

13

Creating the vision

At what point did you stop dreaming about who you could become or what you may be? At what point did what you are become the limit of your ambitions? We can be whatever our vision allows us.



Grange Primary School

As I have had the incredible opportunity to travel over the last few years and have had the chance to meet many passionate educators around the globe, I have become even more acutely aware than I was of the impact of the seemingly endless policy shifts, curriculum reforms and restructuring programmes implemented by governments on our schools systems. When I compare that with some of the organisations and businesses outside of education that I have had the good fortune to work with, I have been able to crystallise my personal belief that systems and structures change nothing; it is people who do so; and tragically for our schools and our children, the infinite top-down interventions, most of which are short term and reactive, have had an adverse effect on education. There have also been some extraordinary new ideas and understandings developed and published about the way we learn and

the challenges facing us. As a result, over the years, I, like so many educators, found myself confused, stressed and unclear of what we should be doing and how. For me, clarity arrived when I decided that implementing systems at Grange, no matter how exciting or how legally binding, was not the way to improve our school for our children, and that the answer lay in the children and community themselves.

I took over Grange Primary School in the last part of the academic year of 2001–2002. The school was typical of so many struggling in the system we inhabit today; the staff was stressed, morale was low, and the school was struggling to define its identity and purpose. As a result, the educational experience for the children was disconnected and irrelevant.

The staff at Grange was made up of committed and vastly-experienced professionals, dedicated to the school and, most importantly, to its children. They had, however, lost their focus. Teachers were delivering a set curriculum by the book, as prescribed by successive government directives and strategies. They were doing so to ensure they were doing what they were told to. Exam results were poor and, as a result, the local authority was pressuring the school to intensify its efforts and focus on test preparation and improvement. This led to greater drops in morale and a declining holistic purpose. In turn, this had accelerated the school's spiral of decline. Teachers knew that they were not providing a vibrant experience for the children, and the children could see no purpose to their learning. In truth the school had reached a point of serious disenfranchisement. Staff were not teaching with passion and the children were learning with even less.

One of the most cataclysmic strategies employed by people in charge of school improvement over the last 20 years has been the misunderstanding that to raise standards, schools must concentrate on systems, delivering more of them and more intensively. Of course, when approaches like this are deployed, children as individuals become lost in the numbers game; they become statistics. I took a break from working in schools because I found myself seeing my children as percentage points in examination outcomes. 'Jonny isn't going to get level 4. He's at least 15 marks away, so that means a 2 per cent drop in the figures. Who can I work on to get a level 4 to balance the books? Oh I know, Elsie. She is only two or three marks away from level 4; I'll concentrate on her. That way I can ensure that our results hit the targets we were set for this year.'

Refreshed and starting anew at Grange, we began by going right back to basics. It meant looking at our children and asking ourselves what kind of people we wanted them to be at the end of their journey at Grange. It was time for the school to look again deep into its heart and rediscover its moral imperative. In my opinion it is vital that any school looking to embark on a transformation agenda must start at the core, the foundations, of its approach, otherwise we end up in a universe of initiatives orbiting like satellites around an already overloaded system. School leaders must find the courage to give the school community time: to resist the pressures of outside agencies to deliver within tight timescales.

True transformation cannot be rushed and must be borne from clarity of vision that becomes a passion so strong that it drives the school and its community through the tough journeys to come.

It is an approach that I can best describe as a distillation of ideas. It is a process I have seen in many successful schools and other organisations and it must start with the development of a truly honest and trusting culture. This, of course, can be tough when you realise that in many of our struggling schools there are some exhausted, and sometimes damaged, staff who are existing on virtually no self-esteem and whose passion has long since evaporated. In so many schools there is such a culture of pressure for progress that there is a danger that we try to implement sweeping reform too quickly, which often leaves many staff behind, confused, scared and angry. The success at Grange was built on a different paradigm: one that was built on conversations, conversations that became increasingly honest and rooted in professional instinct and wider communication. I have long been concerned that we save our best leadership skills for when we engage with the children and forget many when we deal with our adult community. For example, we identify the different needs of individual pupils so that we can meet those needs and so encourage progress, but we don't look at the needs of individual members of staff in the same way.

It is equally important that we don't obsess with knowing what the final structures and models will look like before we begin the process of transformation. I have seen the same mistakes made so often: people want the answers to all the questions before we begin and, in so many ways, that will instantly defeat the culture of innovation and creativity needed to achieve something amazing. So, at Grange, we began our process of distillation by asking abstract questions. For example: How do we turn our school into Disneyland? What would I want to learn if I were 8 years old? How do we sell learning to the children? Why are literacy and numeracy boring?

