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The ‘curriculum challenge’: moving towards the ‘Storyline’ approach in a case study urban primary school

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Abstract

This article draws on an inquiry into the design and implementation of the curriculum in a case study urban primary school in the north of England. In response to the introduction of the revised National Curriculum in September 2014, teachers and the school head engaged in a critical discourse around their perceptions of students’ attainment and engagement across the curriculum, and explored alternative curriculum design and pedagogies. Supported by ‘academic partners’ (Beckett, 2011, 2016; Beckett and Wrigley, 2014), teachers were introduced to the ‘Storyline’ approach (Bell et al, 2007) and encouraged to consider a shift from a rigid and functional curriculum towards more flexible approaches which emphasise problem solving, critical literacy and communication in multiple form. The argument presented here is twofold: firstly, it is suggested that moving towards more ‘open architectures’ (Wrigley, 2007) improves students’ engagement with learning by reducing teaching to the test and creating more socially responsive and real-life learning experiences; this is then contrasted with current ‘top-down’ models of prescriptive curriculum design tied to a raft of high-stakes standardised tests which constrains teachers’ efforts to engage in this process.

Introduction

The complexities and contradictions of recent changes to the National Curriculum for primary schools in England create a challenging juggling act for many teachers. Recent policy directions, as outlined by Nicky Morgan (Secretary of State for Education) in the latest White Paper (Department for Education, 2016) suggest that ‘good’ teachers and ‘excellent’ schools are those that perform highly against standardised tests. Such a conclusion ignores the efforts made by schools and teachers to create engaging and transformative schooling experiences for students, particularly in urban school settings (see Lupton, 2004, 2005; Wrigley, 2006; Thrupp and Lupton, 2011). For the teachers and school head at Green Tree Primary School, the pseudonym given to an urban primary school which serves a disadvantaged community on the outskirts of a deindustrialised city in the north of England, finding a balance between creativity, engagement, national requirements and high stakes testing may sometimes feel like an impossible ‘curriculum challenge’ to get right.

The questions raised in response to the ‘curriculum challenge’ are manifold and consider the purpose and design of the curriculum, the complexities created by national requirements and
assessment, the particular challenges faced by urban schools, and, in addressing these challenges, a consideration of innovative curriculum design which could meet learners’ needs more effectively. Perhaps at the heart of this debate lies the biggest question of all – what is the purpose of education for our students? Serious questions need to be asked concerning what kind of young people we wish to turn out, and what kind of world we hope they might inhabit. As Wrigley (2008, p.3) succinctly puts it in a critique of mainstream School Improvement, “… the question is unavoidably – to what end all this? Where is the vision?” Whilst the answer to this ultimate question may remain elusive, there can be no doubt that the purpose and drive in education, directed by those in power, has great impact on the curriculum offered in England’s primary schools and the pedagogies employed in its delivery.

In this article, I report on the ‘curriculum challenge’ in a case study urban primary school where I was formerly a class teacher and now have a role as academic partner. Prior to the implementation of the new National Curriculum in September 2014, the school head took the opportunity to review the whole school’s approach to the curriculum. Supported by academic partner, the school head and class teachers engaged in reflective discourse about their visions for a new curriculum and the potential challenges that this posed. Building on this, it was agreed that one class teacher would trial a curriculum approach based on ‘Storyline’ (Bell et al, 2007) in September 2014 for the first term with one class. A subsequent review of the successes and limitations of this trial informs conclusions around the particular challenges in regard to design and implementation of the curriculum in light of recent policy directions which affect schools in England.

The National Curriculum in England

A historical context

In order to build a picture of the impact and implications the National Curriculum has for this case study school, it is essential to consider the historical and political background which resulted in its first conception in 1988. Although education for the masses was introduced in 1870, following the Elementary Education Act, this was socially divisive with a curriculum clearly formed on class differences and an emphasis on continuing subordination of the working classes. For most of the following century, a hegemonic belief that intelligence was innate resulted in a continuation of segregation, with students segregated by ‘ability’ at the age of 11. Despite moves in the 1950s and 1960s towards more progressive ideals in education, prompted by key theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky, and compounded by the Plowden report (1967), creative and more child centred approaches were rapidly denounced in the 1980s with the rise of Thatcherism and more neo-liberal ideologies.

