National College for
School Leadership

**Inspiring leaders;
improving children's lives**

Leading curriculum innovation:
Learning from research

**To order a copy of this publication, please email
ln@ncsl.org.uk quoting reference PB201a
or download directly from www.ncsl.org.uk/publications.**

PB201a/book1

QCA
Qualifications and
Curriculum Authority

Everyone involved in education recognises that it is critical to design and deliver a curriculum that inspires and challenges all learners and prepares them well for life in the 21st century.

This is a complex leadership task and one that has been embraced by over 50 schools in NCSL's Leadership Network. These schools are participating in a joint project with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). The project focuses on developing a curriculum for the 21st century. The questions that helped shape the project were:

1. What are we trying to achieve through the curriculum?

2. How do we organise learning in order to achieve it?

3. How will we know that we have achieved our aim(s)?

4. How can this drive for curriculum change best be led for success?

Activity related to the project has demonstrated how the power to innovate engages leaders involved in curriculum development in revisiting their thinking about education and school purpose. It has also required that they reframe their practice as leaders of learning. It has stimulated the creativity of school leaders, staff and pupils and promoted key, systemic shifts towards a curriculum that is more flexible, responsive and relevant to the needs and lives of learners.

Among the project's key findings was a clear recognition that there is no one model for success, because context matters. Each participating school adopted an approach to leading curriculum innovation that was right for its particular situation. Moreover, rather than tackling this task in isolation, participating schools were able to benefit from the thinking and practice of their network colleagues and so were able to articulate and shape their ideas in a way that, as one project participant put it, "enabled us to bring back practical solutions to our school in even better shape than when we took them out".

> **This booklet summarises the outcomes of research undertaken to examine the practice of school leaders and outlines five components of the effective leadership of curriculum innovation.**

Introduction

Five-year-old children in our schools today are likely to be entering the workforce in the 2020s. How do we best prepare them for living in the 21st century? Changes in technology, society and the nature of work have been significant in the last few decades and the pace of change looks set to continue. This necessitates a curriculum that is responsive to change and that is flexible enough to adapt and be tailored to meet changing needs. The curriculum cannot remain static.

Gareth Mills, QCA, 2006

Everyone involved in education recognises that it is important to develop a curriculum that inspires and challenges all learners and prepares them well for life in the 21st century. But who will lead this drive for curriculum change and how will they be able to account for their success?

At a time of growing autonomy and school self-evaluation, the key to the engine of innovation lies in the hands of schools themselves. Not all schools have the confidence, the capacity or the desire to change, but for those that have, what was the stimulus for embarking on change? What did they set out to achieve and how did they lead for curriculum innovation?

The project

Over 50 schools from NCSL's Leadership Network have been involved in a joint NCSL and QCA project entitled Developing a 21st century curriculum. Each school identified an approach to curriculum innovation that it wished to pursue and develop during the project.

There was no one model for how schools might lead innovation because context does matter. Each school adopted an approach that was right for its particular situation and that accorded with the personal level of investment that the headteacher and/or other leaders could bring.

Of these schools, 20 were visited by 6 school leaders, also from the project, in their capacity as research associates. Their research focused on both the nature of the schools' innovation and their leadership journeys.

The data collection methods used included:

- semi-structured interviews with headteachers and other key members of staff
- lesson observations and/or discussions with pupils
- scrutiny of data

The questions focused on during these visits were:

- What difference did the school want to make to its young people and why?
- What has the school done?
- How did the school make these changes?
- What was the role of leadership?
- How does the school know it has achieved what it set out to do?

Case studies were written for each of the schools studied and these are available on the NCSL and QCA websites at **www.ncsl.org.uk/publications** or **www.qca.org.uk/innovation**.

How to use this summary

Five key components of leading curriculum innovation emerged from this study.

