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Research Associate Summary Report

Dr Victoria M Rataj-Worsnop, Vice Principal, Hockerill Anglo-European College,
Hertfordshire

Shape-shifters

Exploring an alternative approach to learning through the curriculum
at Key Stages 3 and 4

Spring 2006

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Introduction: why shape-shift?

“There are lots of very important things we do in education which don’t appear to be addressed very adequately, things like how people learn to live, how people learn to think ... lots of aspects associated with developing whole people.”

Headteacher

In the light of this comment, one of my challenges as a school leader was where to look for an 11-16 curriculum model that would provide a coherent, rigorous and broad-based education and contribute to a wider sense of human identity. This challenge took me on a shape-shifting journey that I would like to share with you.

The college where I hold the post of Vice Principal, whilst happy with its post-16 provision (the International Baccalaureate Diploma (IBD) programme), was not convinced that its 11-16 provision, drawn from the national curriculum Key Stage 3 (KS3) and Key Stage 4 (KS4) programmes of study, provided the same quality of educational experience for its students. So, how best to move forward? Design our own curriculum or look for a tried and tested model to use?

Following discussions with the senior leadership and middle management teams, we decided not to design our own curriculum because it would have been too time-consuming to design and pilot it. We therefore decided upon a tried and tested curriculum model that we knew was successful and would provide students with the type of opportunities for learning that we wanted them to have: the International Baccalaureate Organisations Middle Years Programme Framework (MYP).

MYP curriculum framework

Research journey

The research was based in 4 state 11-19 schools in the eastern region of England, serving approximately 5,000 students. Each school was at various stages of MYP implementation.

In each school, the headteachers or principals and other members of the senior leadership team were interviewed, class teachers provided views about teaching and learning on an informal basis, and student voice was gathered through focus group interviews with a random sample of Year 7 students.

Key findings: school leaders

Key drivers for curriculum change

The key drivers for change were:

- dissatisfaction with KS3 and KS4
- success of the IBD at post-16
- need for organisational evolution
- schools in a competitive market

Dissatisfaction with KS3 was due to:

- repetition of Year 6 work
- disaffection with content
- slow pace of work

Dissatisfaction with KS4 was due to:

- breadth and balance seemed to be optional, not there for every learner

School leaders strongly agreed that the MYP curriculum framework gave every learner the same opportunity to experience a broad and balanced curriculum.

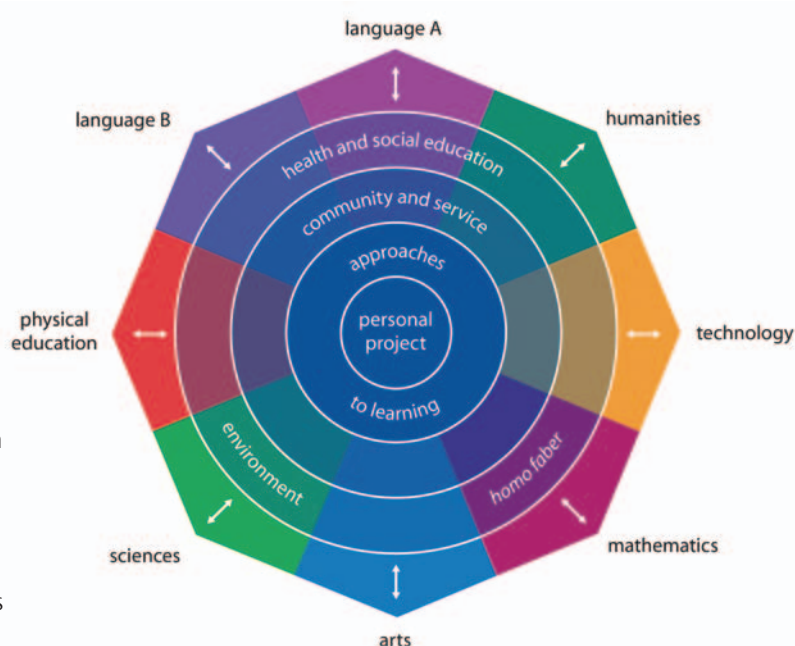


Figure 1: MYP framework
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IBD programme at post-16

Each school had a very successful experience of the IBD programme they taught at post-16, in particular the mandatory components: theory of knowledge, creativity, action and service, and extended essay.