Education as economic policy
The introduction of the 1988 Education Reform Act not only mandated a National Curriculum and associated national tests, but also awarded extensive powers to subsequent Secretaries of State for Education. Phillips neatly summarises the ideology of these changes as “… a mixture of neo-liberal market individualism and neo-conservative emphasis upon authority, discipline, hierarchy, the nation and strong government” (1998, pp.4-5).

It is useful here to consider what Kemmis, Cole and Suggett (1983) term as ‘orientation’. As Wrigley (2014) stresses, any curriculum must always, unavoidably, involve the selection of knowledge and it is this process of selection that is underpinned by political ideology. Thus, the orientation of the curriculum becomes a political beast: traditional academic and vocational curriculum (compounding segregation, division and inequality in education) share the same orientation, namely preparation for future roles in an already existing social order. The original 1988 National Curriculum had a clear emphasis on STEM subjects, with over 50% of the timetable devoted to maths, science, technology and ICT, as well as a strong ‘secretarial’ emphasis in English, which would suggest a conservative orientation based on a traditional academic core but with the purpose for education seen primarily in terms of economic functionality.

Stephen Ball (2008) highlights and critiques this political interference which regards education from primarily an economic point of view. With a focus on school improvement indicated by adherence to a core curriculum, performance in national tests and standardised approaches to teaching, he laments the “increasing neglect or sidelining” of the social purposes of education. This equates with the memorable words of Tony Blair, Prime Minister at the time, that “Education is our best economic policy” (2005, cited in Ball, 2008, p.12). The political destruction of progressivism in education and a return to more functionalist directions continued under the 2010 Conservative-majority Coalition government. Under the direction of then Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove, a revised National Curriculum for schools in England was put forward which returned to the neo-conservative / neo-liberal fusion that had marked earlier versions of the curriculum.

The revised National Curriculum

Subsequent changes to the National Curriculum in 2013 continued this political legacy, characterised by detailed prescription for English, maths and science with seemingly tokenistic treatment of all other subjects. The neo-conservative / neo-liberal blend is now expressed in terms of a curriculum based on a narrowly defined set of knowledge. Concerns raised around the proposed changes to the curriculum by a hundred academics in a letter headed Too Much Too Young (The Independent, 19 March 2013) included the ‘endless lists’ of facts and inappropriate demands which would lead to an increase in superficial rote
learning, and the ‘ignorance’ of the learner with little account taken of children’s interests and capabilities. This is compounded by an increased load of high stakes tests in English, maths and science at the end of each Key Stage to ensure adherence to the directions detailed in the National Curriculum.

It is particularly significant that no attention was paid to what might be appropriate to the age or development of the child. In effect, this reversed a long history of progressive change in early and primary education built on respect for the child and childhood.

**The ‘problem’ of assessment**

‘School improvement’ in England with its focus on attainment in national tests reinforces passive learning and adherence to a prescriptive and standardised curriculum with little room for flexibility or deviation from the “selected tradition” (Williams, 1961) implemented by those in power. Chomsky (2000) argues that much school learning is based on “inert knowledge, fragments of dead facts”, supporting Wrigley’s (2007, p.166) view that “traditional school learning has been a form of alienated labour”. Indeed, examining samples of proposed tests for Key Stage 1 and 2 students in 2016 raises concerns that the new National Curriculum will be marked by more rigid and explicit transmission of rules with an even narrower form of knowledge selected and valued by those in power.

An example of this is shown in recent heated and public debates around the prescriptive and precise expectations in terms of 7-year-olds using exclamation marks - leading Nick Gibb, minister for schools, to pen a letter to the Times Educational Supplement (11th March 2016) clarifying the position. In his letter headed ‘Apparently, I want to stop children using exclamation marks: what a misunderstanding!’, Gibb explains that students are able to use exclamation marks freely in their own writing, but clarifies that in the formal grammar tests they sit an exclamation mark is only accepted where a sentence begins with ‘what’ or ‘how’. It is, of course, the test results that matter for schools as the sole indicator of ‘success’. Such micro-management of the curriculum by politicians, enforced by a high-stakes testing regime, further undermines teachers’ efforts to engage students in meaningful and purposeful learning.

