

Jonathan Lear



CURRICULUM design for building
KNOWLEDGE, developing **CREATIVE THINKING**
and promoting **INDEPENDENCE**

independent
thinking press 

First published by
Independent Thinking Press
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.independentthinkingpress.com

and

Independent Thinking Press
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA
www.crownhousepublishing.com

Independent Thinking Press is an imprint of Crown House Publishing Ltd.

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Edited by Ian Gilbert

British Library of Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178135310-3
Mobi ISBN 978-178135327-1
ePub ISBN 978-178135328-8
ePDF ISBN 978-178135329-5

LCCN 2019930244

Printed and bound in the UK by
TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

For my amazing little boy, Reuben.

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FOREWORD

Reading this book has been an uncanny experience for me.

It continually touches on areas that I have been fixated by and, when it does, it consistently enriches my thinking or helps to resolve my dilemmas. Like many people, particularly at the time of writing, I am fascinated by the idea of how we design and deliver the curriculum. We are increasingly told that the way in which we design our curriculum is the key to improving outcomes for young people, but that idea brings a huge number of challenges. Many of us have become more used to prescription than creativity. We are more used to meeting expectations than fulfilling ambitions when it comes to the curriculum. For many of us, curriculum design has become a lost art.

When we attempt to re-establish our skills, things can become even more fraught. We rarely encounter a curriculum that is genuinely deliverable. A brief examination of any GCSE, A level or any other certificate course usually reveals that it has far too much in it, and teachers edit the curriculum on the basis of their experience of the exams. We are very poor at deciding what to leave out.

We are also, as Jonathan points out, besieged by siren voices telling us that the curriculum must be overwhelmingly based on knowledge or that it must be defined by skills. The voices are always characterised by a resolute certainty and supported by an irresistible body of research. Unfortunately for schools – charged with developing a curriculum tailored to the needs of their specific communities and children, which must also be amenable to assessments that are nationally designed and acceptable to external inspectors – that resolute certainty exists on either side of the debate. There is also no shortage of research, since there seems to be more than enough to support both sides of the curriculum divide.

Jonathan deals with all of this brilliantly. He approaches the big questions about curriculum and pedagogy on the basis of realism, drawing on considerable experience and no small amount of humour. He can afford to do this because of the track record that he, and his school, has. The children with whom he works achieve well and that is recognised by secondary colleagues when they take on responsibility for them.

The monkey-proof box

His track record is hugely important. We hear a great deal about ‘evidence-based practice’, usually as an encouragement to look at the practice of others, but we really need to draw on the evidence emerging from our own practice. Jonathan can do that with conviction and pride, and he deserves to be listened to because of the success that he achieves.

He is resolutely pragmatic. One of the endearing qualities of this book is something that I came to think of as ‘warm cynicism’. Jonathan is not given to haughty, dismissive sarcasm, but he runs all ideas through a mill of common sense and experience, and not every idea makes it through.

These are qualities that we need. We need voices that are gentle, helpful and constructive. We need ideas that help us to develop our own thinking, and that we can take and apply. This book offers both the medium and the message.

I love Jonathan’s emphasis on concepts and the useful examples of how to use them. I am equally impressed by his questions. His ideas are sound, but they are always validated by being tried and tested. Jonathan offers nothing that hasn’t been put into practice and validated by impact. I wish that I had read this book much earlier in my career. There is so much of it that I would have used and so many hard lessons that I would not have needed to learn.

Alongside all of this, reading this book puts any reader into great company. Jonathan is funny. He is also open about his mistakes and willing to share them. There is no trace of pomposity. He writes as a father and a teacher. He invites you into his life and makes you very welcome indeed. That makes reading the book a particular pleasure. It manages to capture so much of the experience of hearing him speak. He is a superb presenter and trainer and that transfers joyously into the written word ... And he quotes me! What more can I ask?

Now, step away from the foreword and start on the real treat.

(Real) David Cameron,
education consultant

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the incredible staff at St Catherine's Catholic Primary School for their positivity in trying new things and for thinking really hard about what they do and why; the brilliant people at Independent Thinking for their continued support, friendship and inspiration; all of the teachers, teaching assistants and leaders who have welcomed me into their schools over the past six years; and, most importantly, my amazing family – Emma, Eve, Imogen and Reuben – whose encouragement and support allows me to do the job that I love.

INTRODUCTION

I've worked at my school for twenty years now. I'm like an educational limpet – I've found a rock that I like and I'm staying put. This is because I'm happy. I love my school. I suppose that one of the reasons why I'm happy there is that it's such an interesting place. The children are amazing and form an incredibly diverse community. We're well above average in all sorts of things: pupil premium, FSM (free school meals), EAL (children whose first language isn't English), SEN (special educational needs, including those with an education, health and care plan), and we also sit in the top 5% in terms of the national school deprivation index.

