Leading curriculum innovation in primary schools
Mark Brundrett and Diane Duncan
Management in Education 2011 25: 119
DOI: 10.1177/0892020610387957

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://mie.sagepub.com/content/25/3/119

Published by:
SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
BELMAS
British Educational Leadership, Management & Administration Society

Additional services and information for Management in Education can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://mie.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts
Subscriptions: http://mie.sagepub.com/subscriptions
Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav
Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
Citations: http://mie.sagepub.com/content/25/3/119.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Jul 8, 2011
What is This?
Leading curriculum innovation in primary schools

Mark Brundrett
Liverpool John Moores University
Diane Duncan
Liverpool John Moores University

Abstract
This article reports on a study of 40 primary school leaders from ten very successful primary schools who were interviewed in order to find out the skills, processes and practices that are required for the leadership of successful curriculum innovation in primary schools. Findings suggest that school leaders need to create an ‘ethos for change’ if successful innovation is to take place. A new four-stage model of curriculum innovation is offered.

Keywords
primary, curriculum, curriculum innovation, leading change

Introduction
The primary school curriculum in England has undergone multiple, complex and overlapping reforms in the last twenty years during which time there has been related debate on the relative efficacy of a strong emphasis on basic skills when compared to a broader, more integrative curriculum (Burton & Brundrett, 2005). This ferment has been reinvigorated in recent years and we suggest that there have been few periods when school leaders have faced greater challenge in undertaking curriculum innovation since we are witnessing a time of strategic review of educational priorities at both national and local levels. This article offers a brief report on a major research project that was funded by the National College for the Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services which sought to examine the leadership challenges posed by the implementation of curriculum innovation in primary schools. In order to examine fully such challenges the research project reported in this article was constructed with two main dimensions which included analysis of:

- the skills, processes and practices that are required in leadership for successful curriculum innovation in primary schools; and
- the extent to which schools are currently prepared for the curriculum innovation.

The project employed a blended methodology based on interviews, observations and documentary analysis in ten schools in order to produce rich data. All the institutions involved were highly successful primary schools, as defined below, which had recently embarked on ambitious and varying programmes of curriculum innovation.

Context to leading curriculum change in primary schools in England
We have argued elsewhere that it has become a truism in education that we are good at initiating change but we are far less successful as seeing it through (Burton & Brundrett, 2005: 84). Indeed, there are dangers in embarking on innovation because the process of inducing change can be challenging, difficult and even painful. Moreover, as Everard et al. (2004: 285–6) have pointed out, all too many initiatives produce only a facade of change followed by a gradual sinking back into old ways of working.

It is important to note that there is a broad and expanding literature on change in education much of which emphasises the complexity of this challenging issue (Morrison, 1998). For instance, the influential work of Fullan (1993, 1999, 2001, 2003) has emphasised the importance of collaboration among staff, community engagement, trust building and strategic planning within a pattern that includes initiation, implementation, continuation and outcome. Good strategy ‘involves the whole organization in a holistic way’ (Fidler, 2002: 9) and values and vision must inform operational planning (Davies & Davies, 2005: 12). Such notions key into more recent conceptions of distributed leadership (Spillane & Harris, 2008) and relate closely to the UK government agenda for target setting and planning dating back over the period of a decade (see, for instance, DfEE, 2001).

Thus we may note that during the late 1990s and early 2000s primary education in England was dominated by the...
government’s drive to raise standards in English and mathematics through the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies (NLNS), implemented in the majority of primary schools in 1998 and 1999 respectively. Head teachers expressed concern about the potential problems of overload as a result of the strong emphasis on literacy and numeracy. By the early 2000s Ofsted’s evaluation of the NLNS revealed that the breadth of the curriculum, particularly within subjects, had often been affected adversely by a combination of the two strategies, including ‘catch-up’ programmes and the requirement on schools to meet increasingly demanding performance targets as measured by the national tests. Ofsted noted some schools which were not providing sufficient depth in their teaching of the non-core foundation subject (Ofsted, 2004). The University of Toronto, which was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to provide an external evaluation of the NLNS, also noted concerns from many head teachers about the strategies squeezing out other crucial programmes and experience (OISE, 2001). The annual report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector (HMCI) for 2002 also referred to the pressures on the primary curriculum and their impact on breadth and balance which represented a ‘serious narrowing of the curriculum’.