Further, it is not only the time and space in the curriculum devoted to covering innumerable prescribed objectives that is concerning, but also the pedagogies which teachers subsequently employ. Haberman (2010), in his discussion of the ‘pedagogy of poverty’ raises alarm over how, in a regime of high stakes testing and accountability,
The overly directive, mind-numbing, mundane, useless, anti-intellectual acts that constitute teaching not only remain the coin of the realm but have become the gold standard.

This reinforces concerns that, in order to prepare for national tests, students are faced with lifeless de-contextualised exercises as they memorise and re-produce endless rules and knowledge in spelling, grammar, maths and science. Such concerns resonate at Green Tree Primary School, where questions in regard to students’ ability to relate to the curriculum offered and engage in education are raised by some class teachers. Therefore, it is essential to consider the context of the school, the community it serves and the ‘virtual school bags’ (Thomson, 2002) of its students as the school management and teachers look to implement this latest revision of the National Curriculum.

**Green Tree Primary School and the ‘curriculum challenge’**

**The school context**

Green Tree Primary School is a small school and nursery, serving students between the ages of 3 and 11. It has 211 students on roll; of these, 39.9% are eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), which is the government’s standard measure of poverty – nearly three times the national proportion. The school has a high number of students on roll identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN), with 14.7% of students placed on the SEN register. Compared to other schools nationally, this places Green Tree Primary School in the top decile for the number of students with SEN. Attendance, at 94.7%, has consistently failed to reach the government target of 95%. The school recognises that there is a core group of students who are persistently absent from school.

The school serves an inner city community dominated by social housing: recent government census figures indicate that 21.6% of the students come from the 10% most deprived areas of the country, whilst Acorn, a UK wide analysis of demographic and socio-economic data, suggests that 89% of families are placed within either the ‘Moderate Means’ category or ‘Hard Pressed’, the lowest two categories of the population in terms of socio-economic advantage. Most students are white British. The numbers of students with English as an additional language (EAL) and more specifically black ethnic minority (BME) students remain below the national average, but are slowly increasing.

Green Tree Primary School underwent an Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection in November 2011, when it was judged to be a “good” school. In 2013, it was highlighted by the local press as being one of “10 most improved schools” in the urban area. In 2013, despite the high levels of deprivation, 91% of students attained the expected level
4 in English and maths, compared to a national average of 74%. However, previous investigations within the school have raised concerns over the realities which are perhaps ‘masked’ by this headline data (see Nuttall and Doherty, 2014). Despite numerous interventions put into place there remains a significant group of students, typically White British boys in receipt of FSM, who seem ‘unconvinced’ by the education offered to them. This group frequently display disengagement and disaffection, typified by disruptive behaviours and passivity in learning.

There are questions to be asked here, then, if the curriculum offered to the students at the school and the pedagogies employed truly meet the needs of these learners, or whether a focus on attainment, defined by performance in standardised tests, narrows the curriculum, further exacerbating the patterns of disengagement.

**Dissatisfactions with the curriculum**

Jonathan Barnes states that “A school’s values are reflected in the curriculum it offers” (2007, p.17). At Green Tree Primary School the curriculum has previously been very heavily focused on ‘basic skills’ – English, maths and science dominate the timetable with rigorous testing, monitoring and accountability structures in place. A typical weekly timetable for an upper Key Stage 2 class prior to 2014 demonstrated narrowing of the curriculum in preparation for national tests, with only four sessions per week (of approximately 60 – 80 minutes per session) devoted to non-core subjects.

Even in these non-core sessions emphasis was placed on developing ‘basic skills’, with opportunities for writing in the humanities and maths skills in science at the fore front of all learning activities planned. Indeed, interviews with a focus group of four boys highlighted how this prioritising of basic skills was disengaging for some, as Student 1 stated:

“I used to like science when we did activities and stuff but Mr L just goes on about how we need to do charts… It’s rubbish.”