What is interesting and very exciting is that people respond with enthusiasm and thought because, all of a sudden, the questions are not loaded; they do not have pre-designed answers. There is no right or wrong, which immediately takes so much of the pressure off. Each question at Grange would spark another and another. One of my happiest moments in the early days came when I walked in to the staff room one lunchtime to find the place alive with debate about one of the abstract questions we had thrown in at the staff meeting the night before. It was clear that just by asking questions and provoking debate we had managed to start a process that was leading to greater communication, a growing sense of empowerment and real optimism.

It wasn't long before the second stage of the distillation process had begun to evolve: the generation of ideas and the start of action research. Staff would find that they had common thoughts or ideas and they would start to develop new relationships with people working in different areas of the school. Sometimes

this would happen with people who had worked together before, but on a very superficial level, as there had been a perception that they didn't have a lot in common, that they were different types of teachers. The role of the leadership team was to encourage the development of ideas and see people trial some of their suggestions, beginning a process of action research. What is particularly positive about this is that reticent members of staff don't hold people back, but the invitation is there for all to participate in. Also, it doesn't rely on that stultifying strategy dependent on complete consensus.

Interestingly, more and more people developed into the culture really quickly, meaning that the school had developed a momentum that could be used to take the development further. This then evolved into the third stage of distillation: the sharing of ideas and honest conversations. In many ways this becomes the most difficult stage, as honesty and time are crucial. It is a time when the staff must draw together, celebrate and review their action research, process and progress. What is critical is that staff are honest and generous in their input, sharing both what has worked and what hasn't. It is also vital that staff don't stop at the superficial level but explore why there have been positive or negative outcomes. This leads to a whole new layer of conversation where people share thinking that sparks new ideas and collaborations. This momentum can be harnessed by the leadership team, who must start to take ideas and develop possible strategies, which can lead to the design of whole-school approaches.

What follows is then the ability to marry ideas, projects and thinking into whole-school strategies that can then begin to help redesigning practice and can be evolved into systems. The process at no stage feels like a top-down model of development or implementation, which therefore reduces the level of possible conflict, and increases buy in. At Grange it resulted in a notional five-year development plan being completed in 18 months.

What was clear from the early conversations we had was that we wanted to define our children by their personalities, their skills, their competencies and value, not by the levels they achieved in their tests. I have heard so many teachers say things like, 'Sammy? Oh yes, great kid, level 5 for sure!' What does that tell us about Sammy or why she is a great kid? We wanted to be able to show prospective parents around Grange and, when introducing any of them to our eldest children, say, 'If you bring your child to our school, this is the kind of person they will become.' It was clear to us that to improve our children's education we must first improve their self-esteem and self-worth. So many children who were failing, or who had failed, within our system had done so because they lacked confidence, self-esteem and personal purpose. Most of those children were labelled as 'special needs' and given a diet of more simple work in the hope that they would miraculously make up ground and become 'okay'.

Our conversations really began when we set about developing what we called a 'Learning Profiles Policy'. We started by looking at the children currently in

our highest year group, our 10 and 11 year olds. We wanted to identify what our 'successful' children looked like, how they behaved in different situations, how they handled challenges, problems, interactions with other people, information and technology. We also wanted to identify, in direct contrast, what behaviours our least successful children exhibited. This process helped us to clarify the kind of behaviours we wanted to actively develop among our pupils. By creating a profile for a successful learner at the end of their journey at Grange, we could then break that profile down and build a strategy to actively develop that profile from the time children arrived at Grange, through our nursery facility at 3 years old. We then created a policy that defined what kind of behaviours would need to be developed each year for the children to evolve as learners. The policy was built around the following key questions: What learning strategies are we promoting this year? What opportunities will we provide for developing independence? What key study skills are we developing this year? How will we communicate these targets to the children? How are we going to measure the success? How will we celebrate the successes with the children?

The process made explicit for the first time what was central to our philosophy: that we at Grange were going to concentrate on developing human beings. By creating a new purpose we were able to start to make sense of the curriculum, the new initiatives and the new thinking surrounding child development, because every time we examined an external strategy we were able to ask how it would support the development of our children's learning profiles. Although the policy was quite rough and has since been replaced, it wasn't so much the final document that was important but the process we went through, the conversations, the development of new relationships and of constructive thinking, which was profound.

The next significant stage in our development was to explore how to deliver a curriculum and to design learning experiences which maintained the integrity of the crucial core skills our children needed – reading, writing, numeracy – while creating a vibrant learning experience that the children felt was not only important to them now, but also in the future. We needed to develop a highly-creative approach to overcome the system overload that had blighted Grange for so long. How were we going to create learning Disneyland?

I am a simple soul and one of my shortcomings is that I cannot see structure through a model that represents a series of tributaries: a core with many tendrils snaking from it. I, like so many fellow professionals, had become confused by the system we were being told to work to because it had become such a model. If we were going to develop a more creative curriculum, we would need to create a new, far simpler model. We also needed to define what a creative curriculum was. What we knew was that it couldn't develop as part of the existing system, like an 'add on' or afterthought.

