

## Wroxham Primary School

This short report was written following a half day visit to Wroxham Primary School in Potter's Bar, Hertfordshire. The visit was completed as part of a curriculum research probe commissioned by QCDA in year 3 of the Building the Evidence Base for a C21st Curriculum project. Wroxham is a Creative Partnerships School of Creativity<sup>1</sup> and the headteacher has been an active member of the Curriculum Evidence Advisory Panel (CEAP), an influential group that coordinates evidence gathering processes and identifies areas for partnership working. The visit was intended to answer the question: *In schools that are successfully developing the curriculum, how are the changes required by curriculum innovation being managed by school leaders?* During the visit, interviews were held with the headteacher and the deputy headteacher and a year 3 teacher who is also the lead for science.

## Background

Wroxham is a foundation school for 242 children aged 3-11 with a nursery that provides an additional 32 places for children aged 0-3. The school is average in size, popular and heavily oversubscribed. The majority of children are White British although there are children from a wide range of ethnic heritage. English is an additional language for a few children. The proportion of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is below average as is the proportion of children with statements detailing their educational needs. The number of children eligible for free school meals is below average. Fewer children join or leave the school throughout the school year than is generally seen. In its most recent (2009) inspection Ofsted considered the school to be outstanding.

## The school's approach to curriculum review and change

Wroxham has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to pupil voice and involving children as co-designers of their own learning. This commitment and a range of related practices grew out of a sustained involvement in a research and development project in partnership with Cambridge University called Learning without Limits.<sup>2</sup> Learning without Limits is rooted in research that draws attention to the many complex ways in which ideas of fixed ability, and the practices based on them, can limit learning. The project aims to develop approaches to teaching and learning that do not rely on determinist beliefs about ability.

Involving children as co-designers of their own learning has serious implications for curriculum review processes.

*"The curriculum is subject to continual adjustment because of its relationship to formative assessment and the role of children in planning." (headteacher)*

---

1 The Schools of Creativity programme supports outstanding schools to engage in research and innovative outreach with other schools, creating a national network of schools that makes an important contribution to the ongoing development of the Creative Partnerships programme as a whole. There are 56 Schools of Creativity. <http://www.creative-partnerships.com/programmes/schools-of-creativity/schools-of-creativity,7,LAN.html>

2 <http://learningwithoutlimits.educ.cam.ac.uk/>

There are very few structures and processes that systematise or fix the curriculum at Wroxham, for example, including fixed review points. Instead the curriculum is at the heart of the school and features in some way in most of the professional conversations that take place. Termly overview plans are written and submitted for scrutiny by the headteacher and teachers translate these into rough timetables to help them think through the range of approaches they will offer. But these plans are subject to constant revision in the light of new directions taken with and by the children as their learning moves forward.

Critical to the success of this approach, according to the headteacher, is the fact that all the teachers at Wroxham are good or excellent. When the head joined the school in 2003, it was in special measures and the existing staff were disillusioned and lacked motivation. In the new regime, staff found themselves doing a lot of work on values and principles and making deep and lasting changes to, not just their practice, but also to their beliefs about learning and teaching. The headteacher was uncompromising on quality and not everyone was able to make the shift; *“it was a case of move on in your practice or move on.”* (headteacher)

The commitment to the highest quality of teaching remains a feature of the school and in one expression of the effects of this, the majority of staff, teaching and support, are involved in some form of professional and/or accredited learning, including higher degrees, teaching qualifications for support staff and NVQs. Wroxham is also a training school, so there are always students on teaching practice around the school and they take a full part in planning and designing curriculum experiences. Staff and children equally thus become part of an *“active, vibrant learning community.”* (headteacher)

### **What is the curriculum change?**

Having drastically improved the quality and commitment of her teaching staff, the headteacher noticed that they had started to break away partly or totally from the ‘download and deliver’ units in the (then) QCA website and there was a growing feeling in the school that teaching numeracy and literacy in isolation was unnecessary.

