

A Curious Curriculum

Teaching foundation subjects well

A practical resource for primary schools and trusts

Claire Banks and Mick Waters
Foreword by Mary Myatt

Free online supporting resources

First published by

Crown House Publishing Limited
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.crownhouse.co.uk

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA
www.crownhousepublishing.com

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First published 2022.

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178583643-5
Mobi ISBN 978-178583649-7
ePub ISBN 978-178583650-3
ePDF ISBN 97-8178583651-0

LCCN 2022936629

Printed and bound in the UK by
Gomer, Llandysul, Ceredigion

Foreword

It is odd that in some quarters there is talk about the curriculum as though it is a 'new thing'. Yet, there has always been a curriculum, even before the national curriculum, and even before it became a focus in the quality of education judgement in the latest inspection framework. What is new, however, is the attention being paid to the quality of what is being offered to pupils, particularly in the foundation subjects. While English and mathematics have been well served in terms of resources, thinking and planning – and with good reason – the same cannot be said for the other subjects. What has characterised the planning and delivery of the foundation subjects in many, but not all, parts of the sector, is that they are something to be 'covered', in the form of activities for pupils to do rather than worthwhile areas of exploration.

The reasons for the foundation subjects being poor relations in terms of curriculum thinking and realisation are understandable: pressures of time, absence of resources and lack of knowledge about where to find good materials. But, with the sector now focused on levelling up the wider curriculum beyond the core, many of us have realised that this is about more than tarting up plans or refreshing a bought-in scheme. It is more complicated than that, and there is work to be done over the long term.

We talk about making sure the curriculum is coherent for our pupils, but is our approach to thinking about and planning that curriculum also coherent? Is there a shared meaning beyond the catchy headlines? If we are going to get better at this, we need to begin by taking a wider view and looking at and interrogating examples from other contexts. *A Curious Curriculum* provides a missing link in the literature on how to make this aspect of school provision actually work on the ground.

We might have all the values statements in the world, but are we doing the gritty work of making sure that the curriculum is working for every child, every day, in every classroom? It is never a blame game, but why is it so common to find that schools are downloading generic stand-alone lesson plans and then wondering why the pupils don't know, aren't able to talk about or do something with what they have been given? This is because we have often slipped into a hand-to-mouth approach, as Banks and Waters call it, to curriculum delivery. In these cases, it means that the provision of a task or an activity becomes more important than whether the pupils have learned anything.

It struck me as I read this book that the three categories of student teachers identified by Professor Sam Twiselton¹ might be applied to curriculum leadership: *task managers* who view their main role as being very product orientated, concerned with completing the task rather than developing the learning; *curriculum deliverers*, where there is more explicit reference to learning, but this is conceived within the restrictions of an externally given curriculum and where curriculum coverage frequently trumps learning; and, finally, *concept and skill builders*, where there is a focus on proficiency and deep learning.

1 S. Twiselton, V. Randall and S. Lane, *Developing Effective Teachers: Perspectives and Approaches*, *Impact: Journal of the Chartered College of Teaching* (summer 2018). Available at: https://my.chartered.college/impact_article/developing-effective-teachers-perspectives-and-approaches.

What we have in this terrific book is the account of one trust setting out to think about, talk about and attempt to realise what an honest, ambitious provision might look like. At Olympus Academy, a cross-phase trust with eleven schools, this work is led by Claire Banks, director of education, with support from Professor Mick Waters (lucky them). It is full of provocations and bold statements, which help us to move from task managers to concept and skill builders. The authors explain how the trust has answered these questions, why they established 'narrative' curriculum plans, which is a genius idea, and give us examples of what this looks like in their context. It is this concrete, exemplar work that will be a real boon to the profession.

There are several important threads in *A Curious Curriculum*. One relates to reappraising what counts as valuable work: when presented with the 'products' of pupils' learning, can we really say that they have learned something when all they have done is fill in the gaps or coloured a worksheet, when instead they might be presenting at an exhibition?