It's exactly the kind of place I'd wanted to work in ever since I decided to become a teacher. When I first joined as a newly qualified teacher (NQT) things were a bit hairy. We were in some kind of category that was dished out to schools that weren't up to much. I didn't mind. In fact, I quite liked being called 'special'. Now we've been called 'outstanding'. We don't have a banner up and we haven't had t-shirts printed, but we're very proud of what our children achieve. They do brilliantly despite the challenges they face, and we're consistently told by the secondary schools they move up to that they're confident, articulate, independent and incredibly well prepared for the next stage in their education.

To get there, like all schools, we've had to work hard.

On a personal level, at the start of my career this meant trying to be the very best teacher I could be by doing as I was told. This didn't last long, and quite quickly an increasing aversion to some of the rubbish that we were being made to do by a government that didn't have a clue what they were up to led me into some small-scale militancy.

I decided that I couldn't keep up with the skip-full of new initiatives, programmes and support materials that were rolling into school on a weekly basis, so I decided to ignore them. I went back to my children uncluttered by the latest shiny educational invention. This wasn't laziness; I'd developed the attitude that if I didn't think it would improve things for the young people in front of me, I didn't bother with it. I got on with what I knew to be right, and as a result, the children in my class did very well.

The monkey-proof box

I enjoyed being a bit militant. It was addictive. I started to think of myself as a guerrilla teacher – quietly undermining the immobile target that was the education system. I didn't get dressed up in camouflage or paint my face like someone from the SAS, but I did write a book about it.¹ I suppose I thought that if I talked about the stuff that went on in my classroom, then I could maybe chip away at some of nonsense that was happening around me.

That was when I was a classroom teacher. After accidentally falling into leadership, things changed. First of all, I realised that I didn't have to keep my approach to myself any more. I'd never shouted about my tactical ignoring before in case I got told off. With a new shiny deputy's badge, though, I was infinitely harder to sack. This instantly brought with it a new-found confidence and determination. I realised that rather than simply going guerrilla in my own classroom, I could now encourage others to behave in a similar way. Then I realised I could do it with an entire school.

This book is about what happens when you apply the same militant approach on a much bigger scale. I'd had enough of being told what to do and decided that there was another way – a different way. Designing a new curriculum is no mean feat, but if we really want something that's fit for purpose, then it's up to us – teachers, teaching assistants and leaders – to do it for ourselves.

¹ J. Lear, *Guerrilla Teaching: Revolutionary Tactics for Teachers on the Ground, in Real Classrooms, Working with Real Children, Trying to Make a Real Difference* (Carmarthen: Independent Thinking Press, 2015).

Part I:
CURRICULUM

Slippers

The idea of building a new curriculum didn't occur to me immediately. In fact, I didn't really think it was an option at all. There had always been plenty of documents close at hand to pick up and follow, so the thought of creating something new hadn't entered my head. Because of this, one of the first things I did was to have a look at what was already out there. There were, and are, quite a lot of curriculum packages floating around, but there wasn't anything that I thought would do the job. Schools are special places. They are part of a community, and whatever goes on in that school should bear some relation to this. A curriculum should be relevant – it should matter. Shipping in an off-the-shelf, ready-made package can be a solution, but it wasn't the solution for us.

The more I thought about this, the more I convinced myself that maybe building a curriculum from the ground up was the way to go. We were pretty confident that we knew what we wanted. As teachers, we'd grown up with the prescription of various different versions of the curriculum. We understood the need for rigour and wanted a curriculum model that was built on solid foundations. But more than this, we wanted it to be inspiring – the kind of curriculum that went beyond what we'd been used to in the past.

In a previous version of the national curriculum, teachers across the country were supported in delivering whatever it was we were supposed to be delivering thanks to some units written by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). These schemes were the epitome of functionality and included detailed plans for every subject. Coverage of content was ensured, and they were helpfully arranged into units that fitted neatly into a half-term. This usually meant that you had three geography units in a year, three history, three art, three design technology and so on. The mavericks amongst us decided to alternate one half-term of history with one of geography, one of art with one of design technology – just for the sheer excitement of it all. (See my top five QCA units on page 10.)

When it was all organised, we'd cut out the unit titles (using wooden letters – obviously) and stick them to our classroom display boards, so the children would know from day one exactly how rubbish their lives would be for the next six

weeks. With this sorted, all that was left to do was deliver the units. This is where things started to go wrong because it turns out that six weeks isn't actually that long. This could just be the result of my failings as a teacher, but I never seemed to be anywhere near finishing a topic by the time half-term approached. This meant that the last week or so ended up in a mad rush to get stuff done because after the holiday I had to move onto something else.

