

Meaningful Schooling: researching a curriculum which makes relevance for teachers and children 5 -14.

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Meaningful Schooling: researching a curriculum which makes relevance for teachers and children 5 -14. Jonathan Barnes, Canterbury Christ Church University.

Abstract

This paper outlines the form and findings of a research project related to the publication of a major new book on the cross curriculum. The research sought to identify any common features between schools identified to be successfully implementing cross curricular approaches. In seeking an answer to this question the researcher found that a strongly common feature was what he calls ‘a sense of meaning and purpose’ in the activity and life of both children and adults working in the schools.

The six case studies comprised of schools taking contrasting routes towards an integrated curriculum. Staff and children observed in meetings, lessons and play. Desk studies were carried out on OFSTED reports, school websites and prospectuses and semi structured interviews were conducted in person or by telephone. Amongst a wealth of data concerning planning, resourcing, teaching, assessing and framing the schooling children of 5 -14 there arose a strong consensus relating to the conditions for learning in each school and their direct relationship to relevance and children’s own preoccupations. These ‘eleven commonalities’ are outlined in the findings section of the research.

A significant strand emerging from analysis of observations and interviews was each school’s serious attention to: values. Additionally consideration of: child and staff motivation, school ethos, authenticity, the full and frequent use of modern technologies, authentic cross curricular links, attention to creativity, physical and emotional involvement, the concept of passing control to pupils, using other adults from the community and activities which held equal fascination for both adults and children were all observed to be common features.

The researcher concludes by discussing alternative interpretations of his findings and proposes implications from it especially in the sphere of shared values, meaningful learning and the importance of the personal and creative development of teachers.

Key Terms: creative, cross curricular, curriculum, future, meaning, values, happiness, emotion

Introduction and background

If we are to believe research and newspaper reports, the liberal societies and burgeoning economies of the west have not delivered the promised utopia we baby boomers of the 1950s expected. Instead, as our nations have become richer, increasing numbers of our children and grandchildren have become or are becoming:

- More obese (Department of Health, 2006, website)
- less active (Health Education Authority, 1998)
- less healthy (Bailey, 1999)
- less happy and less motivated (WHO, 2004, website, Layard, 2006))
- more likely to harm themselves (Mental Health Foundation, 2005)

- more likely to have behavioural and emotional problems (Collishaw et al, 2004)
- more likely to need the help of a mental health professional (Mental Health Foundation, 2002)
- perceived by adults as more likely to commit crime (Home Office, 2006, website)
- depressed (Telegraph, 11/09/06)
- isolated at home in front of a monitor or TV screen (UK Film Council, 2004).

Such developments are not confined to the west however, even in ‘God’s own country’, heavenly Kerala in south India, suicide, alcoholism and self harm rates amongst the young have risen sharply in parallel with increasing westernisation (Outlook, 2004).

60 years of what we still term ‘peace,’ does not seem to have delivered the political ‘Age of Aquarius’ we expected. Wars, massacres and other major international and global crises have proliferated and hardly a day passes without horrifying reports of death and destruction, usually the result of western armaments. Any optimism which may have resulted from the end of the cold war, limits on nuclear arms or the decline of communism has quickly been doused by newly identified uncertainties and the growing pessimism identified by sometime prime minister advisor, Tom Bentley (2006). Fears of natural disaster, terrorism, violence, pandemics, oil and water shortage, global warming, pollution and irreparable damage to environments and eco-systems, dominate the media and significantly for parents and teachers, *children’s* minds (Hicks, 2006). Against such a background which might so easily end in pessimism it is the teacher’s professional duty to be optimistic (Booth and Ainscow, 2002).

Experience in primary teaching over 33 years in addition to research suggests that teachers might be well advised to start thinking about the curriculum by finding out what today’s children are interested in. David Hicks (2001, 2006), Catherine Burke and Ian Grosvenor (2003) have made helpful contributions in this direction. These studies and wider research into western children’s preoccupations, suggests four general areas of common concern:

Children’s interest in global politics and issues concerning the future

When asked, children unsurprisingly, show a preoccupation with many issues highlighted in the media (Hicks, 2001). They are generally very interested in their own future and only a little less interested in the world’s. The success of the much-criticised ‘Green agenda’ in the geography curriculum (Telegraph, 2002, Standish, 2004, website) for example, is partly due one suspects, to its popularity as a set of concepts with children. On an intuitive level ideas like global warming, water shortage, and environmental pollution make sense. Successful current events programmes like Children’s British Broadcasting Corporation’s (CBBC) daily ‘*Newsround*’ and its associated website, and the various *Blue Peter* appeals, confirm young people’s interest in current events. Such programmes are indeed increasingly popular with children; recent viewer figures (BBC, 26th August 2005, email) show that between 2 and 3 million British children watch *Newsround* every evening.