Nonetheless, by 2009, Ofsted found that head teachers had clear and high expectations, not only of what should be taught, but how they set these out in a detailed teaching and learning policy that was followed by all staff so that the school’s principles were translated into practice. The result was consistent approaches to teaching in all classes and good progression in pupils’ learning. The curriculum was enriched by first-hand experiences, including visits locally and further afield, contributions from adults with knowledge and skills that could enhance pupils’ learning, and an extensive range of extra-curricular activities (Ofsted, 2009). Most recently, a survey of 44 highly successful schools which used creative approaches to learning found that most teachers felt confident in encouraging pupils to make connections across traditional boundaries, speculate constructively, maintain an open mind while exploring a wide range of options and reflect critically on ideas and outcomes. This had a perceptible and positive impact on pupils’ personal development and on their preparation for life beyond school (Ofsted, 2010: 3). Thus we may aver that, although the advent of the National Curriculum was consistent approaches to teaching in all classes and good progression in pupils’ learning. The curriculum was enriched by first-hand experiences, including visits locally and further afield, contributions from adults with knowledge and skills that could enhance pupils’ learning, and an extensive range of extra-curricular activities (Ofsted, 2009). Most recently, a survey of 44 highly successful schools which used creative approaches to learning found that most teachers felt confident in encouraging pupils to make connections across traditional boundaries, speculate constructively, maintain an open mind while exploring a wide range of options and reflect critically on ideas and outcomes. This had a perceptible and positive impact on pupils’ personal development and on their preparation for life beyond school (Ofsted, 2010: 3). Thus we may aver that, although the advent of the National Curriculum brought with it concerns that the subject-based approach which it required would lead to more formal or teacher-centred pedagogic methodologies, ‘child-centred’ and integrative learning was not abandoned and the influence of national strategies such as the ‘primary strategy’ (DfES, 2003) and the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda (HMG, 2003) encouraged such approaches.

The Rose Review was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) under the aegis of a Labour government in 2008. After taking evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, the review subsequently recommended a change from a subject-based curriculum to one that embraces six areas of learning including: understanding English, communication and languages; mathematical understanding; scientific and technological understanding; historical, geographical and social understanding; understanding physical development, health and well-being; and understanding the arts (Rose, 2009: 16). The review was influential in leading to proposed alteration of the national curriculum from September 2011 (DCSF, 2009) but the UK general election and subsequent change of national administration in spring 2010 to a Conservative/ Liberal Democrat coalition meant that this initiative was cancelled. In a more wide-ranging review, the Cambridge Primary Review (Cambridge Primary Review, 2010), led by Professor Robin Alexander, challenged the conceptions of the Rose review and posited a more complex formulation which argued for a depoliticisation of schools and an end to a ‘state theory of learning’. The Cambridge Review’s solution to the problems that face primary schooling in England is to extend the foundation stage to age six, prioritise disadvantaged pupils and develop a curriculum based on 12 recommended educational aims and eight domains of knowledge, skill, inquiry and disposition (Alexander, 2009: 261–77).

It has been indicated that the primary curriculum will become arranged around subjects such as English, Maths, Science and History, alongside a set of broader commitments to create a new generation of small schools, give every existing school the chance to achieve academy status and ensure that Ofsted adopts a more rigorous, targeted inspection scheme with more unannounced inspections (Conservative Party, 2010). What is clear is that the primary curriculum in England is experiencing a period of unprecedented change with correlative challenges to the leadership of teaching and learning.

Method

Data gathering in the project as a whole has two main dimensions:

- **Phase 1**: three initial two-day visits during January and February 2010, the data from which has been analysed as a scoping exercise in order to develop an interim report on initial findings by March 2010 and in order to inform the content of the questionnaire to be implemented in dimension 2.
- **Phase 2**: a further seven visits to schools during March–June 2010.

This report focuses on data derived from visits to ten schools and includes: qualitative interviews with the head teacher, deputy head teacher, curriculum coordinators and practitioners in ten primary schools (a total of four interviews in each school); observation of lessons; and collection of curriculum plans and other curriculum documentation. Research instruments took the form of carefully developed and trialled interview schedules and observation schedules. Data analysis relied on coding, categorising and identifying key themes and patterns.