> **The five components**
> 1. stimulus for innovation
> 2. stimulating innovation
> 3. developing strategy for innovation
> 4. implementing innovation
> 5. evaluating the impact of innovation

This summary enables school leaders or others who are seeking to engage in curriculum innovation, or who are already carrying this out, to:

- reflect on the five components
- consider the findings related to these components and use them as a tool to aid thinking about their own school context and the path that might suit it best
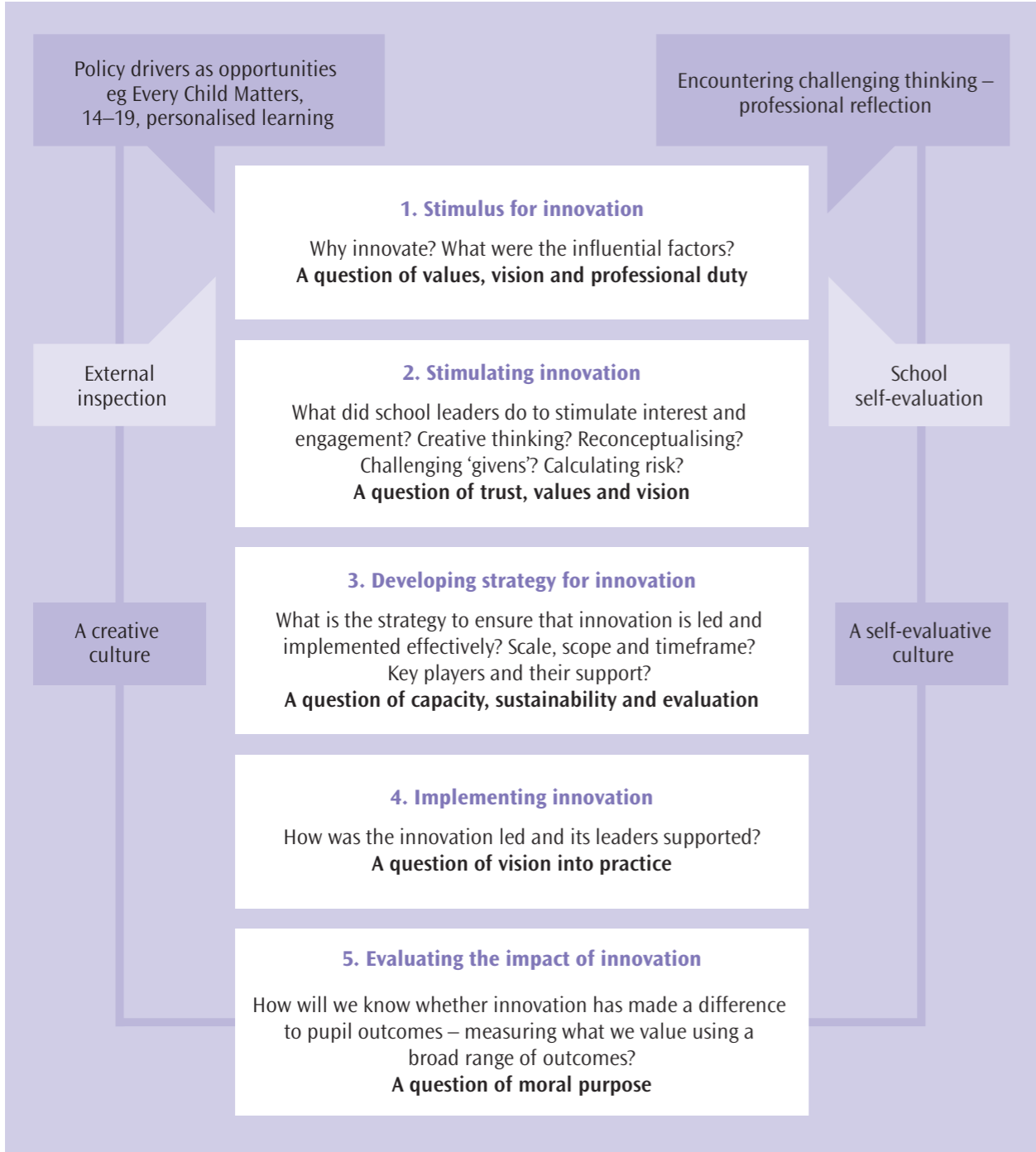
Each section provides:

- research findings from the 20 schools that were studied
- examples of practice taken from the case studies
- questions for school leaders to prompt reflection

The five components

Across the schools, five areas relating to the leadership of curriculum innovation emerged. Although set out in a linear fashion in the diagram below, the manner in which each school engaged with each component had a more dynamic flow. Each component was an important part of the overall approach that was adopted.