Nowhere was this more apparent than with the most ill-conceived design technology topic ever created – 'Slippers'. To be honest, I've never fully understood slippers. I get what they're for, but they're not really the footwear of choice for your average revolutionary. I suppose I can accept that they have a place in society, for those who apparently can't bear to have their feet in contact with carpet, but no one will be able to convince me that they deserve a place in the curriculum.

'Slippers' was the actual name of a Year 6 unit – it wasn't dressed up as anything else and it wasn't even given one of the catchy titles that were dotted throughout the geography schemes (like 'Passport to the world' or, my personal favourite from Year 1, 'Where in the world is Barnaby Bear?')¹

Regardless of my reservations, it had to be done because it said so in the scheme of work, and nobody really knew what would happen if we deviated from the plan.

'OK children – this half-term we're learning about slippers.'

Imagine saying that to a classroom full of children, and then imagine the reaction you might get. There were always one or two who seemed vaguely excited, but from the rest of them there was a collective sigh. I hate this as a teacher. In this sense, we're ultimately no different from a host of other performers – a dissatisfied response from the audience is like a dagger to the heart. To compensate, I decided to go heavy on the enthusiasm and proceeded to sell the topic to them like my life depended on it.

'Now, we're not just learning about slippers. We're actually going to make a pair ourselves ...'

¹ Barnaby was a teddy bear who travelled to different places around the world and brought back lots of photographs and artefacts to help the children learn more about that particular place. Admittedly, Barnaby's travels were essentially limited to wherever the teacher had booked for their half-term break. At best, this included highlights from a range of culturally enriching locations, and at worst, the children got to find out about the best bits of Magaluf.

Slippers

A few more perked up at this point so I kept at it.

'We're going to design them ourselves – they might be fashion themed or sports themed or maybe like those furry animal/monster type ones – you know, the ones with the floppy ears and googly eyes. I've even seen some that squeak!'

They knew exactly what I meant, and thanks to my powers of persuasion, they were now absolutely buzzing. This was the start of my problems.

In hindsight, it's a terrible thing to raise children's expectations in the knowledge that something won't be as good as you've made out, but it was too late now. The children were already imagining skipping down to assembly and dazzling the rest of the school with their new footwear.

My first mistake was using the plural 'slippers'. The QCA scheme actually described the children producing a single slipper, or prototype, rather than a pair. I had missed this. Making one slipper makes even less sense than making two, but I couldn't worry about that now. We had sewing to do.

When I asked the children about their needlework skills, the last time they could remember sewing was when they were in nursery. And by sewing, what they really meant was stringing colourful shoelaces through a piece of wood with holes in it. I don't want to go into any more detail about what happened during the following six weeks, other than to say that I still have an overwhelming sense of dread at the merest mention of any textile-based craft activities.

The upshot was basically that neither I nor any of the kids had anything even approaching the kind of skill level necessary to pull off a pair of slippers. What they did produce was barely recognisable as a piece of footwear. There were soles formed from limp bits of cardboard with slices of rubber glued onto the bottom for grip. Some had managed the upper (a technical term we spoke about a lot without truly knowing what it meant) by stapling strips of hacked up fabric to their misshapen cardboard sole. Some still had the needles embedded in them because they had become so entangled that we felt it was probably best to leave them where they were. The children didn't wear their slippers to assembly. Instead, they remained on the windowsills of the classroom for the rest of the year as a constant reminder of just how inadequate we all were.

I gave myself a hard time over this kind of thing. Slippers is an extreme example, but I found that I was under pressure to get through similar stuff in most of the other subjects too. In the worst cases, it wasn't simply about not getting

things done; sometimes, the children would really start getting into a topic, only for us to realise that it was week five and we only had another week left before we had to change to a new one. The whole business was frustrating, but we kept at it because that's what it said on the plan.

This exemplifies one of the problems with being a teacher. Most of us do stuff because we're told to do it, and then when it doesn't work or becomes unmanageable we blame ourselves, feel guilty about it all and pretend that everything is fine whenever anybody asks. Most of us don't like to feel that we're letting anyone else down so we don't talk about it. This is such a damaging thing to do, yet it's incredibly common – mainly due to the fact that we really care about what we do and desperately want to do the best we can for our children.

I knew there were topics that weren't particularly worthwhile. I also knew that I was constantly chasing my tail because I couldn't fit everything in. I had a sneaking suspicion that the four weeks we had spent gluing screwed up newspaper balls together to make a volcano were probably a waste of time, and that lots of the work I'd got them to record in their books as evidence didn't actually mean much in the long run. In short, I had the feeling that I was rubbish at my job.

So I decided to say it. I found a friendly and more experienced colleague who I knew wouldn't judge me too harshly and told them everything. I was expecting a bit of sympathy and hopefully some advice. What I got was a bit unexpected. She said, 'I know what you mean – I think that too.'