Children's interest in Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

Children love new technologies, particularly mobile phones, the internet, DVDs and TV. 80 – 90% of them use the computer regularly, (WHO, 2004), 50 rising to 90% of British and American children between 5 and 14 have a mobile phone (WHO, 2004). Young people from developed economies report that they like mobiles and the internet because they need no permission, have little supervision and appreciate the possibilities of constant communication (Childnet International, 2003, website). In Romania a recent study showed that by far the chief role models of school aged children were film stars and TV personalities (Popenici, 2006). A stirring finding related to the power of TV and video, was that in the same research, teachers were amongst the least likely adults to be considered role models, ranking even below terrorists! Whilst Romania may be a special case for a number of reasons, such findings at least remind us not to assume shared goals and interests.

Children's interest in relationships

Magazines and websites devoted to personal, beauty and relationship problems of young people have grown hugely in popularity in recent years amongst those over 9 years (National Literacy Trust, 2005 website). Relationships are important to all of us, but for the developing psyche of the child they may dominate everything. Much current educational psychology from Vygotsky to Bruner and Gardner focuses on the importance of group relationships in learning, but more personal relationships are probably even more important. Each year the numbers of children who contact the charity 'Childline' grows by more than 10%. This UK charity gives support to children who are abused, fearful or worried, and in 2004 gave in-depth support to over 141,000 children. 83% of them were between 5 and 15 years old and about a third of cases concerned bullying and interpersonal relationship problems. Indeed bullying and personal relationships were by far the most common reasons for contacting Childline. Concerns about family, peers, friendships, who they can trust and who is caring towards them are clearly central to children's lives. In the light of this obvious interest it is salutatory to know that in England 43% of 11 year olds feel they have been bullied in the past few months and almost 50% of girls and boys at 11 years feel that do not find their peers kind and helpful (WHO, 2004, see below).

The child's growing sense of self

Children are interested in expressing their identity (Burke and Grosvenor, 2003). Simply type the string, 'self' and 'children' into Google Scholar, and over a million recent academic references to selfhood and children are called up. The growing preoccupation with personality and individual lives shows itself not only in the litigation culture but also in the proliferation of reality TV programmes and short lived celebrity. We have known that children are interested in their own developing character for millennia. Exhortations to understand and enhance the child's development of self, characterise Steiner Education formulated in the early 20th century (Steiner, 2003), Froebel's writings of the 19th (Froebel, 1826) and the philosophy of Rousseau in the 18th (Rousseau, (1762, website). It is however, difficult to find systematic, curricular support for examining and developing the child's concept of self and his or her meaning in mainstream schools of the 21st century.

Children and meaning

From the evidence, children may well be occupied by personal and the global concerns very far from their experience of standard national curriculum in schools. They are of course interested in a whole range of very individual preferences as well but children like adults, search for a personal sense of meaning (Bruner, 1996), relevance and fulfilment in their daily lives. Current conditions outlined in the first two paragraphs and contemporary critiques on education (eg Wrigley, 2005) suggest that many may not finding that meaning in school. About 10% appear actively to rebel (Collishaw, et al, 2004) but most children are probably similar to those in modern Romanian schools who quietly tolerate their schooling but feel little connection with teacher's aims and values (Popernici, 2006).

Psychologist Viktor Frankl saw a sense of what he called meaninglessness, as a major feature in the increase in mental ill health since the Second World War (Frankl, 1992). The World Health Organisation also infers clear links between children's perceptions of social and emotional well-being and good mental and physical health. This link is explicit in the UK government Children Act, *Every Child Matters* (2004) and implicit in the United States equivalent document *No Child Left Behind* (2002) with its emphasis on character education and safety. Yet children in the USA and the UK (specifically England) score negatively relative to other developed nations on a wide range of well-being indicators. Indeed English children rank as apparently among the most unhappy in a league of 35 nations in the following categories:

- **Bullying:** 43% of English 11 year olds (35% in USA) report having been bullied in the last few months.
 - **Fighting:** 63% of 11 year old English boys (45% in USA) admit to having been involved in physical fighting in the previous year.
 - **Trust** Only 50% of English (US, 60%) 11 year olds agree that their peers are 'kind and helpful (this compares for example with 82% in Scotland and 87% in Macedonia) .
 - **Stress:** 40% of 11 year old boys in England (US 38%) feel 'pressured by schoolwork' (this compares with 5% in the Netherlands)
 - **Liking School:** Only 15% of English (US, 18%) children at 13 could say they 'liked school a lot' (this compares for example, with 60% in Macedonia).
- (WHO, 2004)

It is very difficult to imagine a healthy sense of meaning and purpose if one is feeling bullied, sick, stressed or suspicious. If there is any truth in the supporting figures, there is little wonder that so few children can say they like school.

How does English education respond this state of affairs? To be even more specific, what do our current school curricula have to contribute to addressing (or preventing) depression, disaffection and potential meaninglessness in children? How can schools respond adequately in the face of major challenges to the always fragile sense of well being? How prepared are teachers in England and their curricula to respond adequately and justly to another Asian Tsunami, or a major terrorist outrage, a sudden shortage of oil, or a global 'flu pandemic or the effects of global warming? I fear that as presently understood, our curricula are ill-designed to address these and other global issues. I suggest in this paper that 21st century schooling requires a curriculum flexible enough to change with suddenly and perhaps massively changing circumstances. In this research I suggest that meaningful schooling should primarily

be founded upon agreed and shared values in each institution. Schools should reflect locally and community-based priorities, resources, personnel and activities and be honestly collaborative at every level. Such parochial values can be proposed and shared, but schools should also be in the forefront of working towards the establishment and spreading of global values. Finally, whilst a responsive curriculum might involve creative and inter-disciplinary responses it should not disregard the teaching of comprehensive subject and skills knowledge which continue to empower, but must be put to work in real and meaningful contexts.

The study

In preparing to write a book on cross curricular learning (Barnes, 2006, in press), I chose to conduct six case studies in schools which argued to be successfully implementing a cross curricular approach to learning. I found in my contacts with these schools that each of them was addressing some of the current issues outlined above. I chose a sample from schools recommended to me as a teacher educator, as schools which offered good cross curricular and creative practice and am aware that this makes general conclusions open to question. But questioning about values and commonalities is a central part of the case for a responsive and meaningful curriculum. If a curriculum is based upon agreed and shared values worked out in the school community, the priorities will not necessarily be mine, or the government's or an industrial sponsor's. The case study schools were chosen in the context of my own interests in the cross curriculum and in creativity and therefore their values and priorities were close to my own. Another researcher's selection would be different but no less valuable, because if the curriculum is strongly rooted in shared values, then it is more likely to be meaningful to each child and teacher. Each case study school had been recommended by a number of colleagues in the profession as being places where good practice was evident in highly engaged and positive children, happy staff, high and rising standards of learning and support from the community. Each of the six schools had, almost by definition, chosen a non-standard route through the curriculum, each of them was led by a strong management team with clear and clearly stated values. The localities they served were varied, two from contrasting parts of London (Hampstead and Kings Cross), two from major conurbations (Medway and Slough) and two from small towns in Kent. Their approach to implementing a creative and cross curriculum varied too. The case study schools included:

- Two examples of whole school cross curricular approaches to the entire 5 – 11 curriculum, one (School A) using the Royal Society of Arts *Opening Minds* Curriculum and the other working in collaboration with Creative Partnerships, its own Arts based curriculum (School B)
- A two-day teacher training module with year 7 group from a secondary school with a performing arts focus (School C)
- A whole term project in mixed year 5/6 city centre primary school (School D)
- A week's cross curricular work in a year 4 class in central London (school E)
- An inner city nursery school pioneering the notion of a children's centre (School F)

I read prospectuses, school curriculum documentation and OFSTED reports, observed lessons, conducted interviews with head teachers, curriculum leaders, class teachers and class assistants. From these different sources of information I drew out themes and looked for common themes shared to some degree by all case study schools.

Findings

Recording the curricular life of six contrasting schools clearly generated a great deal of data, some surprising, some expected and some conflicting. Whilst occasional conclusions might apply to only one school a great number were common to all. Through analysis of various sources of data I found eleven features shared in some degree by all six schools. I have dwelt upon these ‘commonalities’ in this paper because they point to practice which appears to seriously address (from the child’s point of view) the major issues confronting them and their world today. Whilst in every school, the curriculum was to a significant degree, led by the children, they also shared the attribute that this relevance was used as motivation towards significantly raised standards. The six schools had successfully (in the eyes of OFSTED, educational professionals, school staff and community) adopted cross curricular and creative practice in their schools in the last five years.