In addition, underpinning the schools' practices were two important factors:

- a culture of creativity – of looking to do things differently
- a culture of self-evaluation – of engaging with stakeholders, asking questions of its practices at each stage and establishing ways to uncover the answers and using these to inform development

Figure 1 Leading curriculum innovation: the five components

Policy drivers as opportunities
eg Every Child Matters,
14–19, personalised learning

Encountering challenging thinking –
professional reflection

1. Stimulus for innovation

Why innovate? What were the influential factors?
A question of values, vision and professional duty

External
inspection

School
self-evaluation

2. Stimulating innovation

What did school leaders do to stimulate interest and engagement? Creative thinking? Reconceptualising? Challenging 'givens'? Calculating risk?
A question of trust, values and vision

3. Developing strategy for innovation

What is the strategy to ensure that innovation is led and implemented effectively? Scale, scope and timeframe? Key players and their support?
A question of capacity, sustainability and evaluation

A creative
culture

A self-evaluative
culture

4. Implementing innovation

How was the innovation led and its leaders supported?
A question of vision into practice

5. Evaluating the impact of innovation

How will we know whether innovation has made a difference to pupil outcomes – measuring what we value using a broad range of outcomes?
A question of moral purpose

Component 1: Stimulus for innovation

Why did the schools set out on the path of curriculum innovation? What was it that led them to want to change existing provision in favour of something different?

For the majority of schools, one or more of the four factors were cited as being a stimulus for innovation:

1. self-evaluation
2. policy initiatives
3. encountering challenging thinking
4. external inspection

In each case, the extent to which these were proactive or reactive, as well as the extent to which one played a greater role than one or more of the others, varied.

Self-evaluation

Schools' self-evaluation processes highlighted the need to make changes with their existing provision. These included:

- data analysis (eg relating to pupil performance, attendance and behaviour and/or attitude)
- learning-focused monitoring (eg classroom observations)
- reflections of the headteacher and other stakeholders' on shortcomings of the existing curriculum

Case study extract

The school has over recent years been high performing in terms of academic results and pupil behaviour. However, teachers felt that pupil engagement was not fully developed, especially among younger children. Pupils relied too heavily on teacher input and staff felt the children were being spoon fed. Not all teachers accounted for the range of different learning styles of the students and students' knowledge of their own preferred learning styles was underdeveloped.

Case study extract

Through the school's senior leadership team, internal monitoring systems of lesson observations and pupil-tracking exercises, the school recognised that too many of the students were lacking confidence in their own ability to solve problems and had become over-reliant on teachers.

Policy initiatives

Schools saw developments such as personalisation, Every Child Matters (ECM) and the 14–19 reform agenda as drivers or opportunities for curriculum innovation.

Encountering challenging thinking

School leaders drew on learning-oriented publications and professional development opportunities such as conferences and visits to other schools to develop their concept of what the curriculum offer should be in order to enable high-quality learning experiences. These experiences broadened and challenged existing perspectives and led schools towards new ways of thinking.

Case study extract

The initial concept was developed following a course about learning to learn, which four senior staff attended.

External inspection

In some cases, external inspection highlighted aspects that required school leaders to rethink the school's existing curriculum.

Case study extract

In response to its latest Ofsted report, the school seized upon the comment that whereas teaching was mostly excellent, pupils' learning was rated one notch behind at 'very good'. It was observed that not all pupils were aware of how they learn best and this has provided the focus for the school project.

The moral imperative

Whilst recognising the importance of one or more of these four factors, school leaders linked their decision-making on curriculum innovation to their own values, vision and sense of professional duty. In other words, they sought to ensure that the curriculum offer was one that aligned with their own concept of what would give their pupils the best opportunities, experiences and chances to achieve and enjoy. Innovation was consequently often the result of the headteacher's personal, passionate commitment, as illustrated by a comment from one headteacher: "Poverty, inequality – I'm obsessed with it, and that drives what we do here".

Case study extract

Do we want to teach children to strive to reach the highest mountain and appreciate the beauty and wonder they find there or remain safely in the foothills, being able to name each mountain they look up to and describe how they were made without feeling the soil and rock underfoot?

