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## Research Associate Summary Report

**Tim Burgess**, Deputy Headteacher, Holy Trinity Junior School, Surrey

# Lifting the lid on the creative curriculum

How leaders have released creativity in their schools  
through curriculum ownership

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## Context: the box

Many schools have perceived the existing primary curriculum to be increasingly confined by too much content and not enough freedom (Waters, 2006). In response, developing more creative approaches to the curriculum has for a number of schools become an area of focus as they have sought to promote both excellence and enjoyment. For others, this focus has always been at the forefront and indeed its central place within the curriculum for some high-achieving schools has, they claim, been the reason for their success (NCSL, 2004). In these schools creativity is seen as a way of thinking and working that is at the heart of education and ‘produces excited, enthusiastic, enquiry-driven learners’ (Creative Partnerships, 2004).

This study focuses on four successful but very different primary schools, each of which emphasise the importance of a creative curriculum. As with Pandora, to see what was inside the box required a focus on:

- what a creative curriculum might look like
- what leaders had done to introduce and inspire it
- how a culture of creativity is sustained

## Methods: lifting the lid

The research methods comprised:

- initial discussions with the headteachers to gain an overview of the ethos and curriculum approaches
- subsequent semi-structured interviews with the headteachers
- informal discussions with staff, children and governors
- classroom observations to gain perspectives on core practices and key initiatives

## Findings: inside the box

For each school the research focused on the curriculum with reference to construction and creativity and most importantly how leaders had cultivated this. All had high standards in core subject areas but very different approaches to the curriculum, yet all held creativity as central to what they were about. Creativity was seen not as a bolt-on to the curriculum but as central to their whole ethos. The paragraphs that follow summarise the key features of the schools’ curriculum offers.

### Rooted in reality

The crucial aspect of this first school is the use of its grounds as a learning resource so that learning outside the classroom is a central focus for the curriculum. It emphasises hands-on, child-centred approaches and creativity is seen as integral to all aspects of learning and indeed being. For example, the children dug clay from the ground to mould into their own Easter Island-style heads and fired these in an outdoor kiln as the Celts would have done. “We are created to be creative,” said the headteacher. The staff members are encouraged to be learners too and the sense of shared vision and ownership is very strong.

Leaders have encouraged a strong sense of dialogue in decision-making, involving the school and wider community in a sustainable approach to initiatives.

### The proof of the pudding

The main ingredient of this primary school is the connections made in its curriculum. Learning is seen as a seamless whole and links are made explicitly in all they do. They are passionate about pedagogy. “The curriculum comes alive here. It’s contagious,” said the headteacher. Creativity is what drives the curriculum model and there is a high degree of ownership and flexibility among staff and pupils in the learning experiences they provide. For example, every other Friday, the teachers devise and deliver exciting creative opportunities for groups of children to enjoy in cross-phase groupings, such as composing music for an awards ceremony.

Leaders have promoted teamwork and collaborative planning with a strong emphasis on professional development.

## ‘It ain’t what you do’

This primary school is an advocate of the specialist teacher, and learning is subject-based and very focused. There is an emphasis on skills and children are in flexible groups of different sizes appropriate to the focus for learning and children’s needs. For example, a group of Year 2 children re-enacted the Chinese dragon dance and are learning Mandarin. Professional trust is promoted and the headteacher has adopted a distributed approach to leadership giving ownership and motivating personal enthusiasm. “Our teachers aren’t afraid to risk and go deeper,” said the headteacher.

Leaders have strongly emphasised individual excellence and creative expression for pupils and staff, which builds self-esteem and enhances the strong family feel.

## Vessels and flames

In this independent primary school, the International Baccalaureate Organisation’s primary years programme is followed. Learning is enquiry-based and very pupil-driven. There is a clear and corporate vision with management structures that ensure planning in teams with devolved responsibilities. Teachers and pupils engage with their learning and have creative control over its direction. “All we have to do is challenge the children, after that it’s easy,” said the deputy head.

Leaders have given a sense of curriculum ownership and promote the acquisition of skills within a meaningful context.

## Different but the same

Of course every school’s box is different. However, despite the curriculum differences there were important similarities in these schools that leaders had actively promoted.

### The curriculum offer

The following were common aspects of the curriculum offered by these schools.

- They were all **child-centred**. Each school genuinely put the children right in the centre of their learning, developing community and care as well as curiosity and creativity.
- All put an **emphasis on skills** before content and had an explicit focus on learning to learn.
- There was a **slow and organic approach** to learning. Taking time to consolidate and celebrate were key features of each school.
- There was a **flexible and dynamic curriculum**. Creative initiatives were supported and encouraged. Children were often in cross-phase groups for special events to help make learning exciting and challenging.

### The leadership approach

The following were consistent features of the leadership of these schools.

- Each headteacher had a strong **sense of professional confidence and autonomy**. They were committed to reducing paperwork so that teachers were free to teach and children learn.
- There was a real **shared vision**. All the staff bought into the aims and ethos of the school and shared the same approaches and methodology.
- All the schools displayed a high level of **communication and open debate**. There was an emphasis upon shared ownership of decision-making and individual contribution. One headteacher articulated the message that all the headteachers gave: “There isn’t a leader, it’s everybody.”
- Headteachers encouraged and empowered their teaching and teaching support staff to be creative. They have encouraged creativity by **making space and time for the teachers and children to own the learning process**.

## Recommendations – beyond the box

Learning in these schools is put firmly into the hands of the teachers and pupils. All the headteachers agreed that time is the missing ingredient in education. They asserted that there is too much rushing frantically from task to task, new initiative to new initiative, demanding performance and perfection but often only getting mediocre results and frustration. As one stated:

*We need to break this circle of frenzy if we are going to reclaim the creativity and job satisfaction we crave.*

By focusing on a creative curriculum, the headteachers of these four schools have given their staff time to:

- **teach:** less paperwork so they can concentrate on learning
- **imagine:** less prescription so they can plan creative lessons
- **motivate:** less pushing so they can connect with the individual's needs
- **enjoy:** less pressure so they can find space to celebrate together

A creative curriculum, whatever guise it takes, provides the structure that allows independent enquiry to take place. These headteachers have chosen the slow and deep learning that they hope will grow and create life-long learners in their classrooms and in their staff rooms. It's all about ownership and motivation.

*They enjoy their work because they have the freedom to make it their own.* Headteacher

Recommendations for others based on these findings are to:

- think with staff about how children learn best
- decide which curriculum models will help promote creativity in children and staff
- try individual initiatives to excite learners and staff
- rethink the use of time to create space for creative thinking

## Conclusion – lifting other lids

In lifting the lids on these four schools it appeared that excellence and enjoyment very definitely go hand in hand. For these schools, a creative approach to the curriculum and sharing ownership mean that staff enjoyment matches that of the children and potentially enhances the capacity for achievement. But, like Pandora, school leaders must be brave enough to lift the lid in order to let the spirit of creativity out and, as Pandora also did, hope. In these four schools they certainly have.

## References

- Waters, M, 2006, *Towards an Innovative Curriculum*, presentation at Surrey Local Authority Conference 2006
- NCSL, 2004, *Creativity for Learning in the Primary School*, Nottingham, NCSL
- Creative Partnerships, 2004, *Creative Partnerships. First Findings: a review of Creative Learning*

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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](mailto:ncsl-office@ncsl.org.uk)  
W: [www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)

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