Summarising school ethos is not a simple business. To say that the schools shared the following commonalities for example, is not to suggest that all members of staff, pupil and parent communities agreed or even supported the features observed. In every school there was a degree of dissent (or at least scepticism) regarding the ideals which the commonalities symbolise. I have tried to represent these views too.

Eleven commonalities

1. High child and staff motivation All schools were quite open and specific about their motivation towards a more flexible, creative and risky approach to the curriculum. In interviews with heads a common theme was teacher’s and children’s disaffection with a previous curriculum weighted heavily towards a narrow and context light approach to the core subjects. Many specifically spoke about fears of potential *teacher* disaffection and the importance of staff development in this context. One head stated, *‘my staff’s personal development is as important as their professional development.’* Heads and teachers frequently commented on their doubts about the efficacy of Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) and League Tables. One school prospectus stated:

The Creative Learning Curriculum at XXXX School was introduced as a result of dissatisfaction with the learning and teaching of the Foundation subjects together with the over emphasis of teaching of the core subjects. The creation of ‘SATs robots’ and bored, sterile teachers brought into question the nature of what we were trying to achieve with our children.’ (School A, pp. 4-5).

Happiness, as evidenced by frequent smiling faces, relaxed relationships in staff rooms and corridors, expressed job satisfaction, was a notable characteristic in each school.

The head teacher at one of the schools however reminded of the general vulnerability of such positive emotion, however when they voiced the rhetorical question, ‘What happens to my self esteem when someone mentions the word OFSTED?’ This

susceptibility to undermining by an unnecessarily punitive inspection system was noted in significant numbers of conversations in each of the institutions observed,

2. Shared aims and values. All case study schools were clear as to the aims of learning activity in the school and of the values which underpinned them. This clarity was not easily gained however. One school had needed multiple whole staff, parent and school council meetings to identify common goals and values. This school remarked that it was probably necessary to have the meetings every year to ensure that the majority continued to subscribe to the core principles. It was notable that these aims were not only familiar to staff, but also (though often in simpler language) to children and parents. Stated aims in the case study schools included intentions to:

- *achieve a radical change in children's learning styles in conjunction with teaching methodologies. (school A)*
- *build confidence and self esteem so that children are able to express their creativity and individuality. (school A)*
- *be aware of the world in which they live and to realise they have both obligations to society as well as rights within it. We therefore see social interaction as an important factor in their education.(school B)*
- *produce understanding citizens of the 21st century who recognise the need to participate in a caring and responsible way for the sustainability of our world.(school C)*
- *provide philosophical and moral discipline and training through the visual arts and to maintain a state of intellectual and artistic development across all ages. ...a belief in the importance of each individual's integrity, and the importance of the expression of that individuality.(school D)*
- *To encourage children's understanding and tolerance of the world in which they live and its peoples. (school E)*
- *Develop practice which is based upon a philosophy of responsibility towards each other and encourage children to be respectful of themselves and others'.(school F)*

3. Positive school ethos. As might be suggested by such aims, each school demonstrated to the outsider an affirmative, inclusive and supportive atmosphere. This ethos was most clear in observations made in semi structured interviews under the heading 'relationships'. Some typical examples;

Carol (Head teacher) is very much, 'we'll try and see', whereas a lot of people are under pressure to get children to hear things or do worksheets we don't have that sort of pressure here because of the leadership of the school.'
(Doreen, class teacher school F)

...he points you in the right direction. He also encourages you if you're stuck so it makes you believe in yourself and you tend to get the answer correct
(Child, 14, of her teacher, School B)

The children can help themselves at any time – well It's their classroom after all. (teacher school C)

The dominant value in the room seemed to be one of respect for the children, shown in the quiet and calm way the teacher interacted with each child and the way she did not allow low level challenges to sway her away from this attitude. (research notes school B)

The caretaker in a supplementary school observation was overheard welcoming a single refugee mother and her two children in the first day of term with the following words;

'...I was so glad to hear your news, you look so much better than last time I saw you, I bet you feel better too, I'm so pleased for you, now you can settle down without any worries and provide a lovely home for those lovely kids.'

I discovered later that this mother had just been granted permission to remain in England.