The minute we mention the word 'creativity', particularly in relation to education, we are entering a minefield of misunderstanding; there are many misconceptions

and interpretations. It is perhaps easier to explore what creativity is not in terms of educational development.

I know of schools that claim to be leaders in developing the creative curriculum. They ensure that their children 'do' more art, music, dancing, and drama. They have a 'creativity day' every so often or a 'creativity week' every term. Some schools do 'creativity' every Friday as a treat if the class has worked hard.

It is true that we can find creativity and creative expression in the arts, but 'doing the arts' is not necessarily creative. It also dangerously assumes that creativity is a subject, a simple skill or competency that can be taught and is also the preserve of the arts.

A few years ago, I attended a UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization) conference on Arts Education. It was an extraordinary experience. One of the speakers at the conference was a member of the Japanese delegation. He brilliantly exemplified one of the key problems with the teaching of the arts in our schools. He held up examples of portraits drawn by a class of elementary-age pupils. Many were skillfully rendered and colourful, but they were all essentially the same picture. The teacher had shown them how to do it and had shown them what she wanted, so the children worked faithfully towards a predestined outcome. This is clearly not creative. Neither is teaching children to sing a song in music; it may produce a lovely sound and skilled performers but it is not a creative process.

The big issue, however, is the misunderstanding that the very term 'creativity' in education sparks fears of the freedoms of the 1960s and 1970s and of some kind of non-academic arts fest.

The creative curriculum is a curriculum that is really no different from any other form of curriculum. It contains the same key learning, information, skills, competencies and the outline of knowledge and experiences. The creativity comes from the way it is introduced and developed with the children. In essence, it must be flexible, responsive to need and, most crucially of all, focused on developing children's natural sense of enquiry, hypothesis and investigation. It must be developmental but open-ended enough to allow children to find space and time to feed their imaginations and their thirst to find out new things in new ways, so that it feels constantly fresh and challenging. It must empower the children and ensure that they have a profound sense of ownership. There must be the security and opportunity for them to develop new thinking, new ideas and new directions of enquiry.

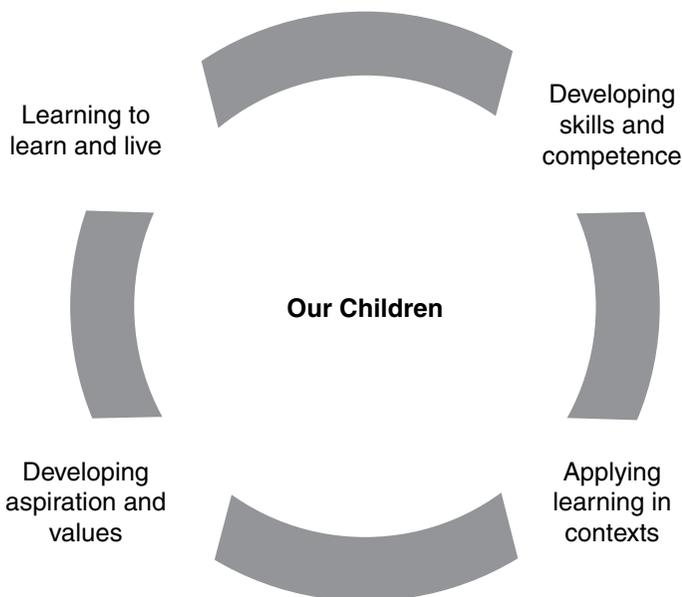
People talk of the challenge of 'developing' creativity as if it were some skill to be learned; the *All Our Futures* report identifies four key characteristics of creativity:

- 1 Thinking or behaving imaginatively.
- 2 Imaginative activity is purposeful; it must be directed to achieving an objective.
- 3 It must generate something original.
- 4 The outcome must be of value to the objective.

These are characteristics that we are born with, so the key aim of developing a curriculum that is creative is to ensure that at its heart is the notion that by helping our children to learn new skills and develop new competencies they will, given a richness of experiences and a climate of discovery, develop a desire for, and acquisition of, new knowledge that will feed their creative process, ensuring that they constantly question, look for new pathways and solutions, think critically and have the confidence to generate fresh ideas.

At Grange we needed a model to make sense of the new process we were hoping to create. It had to conform to the statutory requirements we were working with, but it also had to have a real sense of purpose. Rather than working with the existing model of the National Curriculum as the main river and with strategies, both governmental and broader, being tributaries running off it in a multitude of directions, our model had to be simple and it had to be cyclical. It also had to be a model that was, by its nature, constantly able to evolve. To create a fixed model would immediately render it out of date, in the same way that any National Curriculum finds itself out of date as soon as it is published.

We arrived at a model that had, at its core, the development of our pupils as people and, to that end, it has four key elements:



The Grange Primary School educational process model

Over the next few chapters I will look at the four elements and how they pull together to create a learning experience that meets many of the concerns raised through Section 1 of the book.