Another notable thread is a proper focus on the curriculum as it is experienced through the eyes of a child. We are likely to know that we are on the right track if we hear pupils talking about their work being complicated, that what they are learning is making them wonder and that the questions help them to understand bigger, wider ideas.

A further thread is that this sort of work is fundamentally about problem-solving: solving problems is complex and occasionally frustrating but also exhilarating when things go well. This is much more rewarding than the pursuit of silver bullets and quick fixes.

To shift the perspective from 'What am I doing as a teacher?' to 'What are my pupils learning?' needs sensitive and purposeful engagement to get to the heart of the matter. In *A Curious Curriculum*, Banks and Waters describe how they went about this: the setbacks, the insights, the doubts and, above all, the growing ownership by all involved

A Curious Curriculum

in this important work. We need to stop thinking that this element of provision can be completed quickly. It can't. It is slow, deliberate, purposeful work, and it will always be work in progress. What the authors have also shown in this book is that it can also be great fun!

Mary Myatt



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Introduction: a curriculum built on a good foundation

Why we have written this book

We want to help teachers enjoy teaching some of the foundation subjects well, and, in doing so, see children in primary schools become intrigued by their world and set on a path to success in school and beyond. Knowing that schools grapple with the challenge of curriculum design and the teaching that accompanies it, we wanted to share our experience of developing foundation subjects in the hope that a description of our work and the thinking behind it would be of use to schools elsewhere. This is a book that tries to support head teachers and curriculum coordinators by showing practice, exploring the thinking behind it and describing the process of securing consistent benefits for all children. It tells the story of the development of entwined curriculum and pedagogy in some of the foundation subjects.

Over the course of five years, we have worked together with a group of head teachers, teachers and teaching assistants to help them make a positive difference to children's learning experiences. The schools involved are now proud of their professional work in this area. We know that every school sets out to teach well and ensure good learning outcomes for its children. Every school also sets out at some point to define, reshape and redefine its curriculum. In this

book, we explore how our schools have managed to both design an appropriate curriculum and teach it.

Children experience and enjoy the learning we plan. In our schools, it is provided as a Curious Curriculum. Both of these words have Latin roots. Curriculum means 'course', in the sense of a route to be followed. We also wanted our children to build their sense of being eager to learn and know - the Latin meaning for the word 'curious'. Curriculum also means 'speculation or intent' - our ambitions. Our Curious Curriculum is a course that leads children to the learning ambitions we have for them.

Who we are and how this story began

Five years ago, Claire had recently been appointed to support the work of all primary schools in the Olympus Academy Trust to the benefit of every child. She had many years of experience as a head teacher in an inner-city primary school in Bristol and was building working relationships with the schools in the trust: the head teachers, teaching and other staff, children and wider communities. A common thread for all the schools was concern about the effectiveness of curriculum, partly as a result of revision of the national curriculum in 2013¹ and partly due to the natural commitment of most staff in primary schools to enjoy the best of learning with and for children.

The community of head teachers signed up to a programme of curriculum development to unfold over the next year or two. Claire decided that it would be useful to have some advice and support from a source external to the trust and turned to Mick.

Mick had been around the educational block a few times in various roles from schools to local authority to a national role as director of

¹ Department for Education, National Curriculum (14 October 2013, updated 16 July 2014). Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/national-curriculum>.

curriculum at the then Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. Mick's experience in supporting schools in different parts of the country and beyond had been utilised by Claire in her previous school, and she asked him again to lead an initial staff development day about the curriculum at the start of a school year, followed by intermittent school-based support over the course of the next twelve months. At the time, Mick remarked that it would take longer than that, and they discussed the premise that curriculum has to be linked with pedagogy to make progress.

Mick has spent about ten days a year supporting the trust, working in schools, contributing to their conferences and workshops, and doing detailed work with head teachers or curriculum lead groups. His role has been to provide the necessary spur, to throw a new pebble in the pond, to hold a mirror up to what was being achieved. Over the five years we describe, Mick spent a total of about thirty days with the schools prior to the COVID-19 lockdowns, supplemented by time spent producing documents, being in touch and talking on the phone to Claire. During lockdown he Zoomed in periodically.

