

USING THE CURRICULUM TO MEASURE PROGRESS

This article references the recent HMCI research findings (September 2018) relating to the quality and depth of the primary curriculum and how schools measure children's progress through it. The outcomes generally found the curriculum to be narrowing, especially in Upper Key Stage 2, where sometimes intensive test preparation for the end of Key Stage 2 tests begins as early as January in Year 6 classes.

The research underpinning the commentary showed that there is a dearth of understanding about the curriculum in some schools. Too many teachers and leaders are not trained to think deeply about what they want their children to learn, how they are going to teach the curriculum and how progress will be measured.

Demonstrating progress through the primary curriculum

'The purpose of instruction is to increase the store of knowledge in long-term memory. If nothing has changed in long-term memory, then nothing has been learned.'

Progress is about being 'better' than before:

- by demonstrating greater depth of understanding – *both quality and quantity*
- having fewer or no repetitions of misconceptions, or fewer errors
- demonstrating the transference of new learning (*skills and knowledge*), or applying previous learning in a different context
- learning completed increasingly independently and confidently with a greater willingness to engage!

The importance of effective feedback is therefore crucial to ensure good progress.

Progress will appear in different ways, in different subjects and, for different children, at different points in their learning. Sometimes progress will be evident in one piece or a series of pieces of work, especially when they reinforce new learning or apply their learning elsewhere. At other times, progress will be evident over a slightly longer period, such as a half-term, where it involves the growing of understanding or the addressing of a misconception. We may also look far broader, at how the depth and consistency of application of learning develops over a term, a year and key stage.

Under the new inspection framework, inspectors will focus on how far leaders consider the following:

- *the quality of the curriculum in each subject as a driver of progress (Intent)*
- *the content and sequencing of the curriculum in each subject – do teachers plan their curriculum (and new learning) effectively, so that it is introduced progressively, builds on previous learning, introduces and secures new learning, and constantly demands more of children, as they develop (Implementation)*
- *how well do children learn and secure the statutory content of the NC PoS; are there planned opportunities for teacher modelling and demonstration, reinforcement and*

application to enable children to use new information to develop, consolidate and deepen their knowledge, understanding and skills (Impact)

In some schools, there is not only a general lack of curriculum knowledge and expertise, but a distinct inequity for some children in terms of equal access to the whole curriculum, especially the disadvantaged. The curriculum is poorly organised with too few links in learning and little relevance for children. Hence the need for a greater focus on curriculum in the new inspection framework.

Through our assessment and moderation work with Warwickshire schools, we have found that simply focusing on test outcomes can leave little time or energy for schools to consider the curriculum and how children progress through it. Ideally, testing should be relevant, kept to a minimum and used solely as a teaching tool, rather than for test purposes.

Conversely, we have many schools in Warwickshire that have invested heavily in curriculum design resulting in a curriculum that is unique to the school and that takes account of the local context – *the 'given' environment*.

In these schools, knowledge and skills are intrinsically linked: skill being a performance built on what a child knows. Curriculum leads, in discussion with subject leads and teachers, decide on the 'invaluable knowledge' that they want their children to know as the content of the curriculum: the 'big ideas' in subjects – *rather than simply deferring to what the tests assess*.

In our most effective schools, leaders focus on in-depth understanding of fewer pieces of higher quality content rather than a superficial understanding of a greater volume of content. Children learn skills alongside knowledge, ensuring that both are explicitly developed. In these schools, leaders ensure the curriculum is relevant and meaningful to children by putting knowledge into context. Focus is placed on subject-specific vocabulary and knowledge that allows the children to forge good links in learning, so that it is enhanced for ALL children across subjects, including the disadvantaged.

This rich web of knowledge, with relevant and purposeful links in learning between English, mathematics and other curriculum subjects, provides the capacity for children to learn, develop their understanding, confidently secure the statutory skills and make good progress.

This is because teachers plan for the statutory skills to be taught, reinforced and transferred, time and time again in different contexts and subjects, rather than simply being learned (*and forgotten*) in two or three-week blocks of disparate learning or even worse, undertaking random *cold and hot tasks* in isolation – *which are often wasteful of curriculum time and reinforce failure for many*.

