Schools for healthy living

The Adventurous School

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Key messages

- Children need to know how to strike a balance between complying with the ‘top-down’ demands of society, and creating ‘bottom-up’ opportunities to create multiple-way relationships.
- Schools need to take charge of their direction and purpose and work explicitly from their values and beliefs.
- School improvement needs to be seen as a process of questioning, journeying and open-ended exploration.

Why this matters to us

For the last decade or so, schools have been under increasing pressure and scrutiny from outside (central government targets and league tables, Ofsted, the advent of Academies and so on), and it is becoming all too easy to expend most of your energy trying to impress the outside world. This project, book and adventurous message, is for us, an antidote to all that. It engages with what matters, long-term, to children and communities in the 21st century.

ABSTRACT

This paper describes three schools that worked with their local communities to create opportunities for their children to learn how to be skillful adventurers in our complex and ever-changing world. Each involved learners fully in their learning, clarifying what learning means and enabling it to happen through real and purposeful experiences. Each

worked proactively with their communities and took local control of designing and developing the curriculum.

Keywords: community, education, integrated primary care, partnership, public health

On an adventure if you don't have a map you can walk around and explore or ask someone else.

Primary school child

We walked up the driveway towards the converted monastery that is now The Royal Foundation of St Katharine, a beautiful retreat and conference centre in Limeside, East London. We were exhausted after an intense day at Malorees Infant School, Brent because of an Ofsted visit, where we were head teacher and Key Stage One Leader. That is why we were late for the meeting. We didn't know the others and they didn't know us. All we knew was that someone had recommended us to Jane Reed, who was researching successful schools. Jane wanted leaders from a multi-cultural school to attend a ‘one-off meeting’ to exchange ideas with two leaders from a school in Somerset and one leader from a school in Oldham. It was July 2006.

That meeting initiated a journey that continues to this day. Immediately, the group of colleagues picked up on each other's ideas and inspired each other to think creatively. The beautiful room at St Katharine's, with murals on the walls and magnificent antique furniture, willed us, as we met every term to exchange ideas, to have wonderful conversations – conversations that continued for 5 years. We became a learning community. In particular, we felt the need to learn from each other about the tricky task of meeting competing demands – how to run a school that develops both children and communities, and also keeps a grip on external demands.

We didn't intend to write a book. But in the end we felt we had to – to document the huge amount of knowledge we had distilled about developing children who are properly equipped to face the social and environmental challenges of the 21st century. More so than in previous generations the world is fast-

moving, bewilderingly diverse and fragmented – the result is impoverished communities full of individuals who don't always know how to apply their energies effectively. Our book also aimed to 'honour the unnoticed, quiet experiments that professional educators engage in daily to re-inspire the wellsprings of public schooling' (see the book review in this edition of *LJPC*).¹

At an early stage – probably at that energy-giving first encounter – we formed the firm belief that successful schools are ones that know how to take responsibility for their own destiny. Alongside accountability to national norms, they also know how to define their own goals. Schools need to be creative, productive, living places where children learn how to thrive in complex and ever-changing situations. That means that schools must acknowledge and live within conventional norms, but at appropriate times also be able to step outside these norms, befriend change and live with the unknown, creating new innovative directions; and we need to teach our children how to do this. They, and we, need to know how to strike a balance between complying with the 'top-down' demands of society that are necessary to retain social control, and creating 'bottom-up' opportunities to create multiple-way relationships, from which come meaning and motivation. We need to teach our children how to be adventurers.

Key themes

Our discussions led us to recognise a shared emphasis in the philosophy of all three schools.

- Take charges of the direction and purpose of our schools and our change process.
- Work explicitly from our values and beliefs.
- Involve learners fully in their learning, clarifying what learning means and enabling it to happen through real and purposeful experiences.
- Work proactively with our communities.
- Take change of designing and developing the curriculum.
- See school improvement as a process of questing, journeying and open-ended exploration.