Where Mick has floated in, Claire has been submerged, helping the schools to develop on a day-by-day basis. Naturally, there is the ongoing big agenda linked to supporting schools in seeking continuous improvement, checking progress, helping with all manner of urgencies, and looking after individuals and schools when problems crop up - the agenda that anyone in a leadership position would recognise. Alongside this, she has also done the hard bits: supporting people's efforts, reminding them of agreements, checking understanding, organising meetings, insisting that things get done, confronting occasional shortcomings, and endlessly recognising effort and achievement.

Although Claire and Mick have an unbalanced partnership, both agree that the crucial work in developing our curriculum story

successfully has been done by the teachers, teaching assistants and head teachers day after day in the schools. Nothing that has been achieved could have been achieved without their commitment and willingness to keep pushing the boundaries of practice. At times it has been exhilarating, at times frustrating and at times sheer graft. What it has been is a story of continuous improvement, children's achievement and professional worth.

What this book tries to do

A book can only ever accomplish so much. There are libraries of books on curriculum theory and rationale. This is a book about some of the foundation subjects - those subjects that primary schools often teach through a themed or topic approach. Much of the focus is on the teaching of history, geography and science, of which there has been much consideration about where knowledge fits in; there is less specific reference to music or PE. We have also covered design and technology (DT) and art and design, two areas that are often challenging for teachers in primary schools.

As the book is about the foundation subjects, it addresses the prospect of organising learning into themes that bring the subject disciplines together under 'big ideas'. But it is not a book that rejects the discrete teaching of some aspects of some subject disciplines. Nor do we shy away from giving examples of where mathematics and English can be strengthened through good work in foundation subjects or used to strengthen the wider subject knowledge of the children. As Mary Myatt comments, we are not a trust that has sidelined the wider curriculum;² indeed, this book is about exactly the opposite. We stress that our teaching must avoid the superficial and trivial and must be rooted in extending and challenging children.

² M. Myatt, *The Curriculum: Gallimaufry to Coherence* (Woodbridge: John Catt Educational, 2018), p. 24.

This is a book about how we can teach some aspects of the broader curriculum and do it at depth – and teach it well.

Many books deal with curriculum design by relating curriculum theory to the content that schools need to include, through requirement or philosophy. Other books offer schools a curriculum plan to ensure coverage and depth. Yet more books explore pedagogy or assessment. Our book tries to explain how we made decisions on the ‘what’ of curriculum and then ensured that everyone understood the reasons for those decisions – the ‘why’ of the work we do. This is vital for the adults in the school, of course, but also for the parents and, most importantly, the children.

We then go on to set out some of the tactics we have used to overcome challenges and make successes become routine. Part Two is almost a collection of insights, linked to research, which would support consideration of many aspects of school leadership. We take the general principles and explore how schools can make them work in their own circumstances.

We needed our staff to make the curriculum their own. We wanted teachers to commit to a curriculum for their children – a curriculum that mattered for their community rather than one that was simply packaged for them to deliver. What we call our Curious Curriculum is work in progress, and always will be. That is the thing about learning and teaching: we should keep exploring new territory and pushing the boundaries in the quest for continuous improvement.

We deal with both the big picture and the detail, addressing intellectual concepts and how they are best explored, and delve into the ways that teachers can organise and manage specific and detailed aspects of classroom life to ensure success. At times, we focus on global issues that affect our world today and our children’s futures, such as sustainability, economy, identity and technology. At other times, we find ourselves discussing how to help children to fold paper, use scissors or mix paint.

This book is essentially our own dialogue about the development of the Curious Curriculum – how we approached the work and how we got it done. It is not a model curriculum that can be uprooted and planted in any school, but we hope that the discussions, explanations, assertions, asides and advice will resonate with you as you relate the circumstances to your own school setting. We have spent many hours over the last five years discussing the complicated world that is the school and the best way to enable those closest to the children to take another step towards the effectiveness that every teacher wants to feel.