English is both a subject in its own right and the medium for teaching; for children, understanding the language provides access to the whole curriculum. In our most effective schools, where consistently good or better progress occurs, teachers select appropriately challenging and inspiring English texts that complement their curriculum themes and enable the deepening and widening of knowledge and, in turn, progression across the curriculum through the statutory skills in the programmes of study.

The themes and associated texts are often mapped on a long term overview which everyone has access to, including senior and middle leads. This also ensures that a range and balance of comprehension genres (although not as prescriptively set down in this framework as in the previous framework) are covered within each key stage. Through a 'drip-feed' approach, the children are immersed in the text and theme so that the narrative, its language and generic features and the related subject matter, become internalised.

In Early Years and Key Stage 1, stories such as fairy stories and traditional tales or tales with patterned rhyme help to develop children's skills of word reading, phonics, reading and listening comprehension, whilst also providing good models for developing their craft of writing re: structure, language, grammar and punctuation - *words, phrases, clauses, simple and compound sentences*.

At Key Stage 2, the knowledge and skills that children need in order to comprehend are very similar at different ages – which is why the programmes of study for reading comprehension in Years 3 and 4 and Years 5 and 6 are similar in content. It is the complexity of both **the text studied** and the **required response through writing** that increases the level of challenge through the key stage. **Text and curriculum theme choice are therefore, crucial.**

In the most effective schools, regular information retrieval linked, purposefully, to aspects of the curriculum theme and text, is used to promote the acquisition of core knowledge and efficient recall. Information retrieval from non-fiction texts, presented in different ways, is interwoven at pertinent intervals within the narrative, in order to deepen children's understanding of the subject matter behind the narrative - *the story, itself, the setting and the characters*.

Learning is further enriched through regular and relevant visits – *both to the local area and further afield*. **In these schools, children make consistently good or better progress because learning is exciting and purposeful, linked appropriately across the curriculum and reinforced, time and time again, to ensure it is internalised and never forgotten.**

Teachers and other adults, have a clear understanding of national expectations, next step coverage and skills progression - *what children have to be able to know and do by the end of each year, phase and key stage* – as well as an overview of expectations of the years either side - below and above.

They know and select strategies which effectively enable the acquisition and consolidation of '*specific knowledge and skills*'. They have both the expertise and confidence to explicitly model and demonstrate these skills, with planned, purposeful opportunities for their application in a range of contexts, *within a rich and varied curriculum*. They make regular, accurate and robust formative and summative assessments and use the outcomes to make the necessary adjustments to their planning and teaching.

Furthermore, curriculum design is viewed as an open, reflective process with regular discussion to review and renew - *by senior leaders, subject leaders and teaching staff together*, not just by the head teacher or curriculum lead. The curriculum and the themes and

texts that support it, are ‘owned’ by the teachers, within the parameters determined by senior leaders, in line with the school’s vision.

Teachers are well supported in the process of curriculum design, review and revision, by the knowledge and expertise of curriculum and subject leads to help them to structure, plan and resource their teaching. The curriculum is a progression model, rooted in what leaders expect their children to know, and be able to do, by each particular stage – *always linked to the national curriculum programmes of study at each key stage*. This, in turn informs the focus for monitoring coverage and progress through the curriculum.

In these schools, the curriculum is about more than just leadership. It includes how well the curriculum is implemented through well-taught and appropriately sequenced content – *in lessons, and over time* - thoughtfully designed assessment practice and consideration of an appropriate model of progression. Their well-constructed, broad and balanced, well-taught curriculum, leads to consistently good and better outcomes because the test and teacher assessment results are a reflection of what the children have learned over time, rather than knowledge which has been *crammed* in two terms.

Moreover, both formative and summative assessment are used effectively, as tools, to chart children’s progress and check their understanding of the main curriculum elements, with the expectation that the information captured from assessment is used not only for identifying gaps in knowledge, skills and depth of understanding, but also to inform future curriculum review.

The Assessment Team

Debbie Hibberd, Judy McDonagh and Rosie Parker
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