This summarises the philosophy and drive of the headteacher. It is a metaphor he uses regularly with the members of the school's governing body to engage them in leading the school not only towards SATs but also towards individual pupil attainment and growth.

Reflection point…
A question of values, vision and professional duty

- Which of the four factors outlined is most relevant to your context?

- What kind of curriculum innovation is required for your pupils to both enjoy and achieve?

- What might be the risks?

Use the space provided on page 15 to record your thoughts and ideas

Component 2: Stimulating innovation

In leading for innovation, leaders were conscious that this meant more than school improvement as it required a greater emphasis on creativity and doing things differently. Doing more of the same was not a consideration. This was particularly the case where innovation meant taking more radical, widescale approaches.

Central to this phase was a consultative approach. Not all schools included full consultation with all stakeholders, but instead demonstrated a more selective process. Headteachers typically invited responses from staff members, primarily senior leaders and teachers as a starting point, as well as governors. Pupils and parents were included as key stakeholders but not necessarily at the outset as school leaders considered the appropriate stage to invite consultation within their particular contexts.

Consultation was seen as:

- a contributor to reconceptualising existing structures
- a precursor to formulating a concrete strategy for the implementation and evaluation of outcomes

Leaders in this phase sought to:

- think creatively and consider 'what might be'
- challenge assumptions, such as 'We can't because of the timetable'
- maximise opportunities such as including policy initiatives and partnership working
- gain commitment and buy-in by engaging others in dialogue and using persuasion as required
- communicating the vision through different media such as articles
- calculate risk more fully, especially in a context of high-stakes accountability
- refine options to take forward to the strategy phase
- identify potential champions to lead innovation

Case study extract

The secret is to start flying the kite yourself, then encourage someone else to hold the strings.

School leader

Underpinning this phase was a move to create a shared vision of 'what could be' and translate values into practical solutions. Developing trust helped create the conditions and climate for innovation to proceed. Contributory to this was:

- the headteacher, in promoting or supporting curriculum innovation and modelling calculated risk-taking – in one case the head provided staff with an innovative model supported by examples of successful worldwide innovation
- an invitation to stakeholders to contribute to concept development as an inclusive, collegiate approach

Case study extract

One school's principal took the school's stated values as a starting point for developing innovation as he 'really explored what they meant with staff'. This exercise served as a springboard for the creation of a whole-school vision of what concepts such as 'independence' actually meant in reality, and the curriculum offer and practices that could support pupils in achieving outcomes related to these.

Research and writing relating to learning, such as that of Guy Claxton and Howard Gardner, were used to stimulate thought around the nature of learning and the type of curriculum that might accommodate this.

Reflection point…
A question of trust, values and vision

- What is your vision of the curriculum and how will you articulate this?

- How might you do things differently?

- What are your school's 'givens' that might need to be challenged?

Use the space provided on page 15 to record your thoughts and ideas

Component 3: Developing strategy for innovation

This phase saw the innovation move towards becoming operational and a strategy was developed involving key players. This involved making strategic decisions about what would happen in at least the short- to medium-term. The innovation may have been led primarily by the headteacher or another leader, which in some cases was a deputy headteacher. Key considerations are described below.

Capacity

Leaders made decisions as to what was manageable both within the school and, in the case of partnership-based innovations, between institutions. These determined the scale of innovation ranging from an initial pilot to widescale reform. It also considered the level of distributed leadership required to both lead and support the innovation, ie:

- Human and physical resources – who will lead developments, implement them and, if appropriate, be responsible for liaison between partners, and who and what will support them?
- Structures – what will the revised approaches mean for the school's existing structures and systems, for example in teaching support and timetabling?

Sustainability

How can we ensure that approaches selected are those that can be embedded in the long term? Other questions considered included:

- What training and development opportunities will be required?
- What structures will be needed?

Communication

Who will I need to consult about or advise of this development and how will I achieve this?

- A number of schools made seeking the views of pupils on developments a key part of the strategy, for example by attendance at staff meetings, leadership team meetings, pupil forums and school councils.
- Informing others, for example parents, that innovation was set in the context of national agendas was seen as helpful in at least one case.

Evaluation

How will we know that the innovation has made a positive impact on pupil outcomes? What processes will we employ to establish this and what structures will we put in place to ensure evaluation informs future stages of the project?