This is not a ‘certain’ book with a straightforward solution or a ‘must do’ sequence of actions. We offer our experience with professional humility, inviting readers to use what makes sense for your own school at the time you need it. We both learned long ago that the application of a formula is rarely effective in teaching.

Because we do not believe in off-the-shelf solutions, we have not included our whole curriculum plan, but we have included many sections to exemplify what we do cover.

This book paints a picture of how we developed the Curious Curriculum over time and, importantly, how it will continue to develop. We all know that curriculum doesn’t stand still. It evolves and adjusts to new developments in thinking and research, to new understandings about learning, and to our own growing professional competence and confidence.

We wanted everyone involved to engage deeply rather than be expected to ‘deliver’. We wanted them to exercise responsibility over the work they do, collaborate over curriculum design and innovate to push the boundaries of pedagogy. We wanted them to be professionally curious about just how good learning could be and aim for excellence.

An insightful and practical book that details the transformational steps a school can take towards designing and delivering a rich, rigorous and wide-ranging curriculum.

Rather than being a model curriculum that can be uprooted and planted in any school, the book is a model that schools can use to design their own curriculum, one that not only encourages children to be active participants in their own learning, but also to see the benefits of being part of a bigger, wider family of learners.

The authors concentrate on the foundation subjects, particularly history, geography and science but also design and technology and art and design – areas that are often challenging for teachers in primary schools. Subjects are brought together and explored under ‘big ideas’ and, crucially, the emphasis is on avoiding the superficial and trivial and rooting teaching in extending and challenging children.

All children deserve an engaging, exciting curriculum designed to spark their curiosity, feed their imagination and develop their skills and knowledge. With clear timelines and an honest and transparent dialogue about the challenges and benefits of working together collaboratively and the importance of external expertise, *A Curious Curriculum* is an essential read for all school leaders.

Suitable for executive leaders, head teachers, curriculum coordinators and subject leaders in primary school settings.

A powerful, hard-hitting book about how we ensure that the curriculum truly inspires curiosity and challenge in primary-aged learners. The authentic wisdom of these authors really packs a punch. Not to be missed.

Dame Alison Peacock, DL, Chief Executive, Chartered College of Teaching

Refreshing in its honesty and humility, *A Curious Curriculum* is a comprehensive resource for any school or trust leader looking to improve their curriculum.

Dr Kate Chhatwal, OBE, Chief Executive, Challenge Partners

This book does not tell people what to include in a curriculum. Why would it? Instead, it is a case study in leading change. How to take people with you. How to communicate intent. How to create expectations of what will happen in different classrooms where the ownership of the trust curriculum is with the teacher and not the trust itself. The more our most credible practitioners can share with the wider sector, the better. This book adds to the growing library of must-read books. I loved it.

Sir David Carter, former National Schools Commissioner, Director of Carter Leadership Consultancy

A Curious Curriculum is likely to be an enormous asset to all in primary who (using the authors’ own words) seek to be ‘well informed, well read and thoughtfully discerning’.

Professor Sam Twiselton, OBE, Director of Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University

A former head teacher, **Mick Waters** works closely with teachers and leaders in schools, MATs and local authorities to support the development of teaching approaches and curriculum to ensure the best learning outcomes for children. For some years he was director of curriculum for England, based at the Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA), and before that held the post of chief education officer for the city of Manchester. He is also invited to work at a policy level with governments in different parts of the world.

Before becoming director of education for The Olympus Academy Trust, a cross-phase multi-academy trust in north Bristol, **Claire Banks** was a head teacher for nine years in an inner-city primary school. Throughout her career she has been interested in social and emotional learning and school climate, which has led to her work on leadership culture. Claire now works on curriculum design and school improvement in a system leadership capacity, offering school-to-school support to school trusts. Her passion for succession planning for the profession has led to her coaching and mentoring on Aspiring Heads and Women in Leadership programmes.



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ISBN-13: 978-178583643-5



9 781785 836435

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