This represents a radical agenda that asks schools to be contextually alert and responsive to local changes. It challenges the taken-for-granted assumption of the traditional school that separates children from their world and teaches them to be passive and compliant. It is the image of a *learning organisation*, that includes Senge's five disciplines of personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, team learning, and the fifth crucial discipline – systems thinking.² Systems

thinking means thinking about the best ways for different things to interface – 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' development, for example. The same need has been identified for professionals in the NHS.³

The realisation that we aimed to share quite different ways of doing things in our schools helped us to clarify our views about *vision, building communities, and the school curriculum*.

Vision

'Vision' is an important expression of how a school sees its role, and in particular how it balances its commitment to every unique child, their diverse communities and external agencies. Vision is the visible manifestation of our purpose. Sergiovanni⁴ points out that, 'effective visions obligate people who share them'. Exploring and really knowing a school's aspirations and values help illuminate the gap between vision and current practice and catalyses movement into the new. Change becomes a more natural, inevitable consequence rather than a process of orders and instructions.

Each of the three schools in our learning community used a different metaphor to communicate its vision: flight, light and growth.

Limeside Primary School in Oldham serves a predominantly white British housing estate, with high levels of social and economic deprivation. Their vision centres around enabling the children 'to fly'. One of the school's guiding principles is the belief that anything is possible. However, the possible will not just happen. To achieve this it takes personal effort, active involvement, determination and self-belief. Limeside's vision has to help children and adults adopt such an enabling, empowering can-do and will-do culture. They need to believe that they can influence their future and take responsibility for doing so.

St Vigor and St John Primary School is a voluntary-aided Church of England school situated on the northern edge of Somerset. They describe their vision through the metaphor of a guiding star that shows them the way as they pursue their adventure. Their purpose includes being healthy, safe and happy; being skilled, creative and critical builders and shapers; being bringers of hope, love, care and peace; being curious, open-minded and ethical; and being able to 'shine' in a future world they cannot yet imagine, but in which they actively want to participate in the building of.

Malorees Infant School (our school) is near Kilburn in the London Borough of Brent, one of the most multicultural boroughs in the country. Almost all walks of life are represented in the diverse intake, which includes high numbers of children with com-

plex special needs. We have moved away from the traditional view of education as a race to get ahead (with winners and losers) and see it more as an adventure – children are people with ideas and learning potential that are realised by exploring and interacting with the wider world. Our vision is described through the image of the child as a seed and their school as a cottage garden with a multiplicity of plants where not all the carrots need to grow straight and not all the roses need to be pink.

Building communities

For children to fly, shine and grow they must become skilled at treading a path where they become their own person, but also belong to families and communities. So too the relationship between each school and its community is very important. Taking a community perspective seriously means a shift from the dominant ‘us and them’ mentality towards a ‘we are in this together’ mentality; a shift from ‘doing to’ to ‘doing with’ – a shift from teaching to facilitated learning. Public sector researchers Mongon and Leadbeater⁵ have identified that schools such as ours are more likely to provide effective public value if we:

- draw our community into what we do
- reach out to work in our immediate social networks
- work with our wider community to create social capital and cohesion
- provide services with no immediate feedback to ourselves.

Getting to know the community and seeing it as an asset is the daily work of the adventurous school. It means enjoying its quirks and working with its challenges. The adventure becomes a willingness to do and see things differently. All three schools in the study have worked hard to welcome parents into our schools in a variety of ways to enable them to contribute actively in the life of the school community. Each school exemplifies different ways in which we have engaged with our pupils’ families and the wider community through varied projects and invitations.

Limeside Primary School began by ‘talking parents and community members up’, raising aspirations and celebrating their achievements of intergenerational learning beyond the school gates. They work from a position of respect for their community and its strengths. They are also working hard to contribute to the community through close links with the housing association, including staff and children introducing and supporting housing association personnel to develop philosophy for communities and an enquiry approach within their organisation and the communi-

ties they serve. Similarly, they are working to increase community cohesion through links with a nearby primary school serving an almost entirely Bangladeshi community, again through enquiries using the Philosophy for Children model.

