

POLICY WATCH

2007/19

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14 - 19: it's all about the teaching and learning

Fingernails it seems are suffering as the next two big milestones in 14 - 19 development loom. By next month the 361 consortia that bid under the Gateway process to pilot the first wave of Diplomas should know their fate while the Diplomas themselves head off for final scrutiny and accreditation. It's a nervous time all round and headlines are inevitably reflecting some of the tensions. Sometimes it's easy to forget that there's over a year to go before the first pilots begin and over six years to go before the entitlement kicks in. Water and bridge spring to mind.

One group of people watching the next few weeks carefully will be the teachers. The completed Diplomas will offer the first sightings of what they will be expected to teach while the Gateway results will tell them when they will be able to start.

A lot rests on the profession's already laden shoulders. Advance publicity has made it clear that new forms of teaching and learning will accompany the introduction of these Diplomas and become their defining feature. Young people, the Schools Minister told the Select Committee on 31 January, 'are often much more motivated and much more focused on learning and that is to do with the style of learning and the style of teaching.' Last summer the Diplomas were being officially described as "imaginative;" last October the Schools Minister resorted to "exciting" and a month later the Education Secretary went for "thrilling." From imaginative to thrilling in six months, something many of us dream of.

Crucial to any new style of teaching and learning will be what John Bangs of the NUT described as 'a secure pedagogy.' Much of the success of established qualifications, be they 'academic' like A levels or 'vocational' like BTECs is that they have such a pedagogy - an identifiable style of learning and a specialised form of teaching. These things take time to develop and this will be the case for Diplomas but as work goes on to develop the formal three days training for staff this autumn, what are the pedagogic issues that seem to be worrying teachers?

Four have emerged at present; in no particular order these include work experience and work related learning, functional skills, PLTS and personalisation.

The importance of work experience has recently been highlighted in an initial scoping Report from Trident, the organisation with particular expertise in this area. Responses to their consultation indicated a 90%+ satisfaction rating from both learners and employers. 81% of learners learnt new skills and 75% felt it had helped their career choice. Teachers may be worrying whether there will be enough placements but the Trident survey indicated, and this is backed up with CBI evidence, there are still plenty of employers willing to offer places. The two concerns that do appear are firstly, that as the Trident survey indicated, teachers are finding curriculum pressures are leaving them less and less time 'to devote to

preparing and debriefing youngsters' and secondly that as the CBI data indicated, employers would value a more structured dialogue with schools about placements.

On work related learning, the concern seems to lie in the regulation that "at each level, a minimum of 50% of Principal Learning must be concerned with the application of knowledge and understanding through tasks, problems and situations that are related to work in that sector." Setting tasks that have what the guidance calls "the characteristics of real work" may be more difficult if, as further Trident research revealed, "only 25% of teachers have had recent industrial experience." This is surely an instance where collaborative provision comes into play; teachers may not have that expertise but many in FE colleges and training providers do.

On functional skills, three issues seem to be concerning teachers at present; how far to integrate, how to assess and how to fit with GCSE. Many of these issues will be resolved under the trialling and piloting. On integrated v discrete models of teaching, there's no doubt that contextualisation can be very effective but it is interesting to note the noises coming out of the current DfES consultation on Key Stage testing. There the emphasis is on personalised support for those learners struggling with English and maths where the implication is that diagnostic testing, focused support and some discrete teaching are all needed.

On assessment, various models are being trialled. Portfolios appear cumbersome in an electronic age and current interest lies in 'when ready' on line tests and contextualised tasks; recommendations are due shortly. As for the GCSE fit, various models have been considered. It seems that 'alongside but contributing to' is where this is headed but again decisions are awaited before the end of the month.

The importance of PLTS is widely recognised but the issue facing many teachers is how to develop and recognise these skills, particularly where learners may not see the immediate value. The six skills, independent enquirer, self manager and so on, are quite challenging and do not immediately conjure up the image of the average teenager yet opportunities for development will have been mapped into the Principal Learning while the Project and Work Experience provide other obvious vehicles. A notional 60 guided learning hours has been set aside to provide support specifically for the development of those skills that are not contextualised. Initially the concerns may therefore be about familiarisation.

As for personalisation, this too can perhaps best be seen in two aspects. One is structural and is about how far programmes can be tailored around the needs of individuals. Much of this will be to do with local capacity, building on Every Child Matters and other local infrastructure mechanisms to personalise the services around youngster's needs. The development of diagnostic and other learning support services now on offer from awarding bodies will help here.

The other aspect is more classroom based and is the extent to which the teaching and learning itself can be progressively individualised. Personalisation as a concept has at last begun to gain some definition. Over the last few months the 2020 Vision Report has sketched out a long term vision for personalisation, consultation has closed on developing a vision for FE while the launch of the Key Stage 3 curriculum proposals has shown how important personalisation can be. It may remain more of a litmus test than a pedagogy for a while but it is as the Minister said, personalisation is beginning to come out of the clouds and into the classroom.
Sunny days?

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