When one looks further beneath the surface of course there are multiple exceptions to such first impressions. In the same school as the welcomed refugee, there had previously been strike action over a staff discipline issue, which had led to strained relationships. The example of the welcoming caretaker however, provided a powerful example of acceptance and generosity which was understood as symbolic of where the whole school wanted to be at the beginning of the new term.

4. Authenticity. Each case study school explicitly based their curriculum upon local, community and child-centred relevance. Whether the observed curricular examples were arranged around the Arts (school A), the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) 'Competences' Curriculum (RSA, 2003) (school C), the local environment (school B) or the toys and trees in the school grounds (school F), schools used the curriculum activities as a vehicle to address bigger personal or global issues. Aspects of curriculum and classroom organisation which centrally addressed relationships, selfhood, global issues and the future were all observed in all schools. These highly motivating themes were too big and general for topic themes but appeared as central characteristics in disparate topics. Practical work on the school farm, for example resulting from a study of the concept of 'food miles' and the issues of water shortages in east Africa (School B). In the same school another class topic which combined music, dance and *grammar*, generated animated talk about emotions, relationships and physical contact, amongst 14 year olds. In another school, Turner's painting *The Fighting Temeraire* had six year olds talking easily and profoundly about death and change (school A). In all schools the likelihood of finding relevance was encouraged through well-planned physical, collaborative and purposeful activity in the school locality.

Not all teachers and Teaching Assistants found such work with outsiders and in the community easy to handle. One teacher sighed and said at the end of a long day, 'I just *long* for a normal week.' 'Authentic' curricula can be exhausting and unsettling. Teachers and school leaders need to be aware that times of quiet reflection and settled consolidation are necessary to provide a balance for the excitement of authenticity.

Some children reported 'hating' doing this questioning and experiential learning. Several teachers reminded me of the difficulties some have with unstructured and unpredictable situations, such as are common in field trips, visits and other open-

ended activities. The experienced teacher is well aware of the individuals who need more predictability and closer frames to work within and will plan accordingly, but those less experienced may mistakenly think that all will enjoy the same investigative approach. In the happiest of classes, the solution seemed to come in a balance of opportunities, always personally relevant, but taking a wide variety of forms.

5. Full and frequent use of modern technologies. Without exception schools made significant and uncontrived use of modern technologies. Large digital images (school F), data projectors (all schools), *PowerPoint* presentations (Schools A, B, C and E) and the use of the class video and digital cameras, was common and inclusive. Computers were generally used for presentation and recording and remain highly motivating resources, but when children were free to access the internet to write emails to schools down the road or in distant countries, to Tate Britain, or companies which sold peas from Zimbabwe, they became truly excited. School B used mobile phones to text descriptions to a 'base camp' as different teams made transect to describe the fine detail of a beach.

Twice teachers remarked on the fact that children were more advanced and more relaxed about technology than them. In another setting I overheard a student teacher saying to a year 7 pupil, '*I don't know how to work this (a digital camera) you're the expert, show me.*' The effect on that child's self esteem was visibly positive.

6. Creativity honoured and identified. Three schools were strongly associated with Creative Partnerships a government funded organisation set up to bring creative teaching and projects to schools in economically deprived areas through the use of creative practitioners outside school. In such schools an awareness of creativity was to be expected. In all schools, however, the links between feeling creative and feeling a sense of purpose were made explicit. This point is elaborated in the context of teachers in another BERA paper (Cremin, Barnes and Scoffham, 2006).

Not all teachers feel creative. One remarked, '*... the creativity gene seems to have passed me by.*' Several pointed out particular teachers and identified them as the creative ones, but one of the findings of recent studies of creative teaching (Grainger, Barnes and Scoffham, 2006) was that working with creative practitioners from the community helped teachers recognise the creativity already inherent in their daily work lives.

