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

**Leading curriculum innovation
in perspective**

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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 provides a selection of short think pieces that illuminate thinking on the leadership and development of curriculum innovation and invite you to pause for thought on the issues raised.

Leading curriculum innovation
Geoff Southworth, National College for School Leadership

Leadership is never more needed than at times of change. In this piece, Geoff Southworth focuses on the leadership of innovative practice, drawing on what NCSL learned from its work with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and related work on leadership at NCSL.

Developing the 21st century curriculum was a ground-breaking project with colleagues from QCA and serving headteachers. A total of 50 schools from NCSL's Leadership Network were initially involved. From the work of these schools, 20 case studies were developed. The case studies were put together by six school leaders who worked as research associates at NCSL. Their research focused on the nature of the schools' innovation and the leadership journeys they undertook.

From the 20 case studies, we identified five key components:

1. stimulus for innovation
2. stimulating innovation
3. developing strategy for innovation
4. implementing innovation
5. evaluating the impact of innovation

1. Stimulus for innovation

Here the key questions are:

- Why did school leaders embark on the innovation?
- What were the factors that determined their course of action?

Anyone hoping to embark on innovative activity should ask themselves such questions because if they intend to lead they need to have answers to them. One source of stimulation in the case studies was school self-evaluation. Staff in the schools had asked questions about their current practices, and looked to see whether they could improve on their previous best.

Another source of stimulation was external policy initiatives such as personalised learning. One thing we do know about the effective management of change is that leaders tend to use external initiatives as vehicles for internal innovations; one can support the other.

Values and how they translate into pupil outcomes are really important.

Conference participant

2. Stimulating innovation

The key question here was:

- What did the school leaders do to stimulate interest and engagement in the proposed developments?

Leaders must be able to enthuse colleagues to come with them and change their way of doing things. In the case study schools, there was evidence of the leaders developing enthusiasm and energy to move forward.

3. Developing strategy for innovation

The key question for component 3 was:

- What strategy did the leaders use to ensure the innovation would be implemented effectively?

In part, this question points to the importance of having a plan, but it is also about deciding who will put the plan into action.

Someone, or a small group of people, should be given responsibility for leading the project. But having a development plan is not enough on its own. You also need to have an plan for implementing it. Too often innovations founder because there are no clear ways of putting the plan into action.

4. Implementing innovation

Having got your strategies and plans in place, implementing innovation is about the practical side:

• How is the innovation being led and its leaders supported?

To quote John Lennon, 'Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans'. This component is all about the life of the innovation, the practical actions that need to happen to keep it moving along. Leaders should try to set out with and for colleagues what needs to happen, by whom and when. They also need to make as clear as they can the steps that need to be taken if the innovation is to begin and be sustained.

As the innovation unfolds, leaders should also be ready to make adjustments as they move along. Leadership is not fixed and inflexible – it should be adaptable.

5. Evaluating the impact of innovation

The questions for the final component are:

• What measures were used to evaluate pupil outcomes?
• What was the nature of these outcomes and how did evaluation inform further strategy?

These are challenging questions but essential ones. In my experience, the one thing that motivates teachers to innovate is the prospect that the change will improve the learning and achievements of children and young people. Innovations should therefore be monitored and formatively evaluated to see whether and in what ways the initiative is changing practice. If positive developments can be identified early, they should be used to feed into further developments. Looking for signs of impact is critical to innovation.

These five components relate to another aspect of leadership. Leaders have to persuade colleagues to come along with them. If leaders do not do this, they may not have any followers – and if you have no followers, how can you be leading? Leadership can be described as many things, one being that it is a process of social influence.

This last point is central to whether an individual is a leader or not. Expressed in another way, at root school leadership rests on how leaders influence what happens in colleagues' classrooms. NCSL has researched this aspect across a number of projects, and we have seen that there are three ways in which leaders influence others:

1. modelling
2. monitoring
3. dialogue

Modelling is all about the power of example. Leading by example is vital if you want to change curricular practice. When faced with a change, teachers want to know such things as:

• What is the innovation?
• Will it work in my classroom and with the children and young people I teach?
• What does it mean for my practice?