The solution was a themed and integrated creative curriculum for key stages 1 and 2, which had as a core feature of its design the involvement of children as co-designers of their own learning. The curriculum takes as its starting point the learning objectives set out in the National Curriculum. Thereafter topics and themes are developed jointly by each year group’s learning partnership, which includes teachers, support staff and frequently student teachers, and the children.

This approach enables the school to make visible and valued the role of the children in developing their curriculum. Staff see this as an important opportunity to support children to become confident and independent learners.

### **How does it work?**

At the end of term a new theme for the next term is chosen by each learning partnership. Staff deliberately choose high level, umbrella headings to enable children to interpret themes into a range of topics. Tools such as spider diagrams (a form of concept map) and thought showers resulting in dozens

of post-it notes are used to support each pupil individually to explore their interests and as a way of indicating what they already know and can do in the context of the theme.

The children's notes are then used as the basis for producing an outline plan which is reviewed and refined with the children to make sure that everyone finds something to interest them. For the most part children choose similar foci and the majority of planning is organised around these. However special interests and choices that may not obviously connect with relevant learning objectives are accommodated too, for example through homework tasks and project work. As a result many children complete a significant amount of voluntary additional learning, linked to work they are doing in school. All children complete a related project during the long holiday before term starts to get them 'warmed up.'

There are no ability groupings in any of the classes and for each curriculum experience, children choose from a range of learning opportunities how they want to engage. Groups can be fluid, and frequent self and peer assessment form the basis for setting the pace of learning. This means that fixed plans for lessons or sequences of lessons are of little use at Wroxham.

The approach also challenges staff to 'keep up' with the imaginations of their children and frequently leads them into new territory. During the interviews we heard about children planning and cooking meals for their families, cleaning and categorising freshly dug up Victorian bottles and making papier mache severed heads.

Resources to support learning opportunities like these have grown rapidly and ingeniously to meet the demands of the children and staff; "anything to make learning practical and engage children's imagination." (headteacher) As well as a forest school where children regularly explore and learn outdoors, there is Wroxham Radio, a PA system from which children broadcast to the school, a website full of well-populated and up to date blogs and images of the children and their work, and numerous artefacts around the school including an antique motorcycle. In the playground there is a bus, which is being converted to house the school library so that the space in the school can be turned over to interactive ICT. There is also a TARDIS outside the year 3 classroom in which children regularly travel through space and time.

### **How do school and change leaders support the curriculum change?**

In the term before the creative curriculum was introduced, the headteacher led a series of in-service training (INSET) days, during which staff worked together to 'imagine' (headteacher) or simulate a term's worth of work around some themes.

In addition to the whole school opportunities, staff also worked in their learning partnerships and received 1-1 coaching from the headteacher.

Staff were encouraged to think about what resources they would need and what approaches might work, and to try out some of their ideas in their current classes. Through this kind of experimentation and review, over the course of the term staff developed and refined the principles and underpinning practice, and even some approaches and resources that they could actually use.

*“There was a lot of free thinking about the different topics you could do and what you could get out of learning when all you have is a title.” (teacher)*

The effect of this approach to implementation was to raise the level of creativity in the range of approaches and to build staff members’ confidence that they could let go of the control they held over learning to enable the children to take a more active role.

*“There was lots of scaffolding to begin with. Later the scaffolding was removed and we allowed more freedom as the children became involved and practice became more embedded.” (headteacher)*

*“In the first term the head just said ‘go for it’ so we chose a topic that we would enjoy and where we could see a lot of scope. But we found it too broad so we narrowed it down a bit. Now we seem to be going broad again as we have learned how to balance out coverage over the whole year.” (teacher)*

Through 1-1 coaching of individual teachers during the development period and early stages of implementation, the headteacher consistently modelled her high expectations, for example of the degree of creativity to be demonstrated by staff and children and in particular of the quality of resources she believed would be required to make the approach successful.

Specialist support was made available from both inside and outside the school. The leaders in science, mathematics and ICT are kept especially busy helping colleagues with integrating these subjects into themes. Creative practitioners including singing and drumming teachers have been brought in to complement the skills of school staff.

### **How is the curriculum change monitored?**

In practical terms, the head reviews every outline plan and meets with learning partnerships and individuals to discuss their rationale and help refine their approach. She “frequently and unpredictably” (headteacher) drops in to classes and discusses progress with children and staff both formally and informally, individually and in groups.