A purposive sample was developed which took into account school factors such as type, size, social background of pupils, geographical location and system of governance.
Schools were selected by recommendation from key primary networks, QCDA, the National College, Local Authorities, Higher Education Institution placement managers and by reference to Ofsted reports. Each interview was approximately 40 minutes in length and those interviewed included the head teacher, an assistant or deputy head, a curriculum leader and a classroom teacher. Classroom lessons exemplifying what the school considered to be current best practice were observed in each school and relevant curriculum documentation was gathered and subsequently analysed. Several of the schools are located in areas of considerable social deprivation according to the IDACI (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index) and each has significant numbers of children who are working below national averages.

Findings: towards a new model of curriculum innovation

The project revealed that curriculum innovation is more likely to be successful when:

- teachers and school leaders see the potential benefit for pupils, their professional satisfaction and for the school and community as a whole;
- all school personnel are committed to and believe in its underlying values;
- all teachers and leaders are involved in the process of innovation from the initial idea to its implementation and review;
- teachers trust and respect the leadership team;
- all school staff are able to see the benefits and gains made by pupils;
- it is integral and closely interrelated to the short-, medium- and long-term aims of the School Development Plan as well as the school’s CPD programme;
- it is school created and school driven and is less likely to be sustained when it is derived from published schemes of work, materials or programmes of learning which are external to the school.

It is clear that leadership structures positively impact upon learning in the classroom. Effectively led curriculum innovation improves standards of achievement and increases children’s enjoyment and engagement in learning. Thus successful innovations are more likely to be sustained if leaders ensure that research into a range of possible curriculum models is carried out before changes are trialled and implemented. For instance, best practice in one school involved an action research project on theme-based learning with its Year 6 pupils. Curriculum change was not implemented until its leadership team had evaluated the project and satisfied themselves that the results were favourable for both pupils and teachers.

It is also apparent that a key leadership skill in curriculum innovation is the judicious and strategic use of all staff in a joint endeavour directed towards the implementation of any revised curriculum. When all members of staff feel involved in a collective enterprise, curriculum innovation is more likely to serve the needs and interests of children and those of the wider school community. Correlatively, a clear steer is required if the important work schools have carried out with respect to planning, tracking and monitoring progress is not to be lost. Teachers valued explicit guidance in constructing new formats which captured cross-curricular approaches to learning as well as the skills and knowledge to be covered in specific subject areas.

The opportunity to trial and review planning and recording formats was seen as central to this process of change. Working across phases within the school is helpful in creating the ethos noted earlier. Equally, working in collaboration with other schools in order to share good practice in curriculum innovation is seen as an important method of enhancing curriculum innovation. Visits, staff exchanges and the sharing of strategies between schools which have begun to experiment and trial new approaches to curriculum innovation seem to offer a powerful set of tools that will assist in the achievement of curriculum change and improvement.

Schools also need to be provided with advice on strategies that assist in acknowledging and recognising areas of the curriculum which need strengthening. Engaging the expertise of others in classroom workshops and whole-school INSET programmes is also seen as being important. Allied to this, robust systems of assessment and monitoring which are capable of tracking progress across thematic as well as subject-based curricula are essential. Such systems should be proactive in identifying failing and vulnerable children as well as giving leaders and teachers a detailed understanding of what they need to do at the end of each Key Stage in order to ensure progress. Well developed assessment systems should also provide accessible and user-friendly data to help teachers advance within-year progress. Curricular themes or projects should identify a clear progression of skills, understanding and knowledge which is capable of being tracked and recorded. Regular meetings to discuss and evaluate children’s work as well as check on progress and quality need to involve teachers and all levels of leadership in order to ensure the widest constituency of knowledge on standards, assessment and monitoring.

Once the decision has been taken to undertake major curriculum change it is important that innovation has a clear and understood timeline for implementation which is made explicit in the School Development Plan. The steps and stages between the initial innovatory idea and its eventual implementation need to be lucid and comprehensible from the outset and communicated to everyone concerned. Within this process regular points for ongoing evaluation, review and modifications in the light of experience are clearly identified and acted upon. Curriculum innovation is also founded upon a detailed knowledge of the school, its parents, community, history and social context. It takes careful account of the capabilities, needs and interests of its pupils as well as the strengths and expertise of its staff. It builds on the successful work which the school has undertaken so far in ways which facilitate change as well as ensure continuity and curriculum coherence.