A leader who can demonstrate answers to these questions to his or her colleagues is an influential one. Such leaders show that the innovation works, and that it works in their school. By their actions, these leaders show how the innovation works and what others need to do to make it work in their own classrooms.

Monitoring involves not only conventional approaches to classroom observation and looking at pupils' work, but also knowing how much colleagues are changing their practice and what challenges they are encountering.

Sometimes people agree to change and then do not commit to really altering their practice. For some, changing their pedagogy is a big innovation, one that is perhaps greater than any other, no matter how small a step others might think it. Leaders need to be sensitive to the subtle shifts colleagues make, and use positive reinforcement to encourage further progress and build confidence.

Dialogue is about the fact that for teachers, it's good to talk. Professional conversations are often the medium of change. These conversations involve a number of aspects, perhaps most importantly listening. We need listening leaders who can spot what is being said and not being said; leaders who can see who needs some support and who can be challenged. It is also a where personalised support for colleagues can be provided.

> *The headteacher and key teacher as co-leaders provided samples of work, such as images, which led to discussion around what children were learning.*
>
> Conference participant

Modelling, monitoring and dialogue form the basis for influencing others. We also know you need to do all three: not just one, or two, but all three together. Used together, they reinforce each other and when enacted in combination make leadership active and influential. They create the conditions for staff learning. Innovation is at heart a learning process. We need to enable colleagues to learn their way forward, and these three do that.

They also rely on permitting circumstances in the school. It is very important that senior leaders ensure that within the school there are systems and processes that enable modelling, monitoring and dialogue to happen and frequently. Too often, the organisational conditions and cultures inhibit, thwart or disable professional learning. Leaders must provide ways and means for leaders of innovations to lead by example, to talk with colleagues and to know what is going on across the classrooms.

All of this we have learned from looking at successful practice and learning from it and with school leaders. Such learning is collaborative – it is about leaders learning with and from one another. The research associates embody this belief, as does NCSL since research at NCSL is primarily about the study of leadership practice. It is from innovative practice and the leadership of it that we have learned many of the lessons highlighted here.

The school of the future

Guy Claxton, University of Bristol

This think piece explores what the NCSL and QCA project can tell us about the significance of curriculum and learning for 21st century schooling. It encourages boldness and confirms the value of faith in students' own learning power.

This joint project, exploring practical ideas about 21st century schooling, has been a huge success. Dozens of innovations, some large, some quite small, have been tried out, monitored, refined and shared. No one school has added more than a few pieces to the emerging jigsaw puzzle of the 21st century school, but taken together, clear lines of direction have become visible. Asking for consensus would be too much at this stage, but common concerns and aspirations shine through these examples. There is a sense, not just of tinkering with what we have got in order to cope with perceived pressures and hit conventional targets, but of deep thinking about what it is that today's young people need – and have a right to expect – from their schooling, and how we can move towards providing it. We are seeing innovation that is not just problem-driven, but vision-led.

The project also shows just how much freedom to innovate schools actually have. It is true that schools are constrained both by legal requirements and cultural expectations. But between statutory responsibilities and parental pressures, there is a good deal of elbow room if schools are prepared to look for it. Edward de Bono distinguishes between what he calls 'rock thinking' and 'water thinking'. Rock thinkers look around and focus on all the things they can't do and all the places they can't go. But water, says de Bono, is very intelligent. All it cares about are gaps – places where it can go – and if there are gaps, water will find them, no matter how large or numerous the rocks that surround it. In this project, there has been an impressive amount of water thinking.

We might develop de Bono's analogy by placing the rocks and the water on a hillside. A strong sense of a shared vision places a school on a slope, that is, gives school improvement a clear inclination, which makes it all the easier for the water of innovation to seek out and exploit the gaps that are there. Water on a plain may seep through the cracks but it won't go very far. Water on a slope is a much more powerful force. The combination of water thinking and a clear sense of direction gives rise to the combination of commitment and ingenuity that these projects have displayed.