If, as Barnes states, the curriculum reflects a school’s values then it would suggest that Green Tree Primary School values academic attainment in national testing above all else. However, discussion with the class teachers and management at the school revealed some recognition of the narrowing of the curriculum, and some desire for the curriculum they offer to have a more liberal-progressive orientation (Kemmis et al, 1983); that is, to provide students in the school with an education that prepares them for life and develops the whole person rather than simply producing passive learners equipped with enough basic skills to make them economically viable in the future.
Some teachers expressed their desire to encourage autonomy and questioning amongst students, and for the students to be able to provide more direction for the curriculum and to follow their interests rather than transmit an overly prescribed set of objectives. Teacher 1 sums up how he views his role as “…you’re not the giver of all knowledge, are you, you’re a facilitator”. Despite this, some comments by staff indicated a conflict between what they wanted to do and what they felt they needed to do in order to meet requirements and standards laid down by the previous National Curriculum and national tests. Teacher 2 identified how children in her class had asked about birds they’d seen in the school grounds and local area and were keen to find out more, but feeling restricted by a prescribed and packed curriculum she had to limit that interest to a “quick chat” before the register and then moving on to the other objectives planned already for that day’s activities. She expressed concern that “…the thing that I’d just be thinking about is the red tape, oh I should be doing this, I should be doing that…”

A new vision?

In preparation for the new curriculum implemented in September 2014, the school head and nine class teachers discussed their vision for new approaches. Central to this was the concept of ‘connection’, indicated by phrases such as “connected to real life”, “take into account the views of the children” and “tailored to our children”. This emphasises the importance felt by school staff in recognising the need for strong links between school and the students’ lived experiences. A lack of ‘connection’ for some students had previously been identified as a concern, summarised by Teacher 3 who stated that:

“A lot of ours [students] see school as a place where you learn and then you come out of school and you don’t learn… we want them to see that learning’s for life, that you’re always learning, asking questions…”

Teacher 4 identified the way in which school is very different to the everyday lives of many students.

This recognition is perhaps an important step in improving education for students in urban settings. Kamler and Comber’s (2005) work with 10 teacher-researchers identified that achievement and engagement of ‘at risk students’ were considerably improved when teachers took into account their students’ ‘funds of knowledge’ (Moll et al, 1992) and their ‘virtual school bags’ (Thomson, 2002). When the teachers listened and took into account the lives and experiences of their students and their families they discovered a wealth of resources that had previously been invisible in the context of schooling, rather than the deficits they expected. Subsequent changes to the curriculum and pedagogies which drew
upon these resources successfully re-engaged students, and improved education not just for those at risk but for all students in the class.

There are lessons here which can be applied at Green Tree Primary School. The new school curriculum aims to build on students’ interests and experiences, giving them opportunity to help direct their own learning and engage with their families. One significant aspect of this is an attempt to follow the principles of ‘open architectures’ (Wrigley, 2007) which may be key to re-engaging some students, and creating more purpose and value to learning.

**Open architectures**

As part of the discussion around a new curriculum vision, school staff were introduced to the concept of what Wrigley (2007) defines as ‘open architectures’, including ‘Project Method’ (Dewey, 2010) and ‘Storyline’ (Bell et al, 2007). Other examples include simulations, collective design processes, media production, Mantle of the Expert and various forms of place-based learning. Open architectures involve a shift of focus from rigid, solitary lessons to longer periods of time, creating more flexibility in the curriculum. They are ‘architectures’ because they have a unified structure, which is important in order to sustain a learning community, but ‘open’ in that there are spaces for learners as individuals or in small groups to exercise initiative and agency.

They rely upon real or realistic situations as a foundation for developing skills or concepts, resounding with Gardner’s (1999) notion of multiple intelligences and his assertion that literacies and basic skills are tools that allow us to enhance our deeper understanding and exploration of new concepts. Open architectures incorporate many opportunities for collaboration, enabling teachers to move away from transmission of ‘dead facts’ and towards developing Chomsky’s ideal of ‘real communities of concern’ (2000). These approaches are consistent with meeting some of the needs identified for the school, in particular in terms of improving connectedness with the curriculum, purposeful and contextualised learning experiences, and greater autonomy for students.