Undoubtedly, the maintenance of a core curriculum and rising standards in literacy and mathematics continues to be
perceived by head teachers as a core part of their leadership role regardless of the type, form or model of curriculum innovation chosen for implementation. Throughout the process of curriculum innovation, effective leaders ensure that struggling staff are supported sensitively. Guidance and support is more effective when it is not ad hoc but structured into programmes of training and development. In the larger schools, support for newly qualified and less experienced teachers part of the portfolio of responsibilities for both middle and senior leaders. Middle leaders, particularly where they have responsibility for the whole curriculum rather than a specific subject or group of subjects, given status and value by the head, reinforced by their inclusion at senior leadership team meetings.

Figure 1. Model of curriculum innovation
experienced teachers was part of the portfolio of responsibilities for both middle and senior leaders. In one school the well-being of both pupils and staff was an active and integral part of a values-led curriculum. In another, curriculum leaders set up regular clinics whereby staff could come and discuss ongoing problems and queries during the innovatory stage. This was highly valued by teachers and is cited here as an example of particularly effective and workable leadership support. Middle leaders, particularly where they have responsibility for the whole curriculum rather than a specific subject or group of subjects, are given status and leadership support. Middle leaders, particularly where they have responsibility for the whole curriculum rather than a specific subject or group of subjects, are given status and leadership support. Middle leaders, particularly where they have responsibility for the whole curriculum rather than a specific subject or group of subjects, are given status and leadership support. Middle leaders, particularly where they have responsibility for the whole curriculum rather than a specific subject or group of subjects, are given status and leadership support.

If innovation is to be successful, a culture of adult training is built into head teachers’ vision for school staff and regular high-quality continuing professional development needs to be provided for all staff, including teacher assistants (TAs). The involvement of the latter is particularly important in schools where TAs are used increasingly to assess and monitor children with special educational needs. In some of the larger schools, especially those with a complex range of social challenges, TAs outnumber the staff. So their involvement in the school’s CPD programme is likely to have a number of possible outcomes both for them, teacher colleagues and pupils. In one school the head was keen for the school to provide CPD sessions of a consistently high standard whether they were in-house or external speakers. As a way of ensuring quality all sessions were evaluated and recorded in staff learning logs. These served as useful records and evidence of professional development. In some cases, CPD was part of a responsibility brief for either assistant heads or deputy heads, thus underlining its significance in the school’s ongoing development. It requires a clear steer by the head teacher and CPD programmes are identified in advance in the School Development Plan.

In the best examples of good practice, children were an essential part of the process with respect to decision-making and involvement in the early stages of innovation. Heads and school leaders were united in their view that to fail to canvass the opinion of children and to listen seriously to what they were saying would be missing an important opportunity and might risk the success of the innovation project.

Overall, best practice in the leadership of curriculum innovation ensures that the process of innovation is seen by staff as an opportunity to do things differently, to think laterally and creatively. In one example, teachers were asked to consider whether they were using teaching time in the most effective way. One outcome of this was the use of blocks of time like whole days, weeks or half days rather than regular short periods of time. This gave children the chance to work at a more intensive and sustained pace and increased the likelihood of children succeeding in completing work. The latter was identified as a key concern particularly with older pupils. In Figure 1 we offer a model of curriculum innovation based on a four-stage process of: Researching, Ethos building, Trialling and Implementation. Throughout this process a focus on the core curriculum is maintained and a culture of adult learning runs alongside developments in the pupil curriculum so that the skills of leaders at all levels are increased in order to meet the demands of the new and revised approaches to learning and teaching.

Conclusion

Within the model of curriculum innovation that we present, change is evolutionary and dynamic and proceeds from small, achievable beginnings to more widespread changes which are constantly reviewed, modified and adapted to changing circumstances and requirements. Strong leaders have a clear sense of when they need to pull back and slow down as well as when to drive things forward at a faster rate. Primary school leaders, at all levels, welcome the freedom to innovate and change the curriculum and it may be that the new freedoms that appear to be embodied in a commitment to a looser control over the curriculum as whole will be received positively by many who see curriculum renewal and innovation as central to their professional identity.

References


**Biographies**

Mark Brundrett is a former teacher and head teacher and is currently professor of educational research at Liverpool John Moores University.

Diane Duncan is a former teacher, head teacher and university lecturer who is now an independent researcher and writer.