Organisational evolution

School leaders were in agreement that it was important to engage all stakeholders positively in teaching and learning, to energise staff, avoid complacency and continue school improvement.

Schools in a competitive market

In order to continue attracting clients and consequent funding and resources, school leaders said that schools have to build on their core strengths and uniqueness.

Key changes to the experiences of the individual learner

Opportunities for the individual learner included:

- coherent curriculum linked far more to real-life situations
- students learning how to learn
- active learning rather than passive learning, linked to assessment for learning and the development of student voice
- learner autonomy and development of independent learning skills and emotional intelligence
- development of transferable skills such as independent research, problem-solving and working in teams

Main implications for the leadership of teaching and learning

“The MYP gave us that vehicle to allow the students to have a framework but also to allow the students to do things their own way ... to have some time where they can choose the direction they are going and sometimes to work on fairly unstructured tasks.”

Headteacher

Implications included:

- change in the perception and role of teacher from transmitter of knowledge to one of guide and facilitator
- change in the perception and role of learner from passive to active learner
- change in the perception of school from ‘where children are taught’ to one of a ‘learning community’
- unlocking teachers from their own subject-specific boundaries in order to encourage and enable them to work in cross-curricular teams
- substantial investment needed in continuing professional development (CPD) in order to deliver the personalisation agenda in its totality rather than just paying lip-service to it
- development of teacher knowledge and ability to employ different teaching and learning styles, for example, visual, auditory, kinaesthetic (VAK)

Key findings: students

How students like to learn

The main thrust of the student focus group interviews was an exploration of how students liked to learn and why. These are detailed as follows:

- active or creative learning
- a hands-on approach
- use of visuals, for example, drama, role-play and experiments
- problem-solving in pairs or teams
- sharing ideas and testing them out on each other
- trips and activities

Students enjoyed learning in these ways because it brought learning to life and made learning relevant to them as people. The ways they liked to learn reflected student involvement and ownership of the learning process, ie students as lead learners.

Students and teaching and learning: VAK but not in a vacuum

In the schools where the MYP was in its first year of implementation, students had been taught about VAK teaching and learning styles and knew their preferred way of learning. They could speak knowledgeably about VAK and in which classes teachers were explicitly using different pathways into learning.

Students were very aware that not all people learn in the same way but that all people should experience different styles of teaching and learning in order to develop different ways into learning. They were very keen to state that their preferred way of learning should not dominate how they were taught because that would be to the detriment of other ways of learning how to access knowledge and gain understanding.

Shape-shifting: main implications for school leadership

Some recommendations for school leadership teams contemplating curriculum change at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 appear below.

- Know your staff, talk to them, listen to them and empower them: staff have to want change, see it as desirable and thereby have ownership of change.
- Have a clear focus and clear aims of where you are going and where you want to get to.

“The MYP is not a bandwagon to jump on. It is a philosophy and it is a way of looking at enhancing teaching and learning, allowing individuals to succeed which is where personalisation comes into it ... it encourages natural links ... partnerships you may not have been aware of will develop and the unexpected will happen.”

Headteacher

- Work out what the issues and challenges will be.
- Develop initiatives gradually so staff know where they are going and can see the big picture.

- Encourage and develop a culture of no fear of risk-taking and not being afraid to explore alternatives.
- Invest a large proportion of funding in CPD.
- Actively visit others and network.

“I actually think with the whole system of curriculum development you can’t throw up everything into the air and change everything. I think it’s desirable to start off probably by modifying something that either you already have or that other people already have.”

Headteacher

- Do not be constrained by existing pedagogical practices, for example KS3 in three years, but be prepared to experiment with different curriculum models and methods of teaching and learning.
- Encourage ownership of (curriculum) change by all stakeholders.

In conclusion

What is right for one school may not suit another school: the MYP is just one vehicle for the delivery of a more personalised approach to learning but it emerged as one that those interviewed felt provided valuable learning experiences. In the process of conducting this research and reflecting upon the very rich data that it produced, the importance of personalised learning emerged as a key means towards achieving a notion of Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003).

Acknowledgments

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References

DfES, 2003, *Every Child Matters* (CM5860), Norwich, HMSO

A School’s Guide to The Middle Years Programme accessed at: www.ibo.org/myp/curriculum

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National College for School Leadership

Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0870 001 1155
F: 0115 872 2001
E: ncsl-office@ncsl.org.uk
W: www.ncsl.org.uk

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