**‘Storyline’**

One key approach the school managers and class teachers at Green Tree were keen to investigate is that of ‘Storyline’, developed by Steve Bell and colleagues at Jordanhill Teacher Training College in Glasgow. This is a form of thematic learning which was specifically designed for young children, and is structured by a narrative which provides a skeleton frame of the ‘storyline’. Typically, the narrative would progress through three stages:

1. It begins with a situation or location proposed by the teacher;
2. Students create roles for themselves to become part of the narrative;
3. The teacher moves the narrative forwards in a planned progression, with each event providing a stimulus for student activity, such as research, a writing episode, drama and role play, discussions, etc...

It could be argued that existential engagement in learning is vital, as we most deeply learn what is truly and personally relevant to us (Barnes, 2007). One of the ways in which Storyline achieves this is through the learner’s engagement as a character in the narrative process, and an inhabitant of the situation. This identification must be in ways which are age-appropriate and within the reach of the child. Key figures in pedagogical research, including Bruner (1968) and Vygotsky (1978), identify the importance of pedagogies grounded in socio-constructivist principles, and the ‘storyline’ approach has clear roots in social constructivism, embracing opportunities for collaboration and experiential learning, and supporting students in building bridges between narrative and abstract languages. This form of learning creates a sense of voice for students and allows opportunity for participation and critical thinking within a safe environment.

Wartofsky (1973) highlights the significance of ‘microworlds’, such as simulations and virtual realities. These representations provide a rich multisensory image of reality, but because they are ‘off-line’ they allow for experimentation with no pressure of the consequences of error. Thus the engagement is, in an important sense, playful. Within the storyline approach, then, students can utilise tools in order to operate intelligently, reinforcing Gardner’s (1999) principles of multiple intelligences. Further, the ability, within the narrative framework, to manipulate abstract symbols to solve problems and develop ideas sees learners bridging between the abstract and the concrete, as highlighted by Bruner. The situations and actions are not simply imitative routines but must contain significant challenges. Perkins summarises the importance of this with his phrase, “Learning is a consequence of thinking” (1992, p.34).

The use of Storyline has become popular in many Scandinavian schools, where it is used not only with small children but also with older students including post-16 vocational courses. Bjorn Bolstad writes positively of this approach at the Ringstabekk School, a ‘youth school’ for students age 13 – 16. Whilst his students at this school are older than those at Green Tree Primary School, as Storyline was originally developed for younger children the conclusions drawn here are relevant to students of primary age. Bolstad claims that the use of Storyline “engages learners in a catalytic way for learning at a very personal level” (2012, p. 42), supporting Wartofsky’s concept of creating ‘microworlds’. He goes on to highlight how creating cross-curricular themes promotes more holistic learning experiences, enabling students to experience and connect to real world phenomena, rather than learn separate subjects which create a fragmented version of reality. This ‘fragmentation’ currently occurs
in the curriculum at Green Tree and may go some to way to help explain how some students seem unable to connect with and across the curriculum. Thus, the holistic experience provided by Storyline enables students to do more than just accumulate separate subject concepts and methods and helps them to engage in ‘learning to learn’.

A new planning process

The predominance of ‘learning because you’re told to’ (Wrigley, 2007) is one of the results of a focus on ‘school improvement’ dominated by league tables and adherence to a prescriptive and standardised curriculum. Even individual lessons become standardised and rigid, with a favouring of the three and four part one-hour lesson as prescribed by National Strategies in 1999. Previously at Green Tree Primary School such lessons were expected and encouraged by a set planning format which insisted on clear objectives, basic skills and segregated parts of lessons identified. However, with a move towards the use of Storyline and more creativity and flexibility in the curriculum, new planning formats were designed by the school which aim to reduce the amount of prescription in lessons. Figure 1 shows an extract from the trial plan for a Year 6 class in which the class teacher co-created a story with students based on prior learning about Charles Darwin and theories of evolution. The story was constructed through a sequence of e-mails and artefacts from a museum, with the students taking on roles as historical and scientific investigators in order to solve problems and respond to questions from the museum’s curator. The story culminated in the class creating and presenting their own museum exhibition pieces which either proved or disputed the existence of dragons in the geographical area around their residential visit.