It was a bit of a moment – we hugged and there were tears, then we got a cuppa and started to talk about all of the things that we couldn't do or couldn't cope with. Admitting it, and finding someone who struggled in exactly the same way, was like a weight being lifted, and now that there were two of us, we were almost certain that there must be more.

There were. In fact, virtually the whole staff was feeling incompetent – it was brilliant. None of us could do our jobs as well as we wanted, and we'd never been happier.

There's an important lesson in here for experienced teachers. I think we sometimes do a disservice to young teachers who are coming into the profession. We might end up as mentors, coaches or respected elders, but how often do we speak openly about our struggles – the things we find hard, the things we know we don't do well or have the time to do well? I'm not advocating the celebration of

Slippers

mediocrity, but I do think that the efficiency and levels of automaticity that we've developed over time must seem almost superhuman to teachers at the beginning of their careers. We've got to show our cracks (you know what I mean).

So, back to being incompetent. This collective acceptance that things weren't working ultimately led to one of the best decisions we made as a school. We were all trying to do everything. If it was written in a curriculum document or appeared in a scheme of work, we would cover it. As a result, the outcomes for the children were hit and miss. Some of their work was good, and some of it wasn't. It was incredibly rare, however, to be able to describe any of their work as genuinely brilliant.

Any curriculum document is designed to be both practical and useful – the definition of functional. To make it beautiful as well means making some decisions, compromises even, to make sure we get the balance right.

We wanted our children to have the opportunity to produce incredible work – to be exposed to a world beyond slippers. And for this to happen, we had to accept that we would need to do less, but do it better.

My top five inspirational QCA units

1. **Containers:** A Year 5 art and design topic during which the children spent six weeks inventing a thing that holds some other things – basically a box.
2. **Biscuits:** Design technology this time. If spending six weeks on a biscuit wasn't exciting enough, we were encouraged to jazz it up by making it 'cultural'.
3. **Local traffic:** Geography, apparently.
4. **Controlling a turtle:** A classic from Year 2. This was ICT before proper technology had been invented and was based around using 'Roamer' – a programmable bin lid that could go forwards, backwards and occasionally around a corner. The turtle effect was achieved by gluing an egg box onto its back, although I got told off by the ICT coordinator for 'making a mockery of the technology'.
5. **Rock and soils:** The title of this Year 3 unit should be enough to put most people off, but I have met some budding geologists who really liked teaching it. These people are not normal and should be avoided.

A group of monkeys. A box full of nuts. A lever. A chute.

The monkeys excitedly poke at the box ... nothing happens. Meanwhile, one monkey sits to the side, observing. Then, when the others wander off, he gets up and – with a curious push of his palm – presses the lever and the nuts tumble down the chute!

Not believing his luck, he eats the nuts, presses the lever again and is rewarded with yet more nuts. He's cracked the challenge of the monkey-proof box.

In their early years, children experience a world full of monkey-proof boxes – it's a time of discovery, observation and experimentation, as they engage in the frustration and joy of learning how to release life's nuts. Then, as they progress through school, learning becomes more formal, easier in many ways. The nuts are handed to them on a plate and something important is lost.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

In this absorbing book, drawing on his groundbreaking work as an inner-city primary school teacher, Jonathan Lear sets out how teachers can resist the 'nuts on a plate' approach and deliver a curriculum rich in authentic learning experiences that help children learn from one another and grow into empowered, knowledgeable and creative thinkers who are driven by insatiable curiosity.

This is genius; Lear at his most irreverent and profound best.

Stephen Tierney, CEO, Blessed Edward Bamber Catholic Multi Academy Trust, blogger and author of *Liminal Leadership*

The Monkey-Proof Box takes the reader on a journey that, for an educational text, is unusually gripping and extremely readable.

Professor Samantha Twiselfton, Director, Sheffield Institute of Education, and Vice President, Chartered College of Teaching

This is a wonderful book: wise and witty, reassuring and challenging, theoretical and practical.

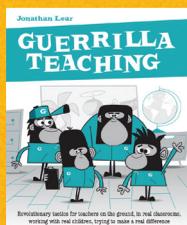
John West-Burnham, Visiting Professor, University of Suffolk

A treasure trove full to the brim with creative and practical ideas around pedagogy and the primary curriculum.

Sir Tim Brighouse, former London Schools Commissioner and Chief Education Officer for Birmingham and Oxfordshire

Crisp, cool and cutting on core curriculum principles, it's also very funny.

Mary Mquatt, education adviser, writer and author of *Curriculum: Gallimaufry to Coherence*



Described as having a breathtaking understanding of how to engage children, **Jonathan Lear** is an award-winning teacher, education consultant and author. He has worked for many years on a compelling mix of inspirational teaching strategies, and has shared his passion for learning as an advanced skills teacher, a deputy head and an Associate of Independent Thinking.

