

# **NCSL/NET Invitation Seminar Leading Curriculum Innovation in the Primary School March 26, 2007**

‘All education springs from images of the future and all education creates images of the future.’

ALVIN TOFFLER, LEARNING FOR TOMORROW (quoted on the QCA Futures leaflet)

**“Why are we talking about what we know is the right thing to do as taking a risk?”**

Delegate, NCSL/NET invitation seminar

## **Dare to lead**

**Seminar report by Diane Hofkins**

Many teachers and heads are genuinely puzzled about primary education. They worry that schools are being pulled in opposing directions. They are urged to teach the whole child, encourage creativity and take risks – but they will be penalised if any risks fail to pay off and result in a drop in measurable standards.

The NCSL has been asked to advise the Secretary of State about the key challenges facing primary leadership. The ideas emerging from the March gathering of 21 successful heads at the leadership college's Nottingham centre will contribute to that advice.

Several key themes emerged, through the comments of both delegates and speakers such as Lucy Smith of the QCA and Richard Howard, chair of the National Education Trust. It was essential to be willing to take risks and to innovate. There was strong agreement about the importance of the local curriculum in addition to the national curriculum. Content and style should fit the school, its pupils and its environs. Shouldn't a school in the Northeast be able to teach the Fire of Newcastle, rather than the Fire of London?

Certain words kept cropping up - powerful, emotional words: courage, passion, understanding, beauty, soul, rigour, trust, vision. Courage was seen as an essential quality for an innovative head. With a clear vision and a set of principles based on experience and evidence, heads will be able to rely on the support of staff and governors who have been trusted and involved in decision-making. Heads should be trying to prepare children for an uncertain future. The best leaders, it was said, have a deep-seated understanding of how children learn best. They are passionate and take people with them. “Inspired teachers will inspire children.”

On the future of primary headship, some delegates were concerned about how to develop more creativity and flexibility in younger staff who had been trained to “deliver” a set curriculum. One commented that while accountability is important, too much can be suffocating; there is no aspect of headship that is not tinged with it.

In his introductory talk, Richard Howard told the delegates: “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.” But, he acknowledged, it’s not that simple. Change may be in the air, but on the ground there is pressure to meet targets and maintain stability. “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.”

He set out a three-pronged challenge for successful heads:

1. To ask, will “more of the same” continue to improve standards in literacy and numeracy? *“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.”*
2. Consider how the Every Child Matters legislation has changed 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.”*
3. How are values to be promoted? *This must be set within a range of principles: how adults care for themselves and each other, the adults’ emotional literacy, the needs of the pupils and the way pupils are treated. “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.”*

### **The headlines: curriculum and leadership**

Delegates were divided into groups and asked to advise on three curriculum questions and one leadership question. Here are some of their ideas.

## Curriculum question

### 1. What are we trying to achieve for our children through our primary curriculum?

- A creative curriculum which is real and relevant.
- Giving children the opportunity to make choices.
- Helping children realise what they're good at and celebrating success.
- Enjoyment, inspiration and challenge.
- Preparation for the world of the future.
- Raised aspirations.
- Integration of values into what happens at school.
- Understanding of their duty of care to each other, even if this is not seen in their communities.

### 2 How do we best organise learning in order to achieve our aims? (what are the implications for the statutory curriculum, use of time, space, people or research findings)

- Employ Mantle of the Expert techniques.
- Establish a culture of flexibility.
- Build from the Foundation Stage areas of experience.
- Put ECM at the centre.
- Have more people to support children, eg inclusion mentors.
- Develop teachers as coaches.
- Engage the community
- Take account of the 3-18 continuum
- Establish staff as learners and risk takers

### 3 What measures can we use to show our curriculum is working?

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- Schools awards. Celebration of success.
- Broader criteria, such as: Have they grown as learners? Can they tackle a project independently? Have they gained confidence? Can they take risks? Do they try? Do they think for themselves.
- Look at KS3-4 data to see impact of an enriched primary curriculum.
- Assess their expertise in a Mantle of the Expert enterprise.
- Collect data on a wider range of aspects of curriculum than at present.
- Specific success criteria, for example, "That they can stand up in front of an audience and reason out an argument, be able to have a view and make a point.
- A 10-minute viva about their achievements.

## Leadership question

What does the NCSL need to say to school leaders to encourage them to lead innovative schools?

