

# Cross-Curricular Learning in the Secondary School

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## Main Body of Contribution

The past 25 years has seen a massive change in the secondary school curriculum both in content and delivery. At the same time as having to manage changes in the subject content of what they teach, teachers have had to respond to a steady stream of cross-curricular initiatives and themes which has been challenging in a variety of ways.

Prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum as a direct result of the Education Reform Act of 1988 (ERA), much of what went on in secondary classrooms was carried out behind closed doors with strategies for success closely guarded secrets. Provided good order was seen to be maintained and examination results satisfactory there appeared to be a laissez-faire attitude to curriculum matters taken by school management. Cross subject collaboration was limited to whole school events such as school productions. Maths could do the finances and Woodwork built the scenery with Art painting it. Science did the special effects and English directed the production. Music organised the singing when they were musicals and Home Economics prepared the refreshments.

Although the NC prescribed what was to be taught, it was still left to subjects to make their own interpretations and curriculum planning and development went ahead in subject isolation. Published in 1989, Circular No. 6 issued by the National Curriculum Council (NCC) advised schools on whole curriculum planning and emphasised that what was in subject-specific documents was not intended to be the 'whole' curriculum. Schools were reminded that the ERA was saying that "...the curriculum should be balanced and broadly based, promote spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development at the school and of society and also to prepare pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life" (National Curriculum Council 1989: p.1).

As further guidance, the NCC published a series of curriculum advice booklets in 1990. These encouraged a cross-curricular approach through the following themes: *Education for Economic and Industrial Understanding, Health Education, Careers Education and Guidance, Environmental Education and Education for Citizenship*. Affectionately known by school curriculum planners as 'the grey books', they mostly remained firmly on shelves gathering dust. Their lack of use and perceived unimportance was probably due to the fact that, as guidance documents, they had no statutory status unlike their big brother NC. However, perhaps the most

important barrier to their adoption as a vehicle for cross-curricular working was that subject teachers were radically (being forced to revise approaches to classroom curriculum delivery within their own subject area and had little appetite for working in curriculum areas outside their 'comfort zone'. Nine years later the Department for Education and Skills (1999) directed that the Science taught in state secondary schools should include both the 'methods of science' and the acquisition of 'knowledge and understanding' of 'facts and principles', and should be 'broad and balanced'. The significance of the notion of 'broad and balanced' science was that hitherto, science teachers could remain in the teaching 'comfort zone' of their own specialism, the revised pedagogical thinking meant that science teachers would have to work more collaboratively across traditional subject boundaries in order to ensure a co-ordinated scheme of work. To place the additional burden of incorporating non-statutory cross curricular themes was seen by school curriculum planners as a battle not worth fighting.

Perhaps the next most significant cross-curricular development in the 90s was that of schools developing personal, social and health education (PSHE) programmes and the formulation by government curriculum agencies of non-statutory guidelines to support these programmes. Realistically, programmes of this kind were already in existence in different guises, such as the health education programmes often delivered in collaboration with Local Authorities and the Health Services. The trend of having scheduled PSHE sessions delivered by a form tutor was quite common and there was an expectation that form tutors would work together on curriculum themes outside their subject specialism.

In 2002, the introduction of Citizenship as a NC subject with clearly defined statutory content that had to be delivered, assessed and reported, therefore gave schools a dilemma. With the introduction of the NC, schools made decisions on their timetable structure and the most common model at Key Stage 3 and 4 (the 11-16 age range) was to have 25 one hour periods per week with the core subjects of English, Maths and Science occupying a majority share of 3 periods per week each. The remainder of hours were spread among the foundation subjects and typically one period would be devoted to PSHE. Variants included the 2 week timetable which gave the curriculum manager the opportunity to work in units of 50 rather than 25 or the 6 period day with subsequent shorter periods. With the additional subject of citizenship the dilemma was what subject time allocation would make way for the new subject or was there another model that would facilitate the new subject introduction? There were three preferred models. Firstly was to incorporate the delivery within the PSHE programme and it to become Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education (PSHCE). Secondly was to give responsibility for delivery of the content to other subject areas, e.g. humanities and religious education. Thirdly was to have the philosophy that it was a responsibility for all and therefore clearly a cross-curricular responsibility. This third option proved to be the least popular which might suggest that there was a reluctance to work collaboratively to deliver subject content.

The National Key Stage 3 Strategy introduced in the early 2000s attempted to re-introduce some familiar themes across subjects. With the NC 2004 revisions, teachers were alerted to opportunities to promote key skills such as literacy, numeracy and IT. There was also guidance on how to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Familiar strands such as enterprise and work-related learning made an appearance as did education for

sustainable development. These cross-curricular dimensions, whilst being laudable, did little to change the core content of teaching, as success was measured by attainment levels achieved in GCSE and Standard Attainment Tests (SATs) and successful behaviour management strategies. Does this sound familiar to the situation prior to NC?

The current NC, last revised in 2008, suggests that there should be themes running through the curriculum. These are listed as identity and cultural diversity, healthy lifestyles, community participation, enterprise, the global dimension and sustainable development, technology and the media and creativity and critical thinking. Again we see common themes.

What is different is that the monitoring process through the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspections is now more focused on some of these central themes and as such is a strong agent for change towards collaborative working through cross-curricular dimensions. The current Ofsted framework for school inspection lists 7 judgement criteria for pupil outcomes. Included in these are the extent to which pupils adopt healthy lifestyles, the extent to which pupils contribute to the school and wider community and the extent to which pupils develop workplace and other skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being and the extent of pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

There is a lot of evidence on the value that school managers now place on collaboration between subject areas with collapsed curriculum and thematic days being a common occurrence within the University of Worcester (UoW) 'partner' schools. The response from the secondary Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) Team was to timetable an interdisciplinary day into the course when students from all subject areas worked collaboratively on a cross-curricular theme. For this day in the academic current year 'Sustainability' was chosen as it is both a global and a University issue. Student teachers were asked to plan a day of themed activities suitable for a school year group to engage with on a cross-curricular day.

In September 2011, draft proposals for changes to the schedule of school inspection were published. In these there is a very strong emphasis on achievement and behaviour and safety and one wonders what this holds in store for the development of cross-curricular dimensions. Talking to some teachers in schools, there is anxious debate about how they will demonstrate pupil achievement with the new regime of part, rather than full, lesson observation by an inspector; there does not seem to be a similar concern over how they might demonstrate delivery of the cross-curricular dimensions.

The rhetoric of the Government with respect to revision of NC when they refer to a "refocusing on core subject knowledge" (National College for School Leadership 2010) would also suggest that there will not be a move towards more collaborative working through cross-curricular dimensions but a return to working more closely within traditional subject boundaries.

The implications for teacher-training are that those who train teachers must continue to prepare students for collaborative working so that they are able to meet the aspirations of the school curriculum planners whilst at the same time be mindful of meeting the demands of a reshaped curriculum.

There are also messages for higher education. Pukelis et al, (2007) suggests that it is now being accepted that the major responsibility for the smooth integration of graduates into professional life, and hence into society, lies with higher education institutions (HEIs). A consequence of this is that HEIs must plan to develop *graduate attributes* such as an appreciation of sustainability issues and this can only be done effectively by inter-institute collaboration.

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## Biography

Phil Collins trained as a secondary science teacher at Worcester in the late 1960s. He spent all of his 32 year school teaching career in Worcestershire and the last 20 were as a deputy head. One of his roles was being a professional mentor to student teachers and he was a member of the University's Post Graduate Certificate in Education Course Committee. He has always had a passion for teaching science and a change in career path now sees him as one of the PGCE secondary science tutors in the Institute of Education.