7. Genuine cross curricular links. Cross curricular activity is defined as 'when the skills, knowledge and attitudes of a number of different disciplines are applied to the understanding of a single experience, theme or idea. ' (Barnes, 2007). In the most engaging examples, links were authentic, manageable and well planned. No school used more than four subjects to illuminate any one theme or topic. Some (Schools A and C) had given their whole curriculum over to an approach where the skills, knowledge and attitudes of a number different disciplines were applied to a single experience, topic or idea in each of six terms. These schools examined the experience of learning as part and parcel of learning activity. They ensured curriculum coverage by comprehensive and detailed curriculum planning. Children continued to study knowledge and skills in *all* subjects throughout the year but got opportunities to apply them in depth in alternate terms. Others (schools B, D, E and F) used concentrations of three or four subjects to make in-depth but time-limited responses to a particular

theme, such as a threatened tree, a nuclear power station or a piece of derelict land behind the school. One school (school E) used Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1993, 1999) as a guide. In all cases, because of the range of subject starting points, the chances of each child finding engagement was significantly improved. This showed itself in observed lessons being characterised by countless examples of what Csikszentmihalyi terms 'Flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) and (in the context of younger children), Laevers (1994) called 'involvement'. Children were typically fully engaged, bright eyed, making positive and collaborative relationships, concentrating for long periods and often unaware both of time passing and of being observed.

Not all lessons using two or more subject approaches were cross curricular however. In some, the subject approaches remained essentially separate - children made up a game in the playground and then they made a map of it. This was not using the skills and knowledge of PE and geography to make sense of an experience it was simply contriving two experiences which related. In another school (School C) children visited a beach and encouraged to play with materials they found there, they were asked to capture the essence of this experience and present it to children from another year in their school. This single experience generated several plays, a filmed story, an art exhibition, a dance and a musical composition accompanied by a mime. It was difficult to see which specific subject was being represented in these presentations but skills taught in ICT, language, design, art, PE and music were all utilised, developed and enhanced through the preparations and performances.

8. Strong evidence of physical and emotional involvement. Each case study demonstrated a high degree of movement amongst children and adults. The choice of topic, resources and the attitude of teachers and other adults had the effect of building emotional engagement for the child. In Steiner's words the curriculum, '...addressed to the child's whole being, not just its head and nervous system.' (Steiner, 2003, p 41). Since physically tangible objects, models, materials, spaces outside and inside the classroom were the main resources, children's sense of touch, smell and hearing were equally engaged. Since many activities depended upon relationships between peers or adopted mixed adult and child groupings a building and broadening of relationships was demonstrated in observations in all observed lessons. This combined with the positive atmosphere in each of the classes corroborates Barbara Frederickson's (Frederickson, 2004) laboratory findings that, positive emotions enhance social resources, and Csikszentmihalyi's that the state of flow enhances intellectual complexity and executive control (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

A number of teachers were quick to observe however that Flow could also be seen in activities which were not so wholesome in their view. In a staff meeting, one teacher noted that many of the characteristics of flow could be experienced in a drunken or drugged state or in full engagement in some criminal activity. Such an accurate observation reminded participants of the importance of clearly articulated and agreed values.

9. Frequent passing of control to pupils, A notable commonality between case study schools was the high frequency of occasions in which teachers handed control and decision-making to the pupils. One secondary school team was so happy to pass power to the children that in two days of child-led activity between year 7 children and teacher education students, the researcher noted *no* verbal or non verbal

interactions between supervising school teachers and pupils. Another when asked by the researcher what the next terms topic would be, replied, *'I don't know yet, we haven't asked the children.'* All schools demonstrated an inclination to pass the locus of control to children despite the fact that each of them was experimenting with new approaches which were flexible and open ended. This trust had the effect, according to the observations of student teachers, (see Barnes, 2005a) of *improving* children's behaviour, *extending* their engagement and *deepening* thinking and imagination.

In many cases passing control to children made a noticeable difference to children's motivation and focus. One teacher observing students working with pupils in this way in school C, remarked, 'You really can't tell who's in control there, they all look so engaged.' In a debriefing discussion, students engaged in the same project noted that the aspect which surprised them most was the way that children's behaviour and motivation increased the more they gave them control. There are risks involved in such trust of course. One pair of students working on the beach exercised mentioned in commonality 7, found themselves joining in an impromptu football game with 'their' group when the children refused to carry out the focus exercises the school had suggested they carry out on the beach. Within minutes of this demonstration of handing control to the children, the footballers were asking for help in building a sculpture from the flotsam on the beach. For the rest of the day and the presentation in the following week the footballers built, photographed and made up stories about their 'beach monster' which far exceeded their regular teacher's expectations. .

10. Using other adults from the community. A feature common to all case study schools was that they each frequently integrated non teacher adults as experts from the wider community. For some school adults came as part of a contracted arrangement through Creative Partnerships (2006) or English Heritage (2006). For most schools community contacts were less formal. Parents formed the largest number of adult contributors, but school B was using a local farmer to help year 8 children develop a smallholding on which they were growing vegetables to raise money to support an agricultural project in east Africa. Another (school D) used architects, town planners, builders, an archaeologist local city councillors and the Lord Mayor to enhance a two term project on redeveloping their local environment. Yet another (school A) regularly welcomed an Imam and a Sikh priest to contribute to lessons and activities in school.

