I well remember a headteacher telling me that her first priority, on taking up a primary appointment in the north of England, was to establish a behaviour and relationship strategy – for the staffroom. As far as the children are concerned, the degree to which a school will be able to listen to their voices, to act upon their evaluations, and to pay attention to their requirements for success is likely to become a more influential assessment than that provided by Ofsted in the future. It will just depend on primary headteachers and their accumulated views on how they effectively describe, and provide evidence for, the quality of provision that is regularly and readily available.

It would be easy – if anything in primary leadership is easy – to say that headteachers will each do a little bit to create a new primary curriculum. But that is not enough. There is the opportunity to make a real difference, to provide the primary child with a series of memorable experiences to improve his or her life chances. This means considerable and sustained commitment. Edmund Burke said:

“No one could make a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.”

The National Education Trust is concerned to shape the way forward for children and their teachers, and to support different ways to make things better. This is what this NET/NCSL seminar is about.