Figure 1: Extract from the trial plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Problem/challenge</th>
<th>Links to other subjects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wk 3</td>
<td>Introduce problem – a letter from an ‘admirer’ of Charles Darwin in 18something… belief that dragons may have once existed in some parts of North Yorkshire, locals have presented him with some evidence… (part of letter missing). Create investigation teams – what evidence might we look for? Identify area for study and plan inquiry for visit.</td>
<td>Geography mapping skills Investigative and questioning skills Science – knowledge of fossils and habitats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>Look for fossils whilst caving Rock piles on Ingleborough walk – story of dragons (rocks from grinding the meat in their stomachs) Dragon egg in grounds</td>
<td>Science – fossils Literacy – story telling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week</td>
<td>Task Description</td>
<td>Methods/Tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wk 4</td>
<td>E-mail from British Museum – never heard of any evidence of dragons, but if the land was suitable might be possible… Investigate land use around Clapham: water, shelter, food sources, etc… Create maps with grid references and keys to describe topographical features</td>
<td>Aerial photographs, Ordnance Survey maps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wk 5/6</td>
<td>E-mail from British Museum – considering land use, may be a slim possibility dragons were there… but what would they have looked like? Consider adaptation in animals to decide in teams what the dragon may have looked like, e.g. size, jaws, skin/feathers, colour, claws, etc… Develop into theory (link to evolution) – why did the dragons die out?</td>
<td>BBC class clips – adaptation and evolution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In planning this storyline it was important for teachers to identify what they hoped to be learnt and to provide some direction for the students’ study. In that way, students’ engagement feels as authentic as possible, but the teacher remains conscious of key curricular aims, both as knowledge and in terms of the development and application of a range of skills. The new format supports the cross-curricular approach, with this example showing how English, geography, science and IT are embedded in one ‘theme’. The school, though, has awareness of the limitations of teaching all subjects through one cross-curricular theme; following the case study of Ringstabekk School (Bolstad, 2012), the timetable has space set aside for the teaching of subjects which do not fit into the current theme, but with flexibility so that weekly timetables change according to the needs of the curriculum and students, rather than being static as has been in the past.

The new planning process also allows for more students direction and collaborative learning. Many of the events which stimulate learning are based on questions, which allow students working in small groups to direct their own responses. This opportunity for pupil direction is also seen in the reduction of learning objectives and prescribed activities. As Abbs (2003) highlights, education cannot take place without the active participation of students, who have to learn to be the protagonists of their own learning. Thus, the new curriculum plans aim to re-engage all students in valuable and purposeful learning experiences rather than continuing to accumulate separate items of knowledge.

**A review of the ‘curriculum challenge’ at Green Tree Primary School**

**Responses to the ‘Storyline’ approach**
Prior to the implementation of the new curriculum, teachers raised concerns about approaching the curriculum through ‘open architectures’. Three teachers spoke of being “frightened” by open learning activities, citing difficulties with organisation, resourcing, timing, accommodating different needs of the class, behaviour, and monitoring coverage of curriculum content. The school head expressed her fears of a “free for all” situation and loss of control. This is not uncommon in urban schools. Research in Australia and New Zealand has indicated patterns in disadvantaged schools: in order to maintain control and advance through the curriculum teachers engage in less questioning and more tightly prescribed tasks, limiting student agency. This could be identified as a ‘default mode’ of operation (Thrupp, 1999; Johnston and Hayes, 2007). This concern is also raised in English schools, as Lupton and Hempel-Jorgensen (2012) conclude, “the pressures on schools in disadvantaged settings tend to lead to the maintenance of pedagogical practices that are unlikely to have transformational effects on students” (p.610).

However, on the whole the class teachers recognised that significant changes were needed in the way that the school’s curriculum was designed and implemented. 18 months on from the initial trial of the ‘storyline’ approach, key changes have been adopted across most of the school:

- Class teachers, with support from a curriculum leader, choose relevant objectives from the National Curriculum and manipulate them into themes and topics that are geared more towards students’ particular interests and experiences.
- Student autonomy and agency has been increased by encouraging them to ask questions and collaborate with teachers in selecting directions for investigative learning. At the start of a new ‘theme’ students are invited to propose questions for investigation which the teacher uses to scaffold some learning experiences.
- Increasingly class teachers attempt to create ‘real’ outcomes so that learning is purposeful and can be shared with a wider audience.
- Wider use of problem solving and role play to create ‘real-life’ scenarios where students collaborate in response, for example hosting a Tudor banquet or designing and constructing a vehicle in response to a letter from a car company.
- Greater use of group work and ‘mixed ability’ groupings, placing emphasis on the social aspects of learning including collaboration, speaking and listening.