While evaluation appears as a separate section (see component 5 on page 12), its placement here emphasises that because of its crucial importance, it should be planned into the strategy at the outset.

Considering the context was central to schools' formulation of strategy. Some took the step of engaging in whole-school reform. For example, Waingels College in Reading and Bristol City Academy implemented substantially revised structures that reconfigured their curriculum provision and approach to learning.

> ### Case study extract
>
> In developing a cross-curricular, themed approach to the curriculum, a whole-school strategy included the following early process. Initially, the themes chosen for the six-week projects were brainstormed at a residential conference in response to the questions:
>
> - What would be an interesting spin on a national curriculum area?
> - What would work?
> - What would the students be interested in?
> - How can we develop each young person's ability to learn better and ensure they have the necessary skills and qualities to be successful and happy?

For others, a more stepped and in some instances piloted approach was used in which innovation was, in the short-term, located in the classrooms and practices of the few. Often these few were self-selecting, interested and motivated individuals; at other times they were those the headteacher considered to have the potential to take innovation forward.

> ### Case study extract
>
> Two high-potential Foundation Stage teachers were selected by the headteacher to pilot a more integrative curriculum approach based on Foundation Stage principles in Key Stage 2. The strategy in the short-term was to transfer the two teachers to a Year 3 class and a mixed Year 3 and 4 class. The headteacher has given them room to take ownership of the development, adapting it half-termly, based upon their ongoing evaluation.
>
> The school's two advanced skills teachers developed a spiral curriculum for the development of brain-based learning to be delivered by an experienced group of form tutors. The programme was broadly based on three of Guy Claxton's 'Rs'. After the success of the pilot, the decision was taken to roll out the curriculum to all forms in Years 7 and 8, so involving a wider selection of staff.
>
> *There was an underlying feeling of 'we can't afford to get it wrong'. This therefore required exacting planning, communication and management skills. Governors had seen the outcomes of extensive strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) exercises.*
>
> *Communication skills were employed to win the hearts and minds of parents. Considerable effort went into explaining the rationale behind the programme through targeted letters and dedicated information evenings.*

Schools that used piloted or early-phase approaches saw these as precursors to the extension of a curriculum model throughout the school, subject to evaluation of the impact on pupil outcomes. The advantages were:

- champions were able to develop effective practices in action research, ironing out difficulties and breeding an ethos of success
- opportunities to assess pupil outcomes on a smaller scale to test the water
- opportunities for others to develop an interest in the innovation from seeing their colleagues' work
- space for leaders to reflect on the medium-term strategy in view of short-term development

> ### Case study extract
>
> *The school's leadership took time building a critical mass of staff that:*
> - *were persuaded that new teaching techniques were a good idea*
> - *were committed to adopting them*
> - *put the techniques to good, regular use*

> ### Case study extract
>
> *The willingness to run a pilot before committing the school to any change has won the trust of the staff.*
>
> Involvement in the Jean Ruddock personalised learning project began with one department and has now spread to 13 departments in total. The school invests heavily in its middle management: the deputies tend to initiate a project then gently hand it over to a middle manager to run. Because the projects are fed through year- and academic teams, there is a real ownership and understanding of what is going on across the school, and a recognition that projects are being taken on for a reason.

> ### Reflection point…
> **A question of capacity, sustainability and evaluation**
>
> - Consider the capacity in your own setting: What strategic approach would suit your proposed innovation best – wholesale reform or a more staged development?
>
> - Who is going to lead this? Who are your key players and how can they best operate?
>
> - How will the impact on pupil outcomes be measured and to which of the five ECM outcomes will this relate?
>
> Use the space provided on page 15 to record your thoughts and ideas

Component 4: Implementing innovation

This phase saw the agreed strategy translated into action. In cases where a staged approach was taken towards implementation, the piloting nature of the strategy meant that lessons learnt from smaller scale implementation informed future strategy, for example in large-scale roll-out across the school. School leaders in this phase sought to:

- develop plans and put in place strategies
- model approaches
- maintain ongoing dialogue with key stakeholders such as pupils and governors
- use this alongside other self-evaluation measures to shape future strategy
- amend current provision if it was deemed inappropriate: 'If it isn't working, it gets junked'

In some cases, leaders took a hands-on role in leading the innovation.