- Put children first and prepare them for tomorrow with confidence.
- Have a very clear vision and help others to understand they have ownership.
- Value breadth.
- Look at the role of SIPs in enabling cultural change.
- Establish a “can-do” culture
- Encourage people to take risks, be innovative, create a unique journey for your school which can be told with passion.
- Listen to pupils and create a dimension of pupil choice.
- Revisit opportunities offered by the National Curriculum and *Excellence and Enjoyment*.
- Know what success looks like. Celebrate milestones.
- Understand and create capacity for innovation. Consider how you select and develop people in your organisation. Make sure you can balance the team.
- Be resilient.
- Be able to work with your passion and with other people’s.

## Two heads who dare to lead innovative schools

[Terri Menham, headteacher, Red Oaks Primary, Swindon](#)

A wolf’s head. A giant’s head. An enormous top hat. A beautiful scrapbook. Terri Menham explained that she brought these props to make her feel at home. They were commissioned from a craftsman in the BBC props department to fit adults, so teachers can take their proper place in role play at school.

Terri opened Red Oaks as her second brand new school in September 2006 and it is part of a four-school PFI campus. Starting with a blank canvas, she determined to establish an “I can” school with a vibrant and colourful learning environment.

The growing school now has a very young staff (seven NQTs out of 11 full-timers), but this is balanced by a part-time team of outstanding and experienced teachers. These teachers “thrive on the buzz of learning”, says Terri, and the NQTs – who were appointed for their interest in creative thinking – are learning from them.

Her belief in teamwork has been bolstered by the experience of losing staff to maternity leave and promotions elsewhere. Teams

ensure continuity. Red Oaks has four curriculum teams and two phase teams, each with integral governors who are fully involved.

The Red Oaks story is told fully and dramatically on the school's amazing website, which is updated every day with the latest videos, photos and information about school activities. These include international links and visits, a well-equipped radio station, charity fundraising and very rich links with Swindon's Steam Museum, which provides a huge range of activities and experiences for children in history, technology and a surprising breadth of curriculum areas.

Terri is an enthusiast for trips for teachers, arguing that such revitalising opportunities can help keep young staff in the profession. Red Oaks staff have visited South Africa, Greece, France and Egypt, buying authentic artefacts for the classroom and coming up with entertainments such as a Tomb Raiders game on the school website featuring the teachers on the Egyptian trip.

The Every Child Matters philosophy is instinctive for Terri. The school is developing connections between the five outcomes and the subject curriculum and arranging to involve the school council in preparing the SIP.

Terri's aim is for everyone in the school community to have "wings to fly".

<http://www.redoaks.org>

#### [Jacqui Laver, headteacher, Priory School, Slough](#)

In 2002 Jacqui Laver took over as head of a school which OFSTED had judged in 2000 to have no areas of weakness and no points for action. In theory, that should be a new head's nightmare. But Jacqui, who had been teaching there since 1989, was convinced the school could do even better. The inspection had taken place during OFSTED's most prescriptive, basics-focused era, and she believed Priory needed more citizenship, PSHE and soul – in other words, greater emphasis on the whole child. "That's why I stayed."

Her timing was fortunate. Creative Partnerships, the body funded by the Arts Council, DCMS and DFES, which supports people from the creative industries to work with schools in areas of deprivation, had chosen Slough as one of its first localities. Priory now works with 50 different creative partners. Rather than coming in, doing a nice project and going away again, "I wanted our creative partners to be embedded in the school," says Jacqui. Today they are fully involved in planning and curriculum development.

One of her first steps was to "re-engineer" the foundation subjects so that they took a more prominent place in the curriculum. The aim was "to enable children to become innovative and creative learners who achieve the highest possible standards throughout all areas of the curriculum."

At Priory the whole curriculum is taught through works of art, one each half-term for each year-group. This was implemented to raise the profile of the foundation subjects, to boost the creative learning curriculum, to build children's confidence and self-esteem and to bring about a radical change in teaching, Jacqui explains. It began with a teachers' visit to the National Gallery and every teacher had the chance to choose their own works.

It was important to ensure there was diversity in the works chosen – a teacher from South Africa developed a highly successful half-term's work based around African rock art. It was also essential to give staff enough time to plan this new approach to the curriculum.

Children know when they're learning about history or geography, but also how these subjects link up. The hands-on approach led one pupil to comment, "We can be all the jobs we would ever want to be."