Some class teachers talk positively about the impact on students’ engagement with learning. Teacher 2 gave an example of how students responded to an e-mail from the ‘Olympic committee’ asking for a new sport to be invented: “the kids, they were obsessed! They loved it! It made such a difference…” The school head recognises the value in students becoming
“immersed” in learning experiences which, she hopes, “takes [learning] beyond school... We want them [students] to see that learning’s for life.” It would seem that whilst the ‘storyline’ approach itself has not subsequently been adopted in its entirety by the school, some of the key principles of collaboration, experiential learning experiences, and bridging narrative and abstract concepts could be seen to be making some difference.

**Future challenges**

However, discussion with the curriculum leader and soon-to-be Year 6 class teacher reveals some caution in celebrating the success of these approaches. She highlights particular worries about providing a balanced and engaging curriculum in light of increased expectations of student performance in English and maths and greater monitoring of individual student and teacher performance:

“Doing all this stuff is great, the assemblies and posters and stuff, but I worry about the books… what if we get moderated [for writing]? There’s got to be so much evidence…”

This echoes the concerns of the current Year 6 teacher, who describes the impact SATs tests have on her curriculum:

“…the whole of Year 6 really is geared up towards the SATS test isn’t it? …There’s the pressure on the teachers of the school and you want them to do well, but actually are they learning anything whilst you’re trying to prepare them for that test? Are they learning the right things in the right way all the time?”

Wrigley (2001, p.1) questions the high value placed on attainment in English schools:

“What really matters: new targets to meet? Higher maths grades perhaps? Or caring and creative learners, a future, a sense of justice, the welfare of the planet and its people?”

However, in a time when what counts in schools “…is increasingly only what can be counted” (Kamler and Comber, 2005, p.121) there is concern that the best intentions at Green Tree Primary School to implement a new approach to the curriculum which is more engaging, relevant and progressive may well be undermined by pressure to teach to the test, which further alienates some students. Gunter recognises this conflict and claims that it is the result of a focus on school improvement which expects teachers to reinforce a single hegemonic version of what constitutes ‘effectiveness’:

The problems of the education system have been laid at the door of teachers while their capacity for finding solutions has been taken away. The rhetoric has been of empowerment, participation and teams, but the reality is that teachers have had to
continue to do what they have always done – be empowered to do what they have been told to do. (Gunter, 2001, p.144).

Whilst rhetoric around ‘empowering’ teachers suggests that with the implementation of the new National Curriculum there will be greater flexibility for schools to direct their own curriculum, the continued focus on ‘raising standards’ constrains this.

**Conclusion**

For schools such as Green Tree Primary School, serving urban communities and groups of disadvantaged students, the ‘curriculum challenge’ is not one easily surmounted. Faced with a neo-conservative curriculum orientated towards economic viability, it may seem that little has changed since the first 19th century curriculum which prioritised the continuation of a pre-determined social order. The current ‘sameness’ agenda which requires schools to adhere to the same rigid curriculum and meet the same national standards can only exacerbate inequality, as identified by Bourdieu (1976, p.113):

> In fact, to penalise the underprivileged and favour the most privileged, the school has only to neglect, in its teaching methods and techniques, and its criteria when making academic judgements, to take into account the cultural inequalities between children of different social classes. In other words, by treating all students, however unequal they may be in reality, as equal in rights and duties, the education system is led to give its de facto sanction to initial cultural inequalities.

However, at Green Tree Primary School there is a willingness to drive change, with the recognition that students’ needs cannot be met by a narrow focus on testable attainment, but require a richer, more sustainable sense of achievement. With the new curriculum developments, staff are optimistic about the possibility of providing a balance between the requirements of the National Curriculum and adaptability to reflect and respond to the circumstances of the local community. Despite this optimism, until policy makers realise that excellence in education does not depend on “battery-farming children” (Wrigley, 2014) the teachers and students at Green Tree Primary School will always be restricted by the socially divisive testing regime which continues to create the curriculum challenge.
References