I am reminded of a famous quotation from Goethe that explains how a firm sense of what must be done makes it much easier to see – and to seek – what can be done. Without that clarity and commitment, it can be hard to detect the gaps and opportunities. With it, gaps open up, even where you had thought there were only rocks. This is how Goethe put it:

Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too.

All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way.

Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.

Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, 1749–1832

We have seen a lot of boldness, and even some flashes of magic, in these projects. And much of this magic has come from the children and young people themselves. Given the opportunity to collaborate on real problems – those that have fired their imaginations, and that have genuine value either to them or to other people – their level of intelligence, ingenuity, maturity and commitment has amazed their teachers, time and again. Given the chance, youngsters seem to rise to and relish the challenge. The research on student voice has been telling us this. What they say they want is the opportunity to do real, hard things that matter, not endless rehearsals of things already worked to death by generations of teachers and students before them. And many of the schools in this project have found ways to respond to this demand.

> *The key to engagement is making learning irresistible.*
>
> Conference participant

This means trust and it means time. Part of the necessary boldness on the part of a school is to stop controlling, managing and predetermining so much, and daring to create different kinds of time, and different sorts of learning opportunity. On the seventh day, contrary to popular opinion, God did not create the timetable. We have heard from the project reports of flexible Fridays and challenge weeks, where students have extended opportunities to get their teeth into something really juicy, by way of a learning challenge. And we have heard of schools that have given even quite young children significant involvement in creating the school development plan, in making budgetary decisions, or in determining their own courses of study. We did not hear a single report of a school that had taken the risk of trusting its students more that had subsequently regretted doing so.

The dominant vision that has emerged is of 21st century education as preparation for a learning life. Headteachers want their students to do well in their exams, but they know that exam-passing is not a very valuable life skill. They also know that examination success for some absolutely requires relative failure for others. When you come down to it, my daughter's four grade As only have value because your son didn't get them. So there have to be other ways of winning at school, and not just the traditional consolation prizes that everyone knows are second-best. But everyone can win by developing their learning power. By being given responsibility and hard, interesting challenges, students develop their learning capacity and their confidence. We have seen this in many of the case studies.

This ability to 'know what to do when you don't know what to do', as Jean Piaget put it, is absolutely invaluable, whatever path in life a young person is going to take. Doctors and solicitors need to be resilient and resourceful, but so too do footballers and hairdressers, retail managers and yoga teachers. As Robert Reich said a decade ago, the 'new poor', both economically and in spirit, in 21st century societies, will be those who cannot or will not learn. In these projects, we have seen, again and again, a broadening and deepening commitment on the part of school leaders to look for ingenious and practical ways to develop the confidence, the capacity and the appetite for learning in their students.

Why innovate within the curriculum?
Mick Waters, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

Mick Waters proposes three reasons for curriculum innovation. He makes the case that thinking and acting in this way are now necessities if schools are to help their students meet the challenges of the 21st century.

There are many good reasons for curriculum innovation. I can think of only two for not innovating, one complacent and one timid. No doubt you can work out what they are.

A key remit for QCA is to 'develop a modern and world-class curriculum to inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future'. This is not a matter just for QCA; it is at the heart of the work of all schools. Preparing for the future is key here. A century ago, schools were preparing pupils for a very fixed future: a job for life in a traditional industry, the professions or as a housewife ('housewifery' was still on the curriculum in 1906). A static curriculum of set content might well have been fit for this purpose.

Now the only certain thing about the future is that it will be uncertain. Traditional industries have dwindled. People are likely to change jobs several times during their lives. It is calculated that by 2026, half the jobs that people will be performing do not yet exist. We simply don't know what they will be. Technology will change things. Lifestyles, aspirations and expectations will change. A static curriculum is unlikely to prepare all learners for this sort of future.

