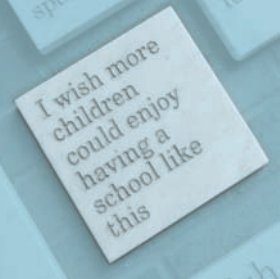


21st Century Learning: School Leader Roundtable Discussions



Practitioners and school leaders were invited, in two locations, to participate in roundtable discussions on the nature of learning in the 21st century.

In Darlington:

Alison Chipchase, Head Teacher Harton Primary School; Keith Cotgrave, Head Teacher Longfield School; Simon Finch, Curriculum Support Northern Grid for Learning; Tony Gill, Head Teacher Headworth Lane Primary School; Mel Philipson, Manager Northern Grid for Learning; Alison Shaw, Head Teacher Seaton Burn School; Della Smith, Executive Director Darlington Education Village; John Steel, ICT Adviser.

In a lively and free-flowing debate, participants developed the view that there was today a 'new context for learning' created by the accelerating pace of change in technology, the changing nature of work and the forces of globalisation. Teachers need to be able to operate in this new context and use technology comfortably as they move beyond their traditional role as imparters of knowledge. ICT has huge potential to enable pupils to access learning in different ways, at different times and in different places. The group acknowledged that the existing 'digital

divide' also applied to teachers' confidence and competence with technology.

School organisation in the 21st century was also discussed. The group was unclear as to whether government was interested in genuine transformation of education or in the meeting of targets. Current arrangements did little to foster innovation. The current arrangements for assessment and school accountability, for example, were like measuring in 'pounds, shilling and pence in a metric age.' The group debated the idea of uncoupling key stages and age-appropriate learning, and agreed that assessment at the 'right age not stage' would be desirable. Freeing up teaching time and providing flexible learning opportunities would be important in 21st century schools. The group saw the current period as an opportune time for a 'renaissance of learning,' with good teaching at the heart of 21st century schools. The teacher's role will be to manage learning, to forge strong and trusting relationships, and to excite and inspire pupils. In the 21st century, the teacher will be the lead educational professional. Time for reflection and professional development will be essential if teachers are to move beyond their current role in 'delivering the curriculum.'

All too often school environments are uninspiring and 'sterile.' The experience of some recent BSF new builds does little to change this. In school building and organisation, focus should be given to learner experiences, and to enable pupils to see relevance in their learning, while also raising ambitions. Schools should encourage risk-taking in pupils; should link areas of learning; and should encourage greater pupil self-direction within a framework of timely assessment and feedback.

In the final part of the debate, the group considered the practical steps towards 21st century learning that could be taken now. Among the suggestions were: making better use of learning platforms for communication; begin providing online teacher support to pupils outside of school hours; experiment with such things as podcasting to enrich courses; exploit peer group teaching; and improve understanding and communication between primary and secondary schools. The group agreed that any change would require strong leadership built on a clear vision, with communication as a key component of success.

In Bristol:

Gavin Ball, *Deputy Head Teacher Gordano School*; David Carter, *Executive Principal John Cabot Academy and Brunel Academy*; Simon Jackson, *Assistant Head Teacher Farmors School*; Steve Moseley, *Assistant Head Teacher Ashton Park School*.

A robust debate In Bristol focused on the secondary phase of education, particularly in a city context. Participants began with a discussion on some of the changes taking place in society, in the economy and in technology. For example, family structures have changed, as has the nature of parenting; and there are strong competitive economic pressures facing the UK. The group took the view that these factors are shifting the nature of the relationship between pupils, adults and school. As a consequence education faces 'complex challenges'. How will schools prepare young people to enable them to survive and prosper? How will schools help develop the ability and desire of pupils to be life-long learners?

Technology was discussed as one means of responding to some of these challenges. Young people are both engaged by technology, adept at manipulating it, and aware that knowledge is readily accessible from sources other than teachers. However schools are unsure how to provide free and safe access to technology, although they do recognise a duty to protect and educate pupils - and parents. Schools want to develop the ICT skills of these 'digital natives' but realise that many teachers are 'naive about ICT' and less ICT-competent than pupils.

Current assessment regimes were a concern. Do we really assess what pupils can do, when they are ready? Constructive changes to assessment would drive curriculum reform. But, since the 1980s, schools have been drawn into league tables and targets and drifted too far from an essential role in educating for tolerance, self-respect, and respect for others.

Local context affects schools differently. In some areas, families are in their fourth generation of underachievement and school has little meaning or value. Here a sizeable group of young people is emerging who are alienated from society and ambition. If the local schools are to be more than agents of custodial care, they will have to provide curriculum and assessment that is relevant, challenging and appropriate to the needs of young people in the 21st century. All the schools in the debate had positive experiences of modernising the curriculum. For example in suspending the national curriculum for Year 7 pupils and replacing this with a 'learning to learn' programme; in initiatives to give and listen to student voice; in enrichment programmes; and in courses based on student-led enquiry.

A key word emerged in the discussion – 'flexibility.' Schools need the flexibility to develop learning experiences that meet the local need. A centrally driven model for schools is not appropriate for the 21st century. Putting this into practice will take time however. Schools can expect an 'institutional lag' as they implement changes in culture, curriculum and teaching methods. Schools will need to be brave and have the courage of their convictions.

In the final part of the debate, the group considered the practical steps towards 21st century learning that could be taken now. Among the suggestions were: focus on the learner, it's their experience that counts; engage in a process of change management (concentrate on realistic timescales, a willingness to simplify and discard, staff ownership and mandate); aim for 'quick wins' to help stakeholders see a tangible difference; develop ownership for change with middle leaders; respect 'teacher voice' by establishing a learning group among staff; encourage pupils to participate in creating learning materials; experiment with media applications e.g. podcasting course materials; look for expert 'champions' in the local authority and elsewhere; learn from others.