

## **The Curriculum Challenge.**

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The curriculum in special schools has undergone major change since the introduction of the National Curriculum some twenty years ago. Its introduction provoked the most extensive curriculum review in the history of special education. However, the national curriculum excluded many learners in special education and was written with mainstream learners in mind. This lack of inclusion, and a neglect in terms of provision for a large number of learners resulted in many schools making the changes in isolation, developing a diverse range of responses to the national curriculum.

In many cases the national curriculum positively affected provision for many learners through the broadening of provision, and the opportunities for learners to be included in mainstream for part of their curriculum. Many teachers interpreted the programmes of study in creative and innovative ways, enabling learners to have experiences that otherwise would have been denied to them. Politically, this has been a positive period for special schools. Recognition of their positive steps towards the mainstream arena has opened many doors in terms of inclusion in major educational policy e.g. specialist schools programme. However, this has brought with it greater accountability through Ofsted, reporting data and monitoring of outcomes. This level of dictate often meant that educators became inflexible in their approaches, driven by the perceived need to deliver all the content within each subject's programme of study and teach to the test. Many schools re-organised curriculum around a secondary model, with increased specialist teaching. Whilst undoubtedly raising standards initially, this approach often ignored the difficulties students had in making links between subjects and the lack of consistency for students in terms of well-being and behaviour. This also created a tension between having specialist subject teachers, but also teachers skilled in special education. This was further highlighted when the last degree courses for special education were abolished in 1988. During the last two decades, there has been a demise of in-depth specialist knowledge and skills that formed the curriculum pre-1988. This will become more pronounced as the population of

special schools becomes increasingly complex due to higher levels of inclusion in mainstream, lower infant mortality and increased medical interventions.

In addition, the high levels of central government prescription through the national curriculum and the national strategies have de-skilled many in the current workforce.

The introduction of the new secondary curriculum (2008) has now given all schools the opportunity to design a curriculum that is unique to each school, one that meets the needs of learners and reflects the schools' population and its community. This is an exciting opportunity that brings a balance in terms of knowledge and understanding, and the skills, attitudes and dispositions a learner needs to be independent.

**Ponder point 1:**

**How do we create confident curriculum designers in special education who understand the learners' needs and can build meaningful learning opportunities?**

The introduction of the new secondary curriculum was welcomed by many schools. The aims of the new secondary curriculum are inclusive and are highly applicable to students in the special school population. The new framework balances the needs of the whole child, the preparation for life after school, and the promotion of cross curricular learning.

A starting point for any school embarking on curriculum change needs to be with the learners. What do we want our learners to be like when they leave our school? The aims of the national curriculum are statutory, but it is crucial that schools discuss and determine what these aims mean for their learners. This is key to establishing a curriculum that is unique to the school and that reflects the learners' needs and future destinations, whether that be employment, independent living, residential care or FE. This will then determine provision and how the learning is organized within the school.

**Ponder point 2:**

**If we want our learners to be.....then we need to provide.....**

The ***cross curricular dimensions*** can be used as powerful connectors between subjects. They can make clear the links between areas of learning for students, and provide motivating

contexts for learning. Many schools have begun to use the dimensions through theme weeks and super learning days. However, longer term planning around the dimensions can establish clear links between subjects providing coherence and also fresh and motivating contexts for learning. They ensure that the curriculum is fit for purpose in the 21<sup>st</sup> century identifying key issues for education – technology, cultural understanding, global dimensions, healthy lifestyles, enterprise and community.

In subject areas there is a clear reduction in the focus on acquisition of knowledge, and more pragmatically, the focus is increasingly upon processes and concepts that students should understand. Schools should consider the links between subjects and how areas of learning could be combined to provide coherence within subject provision.

The PLTS (***Personal learning and Thinking Skills***) are both an end and a means. They are a focus for learning – and they enable learning. They are crucial for a learner within school and for life after school.

The curriculum should expect learners to be using the PLTS in a range of contexts and across subjects so they develop a clear understanding of the skills and how they benefit their learning. When implementing the PLTS, there is a danger that they can be overlooked within the lesson. Often this is because the subject knowledge/subject objective over-rides the PLTS work. One useful approach is to only have a PLTS objective and use this as the single focus for the lesson initially until teachers and learners begin to feel comfortable.

**Ponder point 3:**

**How can the PLTS be used to develop the learning and progress of learners with a range of special needs?**

Many aspects of the PLTS framework will already feel familiar to teachers and students alike. For instance, in '*reflective learner*' students will be familiar with setting and monitoring personal targets, and reflecting on their learning. However, others may be unfamiliar and will challenge educators to understand and come to an agreement on what each PLTS means within their school. Educators will also be challenged by the interpretation of each PLTS for different learners. For example, contexts for learning and expected progress in '*team worker*' for a child with severe autism will be very different to that of a child with PMLD.

Educators may need to consider how to scaffold the thinking for less able students, i.e. teach them to think. Again, educators will need to consider the most effective ways of introducing these for the range of learners. There are established 'thinking programmes' on the market which provide training and materials to develop thinking skills.

Evaluative practice in terms of curriculum review are crucial to establishing the conditions that aid development of the PLTS, the extent to which they are being demonstrated, and the understanding secured by the staff and learners. Opportunities for coaching and mentoring amongst teachers can be a powerful way of sharing good practice, and furthering pedagogical discussion.

The impact of the PLTS on learning and progress should be a key measure in terms of curriculum review. However, this is extremely challenging, as there is no national framework for progression, nor is there any formal assessment. Many schools are developing their in-house procedures for measuring impact;

- Progression routes that explore the development of skills across NC level descriptors
- Annotated evidence of students using PLTS in a range of contexts (usually video/photographic)
- Anecdotal evidence from teachers and students.

All three approaches combined should provide schools with a reliable evidence base for evaluating PLTS provision.

Where special schools have developed a competence based curriculum, there is a range of anecdotal evidence that suggests improved confidence and ability to communicate effectively, increased ownership and motivation to learn.

Successful curriculum planning for the new secondary curriculum, needs to be embedded by a whole school approach. Schools should use disciplined innovation, carefully auditing current provision to understand what provision already works well and meets the aims and what provision is no longer fit for purpose. Leaders should work with educators to understand how the different aspects of the curriculum- PLTS, subjects and ECM areas (Every Child Matters) are planned into the learning experience and how they can substantially contribute to the curriculum

aims. Plans should make clear how learning links are made across the different areas of learning.

Through disciplined innovation schools should frequently review their provision and its impact on learning and progress.

### **Disciplined innovation-**

- Retain what works well.
- Revise areas that need fine-tuning.
- Remove areas that are not fit for purpose
- Reflect your local circumstances
- Re-imagine provision
- Review regularly

Curriculum design and the cycle of review need to become part of the school calendar. Educators should be involved throughout the process of evaluating curriculum provision, along with other stakeholders. It is important that teachers become adept at reflective practice, using data to evaluate and changing provision accordingly. As well as evaluating attainment, schools need to consider what other outcomes are important and monitor how well the curriculum is performing against these wider aims.

### **Ponder point 4:**

**How well are learners developing the wider skills for life and learning? How well are they developing the personal qualities, attributes and dispositions? What data could be collected to demonstrate achievement within ECM areas?**

To summarise, the new secondary curriculum is a welcome challenge for special schools. Again, it requires special schools to be adaptive and creative in their approaches, but the increased flexibility, the focus on learning and thinking, and the ECM agenda provides us with a far broader offer that can be driven by learner needs within a new and wider government agenda.