

Muddling through can't work

The abolition of the SATs for 14 year olds is a huge relief for all those struggling to give children a real educational experience in Key Stage 3. They completely compromised any attempt for teachers to make a creative response to the government's own urgings to explore integrated curricula approaches, personalised learning, and thinking skills.

Most schools have tried to develop initiatives which could help primary school children adapt to secondary schools and to ...so they see it... develop learning and study skills that have not been taught down below.

Yet how valid have these attempts been? The big problem about just introducing a 'skills-based' curriculum is that it's a lot easier said than done. It requires a different pedagogy, training and a commitment to try new techniques. The same is true of cross-curriculum projects and thematic approaches. They take a lot of planning but they too need a different pedagogy ...one based on cooperative learning, investigation skills, communication skills and team teaching.

But take Co-operative Learning. What the research finds is that use of Cooperative Learning almost always improves academic and affective outcomes. Students love to work in groups and they feel more successful and like subjects taught cooperatively. They have more friends of different ethnic groups and are more accepting of others different from themselves.

Yet the pedagogy has been pioneered in the States rather than here and there is precious little instruction on how to do it effectively in PGCE courses or in schools. Rather, there is an assumption that is probably good idea but that teachers will be able to muddle through using traditional teaching styles.

As with all new pedagogic methods, it's not what you do but how you do it. Robert Slavin, the most pre-eminent writer on Cooperative Learning is contributing a major piece for us in the next Dec/Jan issue. He points out that there are at least four different types of Co-operative Learning and that some practices must be employed to make it successful at all. Even then, certain approaches will leave less able children behind in the team. Muddling through simply is not good enough!

The recent National Conference for the Teaching of Drama showed how drama and narrative can be deployed to engage children in collective learning, and to motivate and inspire children to learn and acquire insight and understanding in a way which ordinary teaching rarely does.

Of particular note was growing interest in Mantle of The Expert as a pedagogy which could transform the learning experience. There were present schools which had adopted it for a large part of their KS3 Curriculum. We will be reporting on this for the next issue wherein starts a series on how one secondary and one primary launched a thinking skills programme in their schools.

The Mantle of The Expert requires teachers to have an imagination about the subject they are teaching and to be able to step in and out of roles, and to know when to step back and allow the students to take the lead. It's very different from the classroom instruction model and needs a degree of training. We will, in the New Year, be publishing a Masterclass series of articles on using Mantle of the Expert.

The keynote speaker at the conference was Kieran Egan, speaking on how imagination and narrative are essential to learning and understanding the world we live in. His ideas are explored further in this issue and the Arctic Stories cross curriculum project. He is a thinker who, like Robert Slavin, will have a major impact in UK education if teachers and the system are open enough to take on board some of their ideas.

The others cross curriculum projects to be featured in the magazine will be on:

The River Child

The Mountain Child

The RainForset Child.

All will be underpinned by Egan's frameworks for teaching with imagination and creativity.