



# Tailored to fit

Words **Julie Nightingale**

**Proposals in the secondary curriculum review have a strong bias towards personalised learning. The intention is to inject greater flexibility into a curriculum that has been criticised as stifling**

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's secondary curriculum review heralds more major change for teachers but, unlike some of the other initiatives thrust upon schools in recent years, this one has been broadly welcomed. The existing curriculum of strictly compartmentalised subjects has frequently been criticised as too rigid and is blamed by some for stifling children's enthusiasm for learning at a critical point in their school careers.

The review aims to inject greater flexibility into the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4. Mick Waters, the QCA's curriculum director, said that the broad aim of the review was to focus on how the curriculum should be designed – rather than content – to create a more coherent structure. It could mean linking subjects across the curriculum but also teaching subjects in greater depth, he

said. Overall it could mean a change from the traditional mindset of most schools in which content is "divided up into fragments called a timetable".

Of greatest significance for the assessment world is the review's proposal to make independent and personalised learning much larger features of children's secondary education. Schools will be encouraged to target students who have fallen behind or who are the brightest achievers with extra support. But all pupils will be given a more personalised approach to learning with more choice in what they learn, and more opportunities to develop specialisms and to direct their own learning.

Key here will be the role of Assessment for Learning in enabling teachers to pinpoint the particular needs of individual children and the specific steps they need to take to

progress. The QCA has identified several examples of how the new-look curriculum could work, which is already happening in schools around the country.

Among them is Manor Foundation Business, Enterprise and Sports College in Wednesbury, which has been trialling Assessment for Learning with KS3 pupils.

Sue Hogan, the college's deputy head, welcomes the review's proposals to increase emphasis on independent and personalised learning. Many children arrive in year 7 with low attainment levels and the opportunity to tailor the curriculum more closely to individual needs will benefit them in particular, she says.

"The new emphasis on independent and personalised learning will be marvellous for us. Children can't access KS4 if they have a reading age of 12."

Hogan first introduced the idea of Assessment for Learning in 2003 when she wrote the school's assessment plan.

"Developing children as independent learners means, for us, getting them to assess themselves, to analyse their ways of working, to understand how they can move into their next stage of learning, and to choose the areas of learning that they need to study in order to get them to the result they are aiming for."

Teachers give feedback on the spot, which children like, Hogan says, and they are also told in advance the learning aim of any task they are given to do.

Hogan says: "I think it can be quite

haphazard at secondary school – 'open your book at page 63', that sort of thing. Now every lesson starts with a learning objective and it has enabled children to make sense of what they are learning and why."

Currently, the school is trying to encourage peer and self-assessment with children, getting them to assess each other's work in pairs and groups as well as reflecting on their own work. Hogan says: "They find it much easier to peer assess than to self-assess because they are not used to analysing their own work."

## Reluctance to change

But more problems have arisen with staff. One of the biggest challenges is how to persuade teachers to change practices they have become used to over the years.

"In the past, teachers have been accustomed to saying 'well done' or giving marks out of 10 and the children are passive in that process," Hogan explains. "Now they have to refer back to the programmes of study to give individual students guidance on how to move forward and there has been some resistance."

"Some would find it easier to continue giving marks out of 10 and doing their marking at home. They feel that they don't have the time to give each child separate guidance. But children will learn far better if a teacher gives them the marks and guidance on moving to the next stage while the child is there. Marking at home is actually of limited value."

It is not simply stubborn resistance to change, she acknowledges. There is also a sense among staff that, unless they go home loaded down with books for marking, they are not fulfilling their role.

"We have to move them away from that idea. A tick next to a piece of work doesn't show children how to move to the next stage. Teachers enjoy the professionalism of going home and marking books. If they are helping the child there and then or children are marking each other's books, teachers' perception is that they are taking shortcuts, but that's not true."

More staff development will be needed, says Hogan, to get the message across that the new approach is both more beneficial to students and more efficient.

Since the school began to use Assessment for Learning, exam results have risen steadily, from 22 per cent getting five GCSEs at A-C in 2003 to 42 per cent in 2006, although Hogan stresses that the improvement can't be attributed solely to the new approach.

But in the long term, she believes, Assessment for Learning will make a marked difference to attainment. And, like many teachers and school leaders, she would like to see more reliance on teacher assessment in the classroom and the back of SATs.

"Teachers find them soul-destroying and I have seen children faint doing a SATs English paper. Putting teachers in charge of assessment would be excellent." ■

## The secondary curriculum review

- The broad aim of the QCA's review is to make the secondary curriculum more manageable. There are four key areas:

1. **Organising the curriculum:** personalised learning; a range of teaching and learning experiences, including student-initiated learning; and assessment as a tool in promoting progress.

2. **Curriculum lenses:** offering guidance on developing a curriculum, the role of personal development and embedding personal, learning and thinking skills and functional skills. In part, it reflects demands from employers for people who are literate, numerate, confident with IT, work in teams, have problem-solving abilities, build and maintain relationships, and are adaptable and willing to learn new skills.

3. **Subjects:** featuring revised study programmes at Key Stages 3 and 4.

4. **Curriculum dimensions –** creativity, the global dimension, enterprise and cultural diversity, which teachers will be encouraged to use to link different subjects together thematically.

- The review positions assessment as a tool for promoting progress. It underlines that assessment takes many forms beyond teachers marking written work and stipulates that teachers need to examine how learners will get feedback, whether through discussion, self-assessment or peer assessment.

- It also emphasises that teachers must consider what the assessment is intended to achieve – is it to document achievement, to inform the learner so they know where to go next or is it to gauge the performance of an individual against others? – before opting for a particular form.

- The review also stresses the need for schools to set up systems for collecting evidence and to think about using the same data for several assessment purposes.

- Draft materials on assessment will be available this September. The new curriculum is scheduled to be taught from September 2008.

[www.qca.org.uk/secondarycurriculumreview/index.htm](http://www.qca.org.uk/secondarycurriculumreview/index.htm)