Part of the remit is to develop a curriculum to inspire and challenge all learners, and we mean all, not just those destined to attain high national curriculum test scores or five A* – C grades at GCSE. If you think your present curriculum does just that, there would be little need for change. However, we know that nationally, significant numbers of pupils do not feel inspired and challenged. Some vote with their feet and are found in the lack-of-attendance figures. Some come to school but fail to engage; their attitudes and behaviour show how inspired they are. Many plod on and do their best but do not always find the curriculum relevant, let alone inspiring. Some 13 per cent leave school at 16 and do not enter employment, education or training. To inspire and challenge all learners, we need to be innovative and creative. We need to take a fresh look at the curriculum's relevance, its appeal and its ability to foster a love of learning and equip young people with the capability and desire to learn throughout life.

A third reason for innovation is the present balance of focus within the curriculum. When we ask groups of people such as employers, further and higher education providers and the public what they think education is for, or what young people should know, understand or be able to do by the time they leave school, people almost always answer in terms of skills and qualities such as being able to work in a team, show independence, take the initiative, solve problems, communicate well and show empathy for the customer.

Employers often complain that young people do not have these sorts of qualities even though they have five A* – C grades at GCSE or three A grades at A level. These are not just skills and qualities needed for employment; they underpin a positive approach to life and leisure and they mark out the rounded person. They are also the skills that might enable a young person to flourish in the uncertain world of the 21st century.

Yet the curriculum often focuses only on the content of subject programmes of study. The innovative shift is to build in the development of skills and personal qualities. These underlying skills and qualities are the roots of learning that keep the process anchored and that will sustain life-long learning. This means that the curriculum is not driven entirely by the subject content, but by wider goals; it does not mean abandoning subjects or softening standards. In fact, there is growing evidence that when schools attend to the roots, the whole plant grows better.

QCA's co-development programme, of which the NCSL Developing the 21st century curriculum project is part, is working with schools across the country to take a fresh look at the curriculum. Schools start by asking themselves three simple questions:

- What are we trying to achieve?
- How should we organise learning to achieve these aims?
- How will we know if we are achieving our aims?

Schools are answering the first question in the widest terms. It is not just a matter of covering the content but also of achieving the wider goals of education. Once the goals are set, schools are being purposeful, innovative and often radical in how they organise learning. This involves being willing to question long-accepted practices.

Given our goals, does the traditional timetable give us the scope we need to organise appropriate learning? Is the traditional one-hour lesson the best way of achieving these goals? Some secondary schools have abandoned year groups altogether, some work in week-long subject activities, while others have blended subjects together. Some primary schools have moved away from traditional lessons and locate learning within role-play. When you take a fresh look, the curriculum is not as prescriptive as it seems.

Innovation won't occur without school leaders enabling and protecting. They must find the balance between holding on and letting go.

Conference participant

Pause for thought…?

- **What would be the reasons for innovation within your own school?**

- **How well does what you offer address the reasons given in this piece?**

Use the space provided to record your thoughts and ideas

The final question, 'How will we know if we are achieving our aims?', means going back to the goals and considering their scope. This involves national test results, but goes beyond to look at the wider aspirations of education.

Already we are seeing the fruits of this innovation. Schools report that pupils are more engaged and motivated, and as a result they learn more and do better in tests. Wider skills and personal qualities are developed that provide the roots for further learning. Teachers find the job more rewarding and less stressful.

It is through these innovative approaches that we are developing the modern and world-class curriculum that really does inspire and challenge all learners and is well placed to prepare them for whatever the future may bring.

The real question is not 'Why innovate?' but 'Why wouldn't you innovate?'

Which brings us back to the only two reasons why you wouldn't. Did you spot them? If we were complacent enough to think that the present curriculum is already perfect, then we would not want to change it. Or we might timidly think that although the curriculum is not perfect, we might only make it worse by innovation.

I am sure that school leaders are realistic enough to know that improvements can be made, confident enough to make those improvements and bold enough to believe that we can truly inspire and challenge all learners and prepare them for the future.

Pause for thought…?

- **If you are serious about curriculum innovation, how will you make a start on responding to these three questions:**
  - **What are we trying to achieve?**
  - **How should we organise learning to achieve these aims?**
  - **How will we know if we are achieving our aims?**

- **Who will you convene for the discussion? What will be the first step?**

Use the space provided to record your thoughts and ideas