11. Activities held equal fascination for both adults and children. In discussing the life of the school and the meaning of the curriculum with children and adults in the case study schools, it became clear that many activities were as engaging for adults as the children involved. This was particularly marked where there was a high 'values' context to the class or school theme. Thus the school with the market garden linked to fund raising for Africa, the school with the commitment to improving its own local decayed environment and the school with an overt aim to express understanding and tolerance were notable for their success on tackling those aims but also in the commitment of staff and children to them.

An interesting discussion was provoked by the Creative Practitioner in school B when he asked if the themes the children and teachers worked on were contrived or genuine. Some felt that it did not matter others argued that there was more energy when the

theme arose from the real lives and interests of the children rather than being foisted on them by adults.

Discussion and Implications

Despite unprecedented spending on education in the UK ‘the stubborn tail of underachievement,’ remains (Sheerman, 2005). A third of children are not reaching their potential, a million children attend substandard schools, 23% of all secondary schools are classified as ‘poorly performing,’ (National Audit Office, 2006). Recently it had even been argued that inspection and league tables have not significantly raised standards (Literacy Trust, 2006). Money, it seems does not always provide the answer. Several of the case study schools reported that before their curriculum changes, up to 70% of their children were unmotivated and under achieving. Yet achievements in mathematics, English and science SATs continue to be the standard measure of success in schools. Even in the recent OFSTED (2006) and the accompanying NFER (2006) reports on Creative Partnerships activity in England, comments dwelt upon the fact that Creative Partnerships had not made appreciable difference to the core subjects in participating schools. NFER reported for instance:

There was a statistically significant positive association between the progress in mathematics in key stage 3 of young people who attended Creative Partnerships activities compared to similar young people nationally. However, the effect size was small and cannot be said to be educationally significant.

(NFER 5.1. p 21)

The same reports are fulsome in their praise of the improved motivation, personal and social development, high attendance rates, high standards of behaviour, cooperation, responsibility and creative thinking.. Ofsted reported that ‘*Convincing evidence* was provided in all Creative Partnerships areas about the contribution of the programmes to Every Child Matters outcomes.’ (OFSTED, 2006, p9). Until these vital components of a healthy and happy population are valued over crude test scores, the true worth of meaningful schooling may not be generally accepted.

Perhaps the main implication from the case studies is that meaningful engagement and high motivation, costs little more than a change of mindset. All case study schools had made a deliberate decision to make their curriculum more relevant and satisfying. In place of stringent targets, reduced autonomy (Burgess et al., 2002) under valued pedagogical knowledge (English et al, 2002) these schools created time, creativity and collaborative commitment. They had devoted time and talent to thinking new thoughts about children’s experience in their schools. Despite their decisions none of the schools had any difficulty in complying with the national curriculum for England. No schools were criticised in subsequent OFSTED inspections for poor subject teaching, low standards or lack of progression. Each school in some way was congratulated for a curriculum responsive to children’s interests and concerns. Interviews suggested that schools had developed a staff ethos where teacher well-being was as important as children’s. All reported a belief (often backed up by evidence from SATs improvements) that the vast majority of children were achieving their potential.

Closely related to the described ethos of meaningful and collaborative activity was the observation that teachers and children seemed aware of school values, and lived them. The conversation about what values should be shared and lived in the school community may well be the most important set of decisions a school makes and on the evidence of many of the most vibrant case study schools, the ‘values conversation’ should be regularly revisited. *One solid recommendation which arises from this research, is that schools should have and repeat the values conversation frequently.*

Whether other findings listed above could form starting points for staff conversations, depends very much on the outcome of discussions on school values. If a school decides that a sense of meaning, engagement in learning and the construction of inclusive communities are important, then many of the commonalities between case study schools would be worth debating. However, I am fully aware that there are other interpretations of the data I collected in interviews, observations and readings

One person’s ‘positive ethos’ may feel too informal to another. Apparent happiness can be superficial and ‘turned on’ for a researcher. Schools I called ‘successful’ would be questionable in the extreme to those who feel it is the teachers’ job to teach facts. Indeed the thoughts in the introduction to this paper come perilously close to suggesting that teachers are to participate in ‘saving the world’. Criticism of this approach is championed by Professor Chris Woodhead);