> ## Case study extract
>
> *The leadership style of this innovation is both democratic and pace-setting, and it is apparent that the views and concerns of all interested parties are considered before further development is considered. The curriculum review group, which meets on a regular basis and offers all stakeholders the opportunity to contribute, is now looking at the next stage of innovation.*

Support for those leading the innovation was given through:

- ongoing informal support and dialogue
- regular feedback meetings to discuss the progress of the innovation against desired outcomes
- clear messages of trust that empower those leading to take responsibility and ownership of developments; as one headteacher said, 'Their contribution is to be expert leaders of learning rather than, say, historians … I trust them and don't interfere'
- financing of professional development opportunities such as school visits or conference attendance to retain a cutting edge
- financing of strategies and resources that aid the innovation in taking a foothold, for example leading an academic consultancy

> ## Case study extract
>
> The headteacher exhibits a personalised approach to leadership development, showing in many cases a generous degree of trust; making prompts and suggestions; making space for promising middle leaders… he gives innovators some freedom on a longer leash so that new developments are allowed to mature within a reasonable timescale.

> ## Case study extract
>
> *You have to enable everyone to take risks; you can't give responsibility and then take it away. Set overall parameters and then let people be adventurous.*
>
> In this setting, ownership extended to the key leader, the curriculum leader for creativity, who was leading staff training across the school to develop provision and practice.

School leaders (or in the case of distributed leadership, other leaders in the school) supported those implementing the innovation directly by:

- providing relevant, up-to-date resources
- providing detailed schemes of work
- providing regular in-service training
- providing differentiated continuing professional development for some staff
- encouraging opportunities to carry out research linked to the developments
- providing opportunities for working group membership to encourage peer support
- pairing practitioners with an appropriate advocate who acts as a project champion, or a stronger or more experienced staff member with a weaker or less experienced colleague
- providing training for new staff members to develop sustainability
- providing opportunities for ongoing, learning-centred reflection and dialogue
- linking innovation with performance management

> ## Case study extract
>
> The head is committed to the idea of a continuous conversation, building reflection and evaluation into planning. To this end, the entire campus staff meets for 15 minutes each day. This helps to provide a driving vision across the three mini-schools, and provides a regular forum for the articulation of the central vision.

In some cases, ownership by practitioners means that development is self-supporting, for example by teams of teachers meeting regularly to evaluate the progress of a cross-curricular project.

- Ensure ongoing evaluation (eg through reports to senior leadership teams or designated bodies such as a curriculum review group).
- Ensure ongoing communication of implementation and outcomes to stakeholders (eg by including governors in monitoring procedures such as visits to classrooms to observe practice).

It is expected that innovation sometimes brings with it resistance from sceptical members of staff who are asked to implement the new approaches. In the schools where reform was an incremental process and innovation was initially in the hands of the few, this was not likely to be a factor. However, with larger scale reforms, its prevalence was heightened.

> ## Reflection point…
> **A question of vision into practice**
>
> - What will be your role during development and roll-out?
>
> - How will you implement this role?
>
> - What additional support will leaders of innovation need?
>
> Use the space provided on page 15 to record your thoughts and ideas

Component 5: Evaluating the impact of innovation

Schools embarked on curriculum innovation because of its potential impact on pupil outcomes. Accordingly, selecting evaluation strategies that would measure such outcomes was imperative. Leaders therefore considered the following:

- the range of stakeholders that might contribute to evaluation (eg pupils, teachers, parents)

- a broad range of outcomes that accord with the five ECM outcomes and that are measurable through more than academic performance alone (eg levels of engagement, increased attendance and post-16 retention rates, reduced behavioural problems and exclusion rates)

- the different tools that might be employed to provide data (eg pupil attitudinal surveys, post-programme engagement pupil questionnaires, pupil interviews)

In one case, comparative evaluation of a piloted approach in two classes with a class in which the innovation had deliberately not been applied was used.

Case study extract

- Primary behaviour and attendance survey outcomes show that the Year 3 class has higher ratings of enjoyment of school than other classes.
- Behaviour logging shows a reduction in inappropriate behaviour within the pilot classes.
- Homework tracking shows increased engagement by those who previously did not submit items.

