

NATIONAL GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

2008 Summer Conference Short Report

Whose Curriculum is it anyway?

Saturday 21 June 2008

Wolverhampton Race Course

Please note, the notes taken at the workshops will be written up and posted on the website so that everyone can gain a flavour of what was on offer. Some of the presentations by the afternoon's speakers will also be available.

The Conference began, not with the usual welcome from the Chair, but with a wonderful musical event. This was presented by three teenagers, who are part of Thrift Musical Theatre. Thrift works with young people in and outside of schools. The three performers, Will, Tom and Graham, play accordion and guitar and sing songs composed by one of the group. They have attended QCA conferences around the country and have ended each event with songs written during the day, based upon what they have heard from those attending the event. They began the day with a performance of *Dull Jack*, which well illustrated how frustrating the confines of the curriculum can be.

The Chair, Judith Bennett, followed this splendid performance with the much more ordinary activity of introducing the aims of the day – bringing delegates up to date with changes in the curriculum development process – both things already happening and things anticipated and QCA's drive towards a more flexible curriculum which enables pupils to have a broader and more varied experience. The day was also at pains to show that there should be much to embrace beyond the obvious curriculum and beyond usual classroom practice. The Chair explained that the morning workshop sessions would lead delegates into a variety of options that can provide a wider view of learning that we should all welcome in our schools.

The workshops on offer were *Learning Outside the Classroom*, *Greening your School*, *Digital Creativity*, *Community Cohesion* and *Making Music Happen*, and delegates had the opportunity to attend two workshops, with a refreshments break in between. There was an emphasis on pupils' involvement and *Making Music Happen* gave the opportunity to those attending, with or without any previous experience, to play musical instruments. Listening to comments in the course of the day, it was clear that the workshop sessions were very successful.

After an excellent lunch in the restaurant overlooking the racetrack (no racing provided, but there was a fox to watch for the observant!), the afternoon began with two songs by Thrift. There followed three speakers, Tony Breslin, Chief Executive of the Citizenship Foundation, Mike Briscoe, Programme Director at Becta, and Mick Waters, Director of Curriculum at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. All three commented on the task merely to speak after Thrift's very talented performances, but all three gave both interesting and amusing presentations.

Tony Breslin had just arrive from a morning spent in Leeds at the finals of the Magistrates' Mock Trial competition, in which more than 250 twelve to fourteen year olds had participated. This is an example of the work done by the Citizenship Foundation, and Tony spoke about the need, not to teach Citizenship, but to live it and to make it happen in schools. Inclusion in its widest sense of encouraging participation, he believed, came before achievement and in practice this 'inclusion' improved achievement

The second speaker, Mike Briscoe, talked about the need for parental involvement in children's education and the drive to aid involvement by means of ICT. He mentioned the Government's moves towards home access to ICT for all: the aim is not just to allow parental access to information about their children's progress but also to encourage them to take a positive interest in their children's education by working with them at home. 39% of households are not online and 1.5m pupils have no access at home to a computer. Since the greatest influence on young people between 7 and 16 is that of their parents and 85% of a child's waking time each day is spent outside of school, parental involvement is essential in supporting pupils' educational development. Schools can't do it all.

After Mike's presentation, Thrift gave their last performance – another stunning performance. The Chair summed up the feelings of all in one word – 'Wow!'

The last speaker was Mick Waters. Mick spoke about QCA's working relationship with the young people from Thrift and how impressive they were and then moved on to explain his vision of the curriculum – something to be treasured and valued and something that should be shaped to fit with children's lives. The curriculum should not be a set of unconnected elements. Mick's illustration is worth sharing: if you shop for the ingredients of a salad – tomatoes, lettuce, cucumber, etc – and lay them on the table, you would not expect to eat them as separate items. You would not have '40 minutes of tomatoes, then 40 minutes of cucumber and then double onions'. The mix was important. In the same way schemes of work were not to be seen as prescriptive: they were ingredients to be combined and selected from, to make an agreeable 'meal' or educational experience. Mick also asked about what kind of governors we wanted to be. He offered four 'models' – sleeping partners, uncritical lovers, hostile witnesses and critical friends. What we need to be, as we all know, are critical friends – to support and appreciate but to challenge and ask questions too so that we can help to ensure the best educational experience for our students.

What gave all the appearances of a most successful day ended with the Chair's very sincere thanks to all who had participated – workshop leaders, facilitators and note-takers, organisers, speakers and, of course, Thrift, for all they had contributed to the day, and to delegates for giving up yet another Saturday.

Judith Bennett
23 June 08