As a view of education, this is both absurdly grandiose and dangerously diminishing. Grandiose because utopian goals can never be realised, and diminishing because it hammers one more nail into the concept of the teacher as an authority in a particular subject whose job it is to teach. (Woodhead, 2001, website

In another article, *Teach facts not twaddle*, Woodhead helpfully suggests that teachers should only teach ‘worthwhile knowledge’ (Woodhead 2005, website). I agree. The problem is that neither Professor Woodhead and I, nor any two community schools are likely to agree on *what* worthwhile knowledge is. I suspect that few in inner city Birmingham would concur with his suggestion that knowledge of the last British Monarch to abdicate was particularly worthwhile. The values conversation will bring such contrasting definitions of schooling into the open. On the evidence of this small study, agreement on shared values generates greater staff and pupil commitment and a higher likelihood of meaningful schooling.

Agreement on values *is* possible within smallish communities and in sensitively-run institutions. Agreement is hopefully possible on generalised core values in regions and nations and between nations too, but it is unlikely in our present pluralistic and global society that general accord on the relative importance of specific subject knowledge and specific ways of teaching is possible. The lack of agreement on detail should not matter. This century promises unprecedented change and helping children discover personal well-being, effective learning strategies and positive attitudes to lifelong learning are more important.

Critics of cross curricular approaches fear a loss of subject rigour. The Campaign for Real Education (CRE, 2006, website) laments the loss of traditional subject boundaries. Current calls for the return of ‘honest subjects’ are a result of their

negative assessment of cross curricular developments such as Personal, Social and Health Education (CRE, 2006 spring Newsletter). However, interest in a responsive, meaningful and integrated curriculum does not imply that subject disciplines become redundant or that a systematic and progressive coverage of key aspects of each subject is unimportant. Influential constructivist figures in education recognise the subject disciplines as *the* most effective tools for understanding and enjoying our world (see for example, Gardner, 2004, Csikszentmihalyi, 2002, Bruner, 1996). They are *tools*, however, not the experience itself. Themes chosen by each case study school were distinctly different from each other, but each theme involved strong and emotionally engaging experiences for adult and child participants. Within the themes, relevant subject areas were taught with rigour and challenge. In each case children learned skills and knowledge deemed appropriate to an understanding of theme, place or event and then quickly were given real-world opportunity to apply their new knowledge. The subject disciplines appeared to enlighten and deepen their experience.

All of the schools had lively staff development programmes. Visits to art galleries, concerts, plays and workshops were a common feature. Several interviewed teaching and support staff remarked upon their pleasure at discovering new interests and school commitment to the personal development seemed to have spin offs in the classroom. One teacher discussed in a lesson the fact that she never felt she had really looked at a painting until a recent staff development day at the National Gallery in London another made numerous references to the writing they themselves had done as the result of a writing workshop. Over and above the direct influence of staff development, it seemed from staffroom conversations and interviews that caring about adults' personal development had a very good effect upon morale.

The lasting impression from the six schools in the survey was the commitment and enthusiasm of both adults and children in each community. There was little doubt that the adults saw themselves as co-learners with the children. There was evidence that the schooling I observed, in some degree liberated children '...from the constraints of economics and politics,' as Steiner put it, (Steiner, 2003, p 26). Applying a simplified version of Laever's (1994) involvement scale to a number of working classrooms I found that between 70 and 80% of children were at the highest levels throughout the day. A tally of the positive emotions expressed in adult and children's faces during work/play would have given even higher percentages (this observation is developed in Barnes, 2005b).

Conclusion

Returning to my introductory suggestion that schools needed a curriculum able to respond and bring meaning to perhaps sudden and dramatic change, I found to my surprise that quality which united these case study schools was *positive responsiveness*. Because the curriculum in each school was so responsive it would easily have been able to do what one international school in Tanzania did on September 12th 2001. It suspended the proposed September programme throughout the school and held a series of debates, discussions, reports and planning sessions between its Muslim, Jew, Sikh and Christian students on why and how the tragedy they had all seen on TVs the day before, had happened. They went on calmly and rationally to discuss what the school and they personally could do in response to the events, what might be the implications and how we might avoid a repeat. It was quite possibly the only institution in the world where such a debate was taking place. That

sounds to me and to parents, children and teachers of the school, (Barnes, 2001) like meaningful schooling.

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