Case study extract

An online evaluation of the Learning to Learn programme introduced in Year 7 showed 80 per cent of the students felt that Learning to Learn gave students 'better ways of learning'.

Case study extract

An electronic reporting system (developed in-house) assesses the degree to which the students are developing the 17 capacities to learn as developed by Guy Claxton. To help the teachers focus on particular capacities, the academy has mapped these to its learning themes. It has also developed a grid that enables teachers to allocate a score for each R (resourcefulness, reflectiveness and resilience). These scores give a score for building learning power.

This report is completed five times a year and is combined with predicted, current and target grades and levels. It has become a powerful tracking and motivational tool. It also provides a framework for self-reflection and discussion between teachers, students and parents.

The school's evaluation measures also enabled the following outcomes to emerge:

- performance in the top 1 per cent of value-added performance for KS3 to KS4 of all schools as shown by national data
- attendance above national average (93.2 per cent for 2006)
- improvement in trends at KS3, with very significant improvements in English
- sharp decline in exclusions (down by over 90 per cent) in three years

Case study extract

The emphasis has been on developing an approach in which pupils felt valued and secure in very challenging circumstances. The ECM outcomes of staying safe and being healthy are therefore very important and one response to the researcher reflected these outcomes: "Windmills is like a family to me," said one Year 9 girl of her mini-school.

Owing to the school's context, it is working with the University of Sussex to come up with alternative indicators of success, using the QCA skills and qualities in learning framework. The team has sequenced the dispositions and is writing its own descriptors through a project called the Essex target tracker. In addition, the school uses student questionnaires, student sampling and attendance records to judge success. They have had no teenage pregnancies and no permanent exclusions in the four years that they have been open, despite many pupils having previously been excluded from other schools. There is no graffiti and very little vandalism.

As the headteacher described: 'When kids keep coming to school despite their life being in tatters, then it is working.'

Reflection point…
A question of moral purpose

- How will you know if you have been successful – what measures or indicators will you use?

- What evidence will you need to judge the level of your success?

- What evaluation strategies and methods will you need to put in place?

Use the space provided on page 15 to record your thoughts and ideas

Leadership implications

Key messages that have been generated from the schools in this study are as follows.

Stimulus for innovation

- Self-evaluate – consider the school's existing curriculum offer – is it going to equip pupils for their future in the 21st century? If not, consider calculated change.

- Ask the questions:
  – Will change make a positive difference to pupil outcomes?
  – What might be the risks? Balance this against what the benefits might be.
  – Are there any levers for change (eg policy imperative) that I can use?
  – How do I as a leader perceive curriculum innovation in relation to my own sense of moral purpose?

Stimulating innovation

- Self-evaluate – seek the views of others. Ask what key stakeholders can do to contribute to the development of a vision for curriculum innovation.

- Think differently – innovation means reconceptualising existing provision and challenging 'givens', so be creative.

- Build trust through engagement – use dialogue about the school's aims as a route forward.

Developing strategy for innovation

- Consider scale – make choices about whether the innovation, for example, should be widescale or a staged reform using key players?

- Consider capacity – determine who will be in a position to lead, what support they will need, what the timelines will be, how short- and medium-term measures will feed into to long-term sustainability, and what resources might be available both within and external to the school.

- Consider the impact on the organisation. What will it mean for different groups and how can they be involved or kept informed of progress and outcomes? Which communication routes will be most effective?

- Have processes that are effective in accommodating and supporting reluctant teachers.

- Plan for evaluation at the outset. How will you know it is making a difference?

Evaluating the impact of innovation

- Think of the five ECM outcomes. What measures will be used to judge whether the innovation has impacted positively on pupil outcomes?

- Choose the right tools. In addition to quantitative pupil performance measures, consider how pupil attitudes, engagement and behaviour can be measured.

- Benchmark before innovation commences and measure at sustainable intervals.

Final thoughts

In one school, the headteacher, as the person responsible for initiating the innovation model and ultimately accountable for its impact on pupil outcomes, was able to draw on the support of a local authority officer, 'to avoid him feeling too vulnerable when doing something very different from the mainscale model' (case study description). This example prompts the question: who supports the innovator if the innovator is the headteacher – governors? networks?