The headteacher also completes performance management reviews for all staff, including support staff. No targets are set for individuals relating to pupil performance. Instead the focus is on personal professional development including mentoring others and taking part in accredited programmes.

Occasionally the headteacher will convene what she calls a ‘curriculum continuity party’, to which staff bring their plans so that the overall offer that the school is making becomes accessible to everyone and ideas can be swapped and refined. Such occasions also involve staff in reviewing coverage and progression and help to share the responsibility for securing the quality of curriculum experiences across the school.

Writing portfolios for each pupil are kept, and children keep blogs and self assessment journals that are regularly reviewed by staff and children separately and together.

Curriculum development features prominently in the school development plan and so is subject to regular scrutiny and review by the senior leadership team and school governors.

Curriculum development and related practice are clearly closely monitored. However the consistent message communicated in interviews and in the school's documents and artefacts is a sense of freedom in relation to the curriculum.

The headteacher leads curriculum development and other aspects of the school by modelling consistently a set of values and expectations and staff are expected to "find their own way within a principles based environment". (headteacher) At the heart of the value system is what she calls 'the ethic of everyone'; which for the headteacher means that every learner, adult and child, is important, even if they are not the easiest person to get along with and do not display the most socially acceptable behaviours.

Supporting the learning of each individual through curriculum experiences requires people to empathise and work out what needs to be done to help in a non-judgemental and optimistic way. For example a pupil who is seriously ill and confined to a wheelchair recently became depressed and started behaving badly in school. The support that is provided to him is wide-ranging and reviewed each day. Currently he has a personal sports coach and a counsellor who spend time with him 1-1. Previously the school has paid for his entire family, including grandparents, to attend a performance given by the Chicken Shed Theatre Company. So the ethic of everyone, for this pupil, means that the school will, unconditionally and regardless of his behaviour and performance, create new curriculum opportunities and do whatever it takes to help him to be a successful learner.

The ethic of everyone applies to staff too and the resulting culture of collaboration and support combined with freedom to experiment and personalise teaching and learning is highly valued:

*"Trying stuff out, even if it doesn't work, well that's almost welcomed. You need learning objectives and to be safe, but other than that – give it a go!" (teacher)*

*The head doesn't breathe down our necks and we feel we have the time and the resources to make it work. We have a lot of trust and you need that." (teacher)*

The culture of high expectations in the school balances the sense of freedom with one of high levels of responsibility. The head's message to staff is "get it right and the rewards are tremendous."  
(headteacher)

## **What is the impact?**

Wroxham has twice (2006, 2009) been recognised by Ofsted as an outstanding school, with the creative curriculum and in particular children's' role within it making important contributions to the success of the school:

*"Lessons are planned very carefully, often with creative flair and with implicit varying degrees of challenge. Because meaningful links are developed between subjects, there is often planned overlap so that exploration in one subject leads to reinforcement in another. Staff provide the*

*pupils with structured support to ensure that they have the necessary skills to complete the task and tackle the challenges. This is a particularly strong feature of lesson planning.” (Ofsted, 2009)*

And:

*“The school fosters pupils' confidence and self-belief extremely effectively. Pupils' views are listened to carefully and their personal development is outstanding. The school works with the pupils and together they promote a culture of high achievement. Year 6 pupils are mature, confident and articulate. They clearly enjoy school a great deal and demonstrate in their attitudes to learning a determination to get as much as possible from the school's rich curriculum provision.” (Ofsted, 2009)*

Obviously this kind of recognition, and the continuing high standards that children from the school achieve in national tests are important indicators, which the staff strive to achieve. However it is the level of interest and engagement from the children that staff consistently identify as their principal motivation and source of pride. “Children here rush into school.” (teacher) And they are clear about what difference their approach to curriculum at Wroxham makes to pupil learning:

*“It makes the children the people they are – creative individuals. They are children with a thirst for knowledge and who want to make a difference in the world, not just trying to succeed. They are self sufficient and not afraid to try something new.” (teacher)*