St Vigor and St John has been working to create a strong sense of pride and belonging within their rural community, at the same time creating links with the wider world for the children. They have strong links with schools in Ghana, India and France that enable the pupils to experience and develop their understanding of other cultures. They actively promote a more environmentally sustainable agenda within their community through gardening projects, energy-saving devices and solar power. In particular, they ensure that their curriculum is imbued with moral purpose with themed weeks on subjects such as ‘democracy’, always being aware of the responsibility to look ahead to the challenges and opportunities that an uncertain future brings.

Malorees Infant School has been trying to create a partnership with families through encouraging participation in school events such as Arts Week and the regeneration and maintenance of the orchard nature area. At the same time, we ensure that the children’s learning is regularly shared with their parents through ‘Grand Finales’ – varied celebrations of learning which take place at the end of each topic. The school has been forging strong links with Kids Company, which supports children and families in a variety of ways including after school clubs, therapies and practical support. The overall aim is to create a partnership that will enable the whole community to thrive.

Curriculum

Vision determines direction and purpose, and communities provide the context. The curriculum provides the framework for learning and the learning outcomes. A curriculum is the overall design for learning – a way to organise time and space and maximise opportunities for learning from everyday life. Our schools embraced the value of private, personal and collaborative learning rather than just the publicly valued elements of attainment. The child of the 21st century needs to be prepared to continually learn and adapt to change, so learning how to learn is at the forefront of the curriculum in each of our three schools. Here are some ‘snap shots’ of what we do.

Limeside Primary School examines the curriculum through four dimensions: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together. Their choices regarding the knowledge content of their curriculum are based on a combination of the

interests of the children and elements of 'worthiness'. This means that their curriculum is largely 'values led', for example a study of Victorian history in which the working hours and conditions of Victorian children is researched is followed up with discussion of manufacturers of training shoes in developing countries using child labour. Learning attitudes and skills are promoted through completing challenges using Belle Wallace's TASC wheel (Thinking Actively in a Social Context) and awarding 'wizards' for learning expertise.

At St Vigor and St John, the curriculum is designed around 'quests' so that units of learning are phrased as questions, for example 'How can I be a good storyteller?' or 'How can I tell other people about myself by making a portrait gallery?' Alongside this, are four cornerstones of effective learning – identity, problem solving, communication and creativity – as well as an emphasis on the worthiness of any particular quest. For instance, several quests have a focus on outdoor learning as part of the school's passion for sustainability. A key component of their curriculum is the concept of the 'lead learner', which means that once a pupil has mastery of something they are able to lead and support the learning of others.

At Malorees Infant School, the curriculum is designed to develop confident learning attitudes and an enthusiasm for learning, with the children's school experience more like growing or exploring rather than being driven or herded. Units of learning called 'contexts' are flexibly planned to enable pupils to exercise choice and steer the direction of the learning wherever possible. Creativity is encouraged in terms of teaching styles and methods as well as in terms of children having opportunities to find their own solutions to problems and challenges. Underpinning all is a belief that every child can achieve and that positive relationships and self-belief rather than so-called 'ability' will dictate progress and success.

Leadership

The final chapter of our book is entitled 'Leadership as if the future really matters'. It highlights the need for leaders to focus on innovation to build a better future for our young people rather than focus uniquely on the now, and on performance and target setting. Here again there is a parallel with learning needs in healthcare – in the words of Kelley-Patterson, 'Integrated care requires a shift from thinking about leadership as a control process to a focus on building communities ... to generate transformation at a local level'.⁶ Those words could equally have been written by a school teacher. Such leadership is active, adaptive, creative and inclusive; it engages with public value; it is

willing to come out of comfort zones. It is holistic – leading from the spirit, the heart and the hand as well as the head.

An adventurous future

Each of our schools set out on its own adventure in partnership with the children and our communities. Our schools enjoy very different contexts and have consequently shaped different policy. But what we have in common is a preparedness to deviate from what is comfortable, known and expected, and actively manage the tensions between the way things are and the way they might become. In this sense, our philosophy is constructivist,⁷ recognising that everyone and everything is an on-going creative interaction with everything else. Our job is to help our children to learn how to engage optimistically in such creative self-organisation.

We do this because we share a concern about the world we live in. We believe that this approach, which manages external controls in a way that also permits local creativity, is the best way for children to learn how to fly, shine and grow in a fast-moving world.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

None needed.

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