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11. Nuffield Primary Design & Technology – A Brief History

Introduction

This chapter charts the history of the Nuffield Primary Design & Technology Project since its inception in 1996. It will describe four phases of activity:

- Phase 1 development, in which the approach to teaching and learning was devised and piloted with independent external evaluation in a variety of schools, and the first website was developed.
- Phase 2 publication and dissemination, in which the results of the evaluation were used to inform the content and design of the published materials and a revised website became a major vehicle for dissemination.
- Phase 3 after care, in which the project concentrated on working with various groups concerned with supporting the growth of primary Design & Technology in schools in England and contributed to the technology curricula in other countries, including those in the rest of the United Kingdom.
- Phase 4 recent developments involving the increasing importance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and putting this in the context of the Rose Review of the primary school curriculum.

Phase 1 Development

In the mid 1990s it was widely acknowledged that many primary school teachers found Design & Technology alien with regard to the established concerns and culture of the primary school. Design & Technology subject reports from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) indicated that although some good practice could be found it was rare and that most primary school teachers were struggling in their attempts to teach Design & Technology (Office for Standards in Education 1995, 1996).

Lack of non-teaching time for D&T co-ordinators, cramped accommodation, large group sizes and insufficient resources hinder attainment and progress and limit coverage of the Programme of Study. Whilst there continues to be small improvements in specialist facilities and resources for D&T, provision in nearly one-third of schools falls short of what is required for the National Curriculum. (Ofsted, 1995, p. 8)

Standards in Design & Technology continue to improve in both Key Stages 1 and 2 although they remain lower than in most other subjects. (Ofsted, 1996, p. 1)
Many teachers are not sure what to assess or how to assess their pupils’ attainment and progress in Design & Technology. As a result, in nearly half of schools, teachers are unable to plan activities which build successfully on earlier knowledge, or provide a programme which supports the progressive development of skills. … Few teachers have any initial training in Design & Technology and arrangements for in-service professional development are generally inadequate. This results, overall, in low levels of teacher expertise. (Ofsted, 1996, p. 2)

In the autumn of 1996 the Nuffield Foundation Trustees agreed to allocate £150,000 to a first exploratory phase of a project designed to consider Design & Technology in the primary curriculum. This first phase, lasting one year, was required to explore the prevailing situation. The objectives of the project were to develop approaches to teaching and learning Design & Technology that were appropriate for the primary school and, in the second phase of the project, to produce associated resources that would enable primary teachers to be effective in the classroom. It was agreed that this effectiveness would involve meeting the needs of subject leaders who have the responsibility for training their colleagues and convincing head teachers of the value of Design & Technology. The third phase would be concerned with dissemination and training. David Barlex (Figure 1) was appointed Project Director. Although he had extensive experience of Design & Technology through his work on the highly successful Nuffield Secondary Design & Technology Project, it was particularly important to avoid secondary education assumptions in developing a primary school project. To ensure that secondary education thinking did not unduly influence the project Jane Mitra (Figure 2) was appointed as Co-director. Jane had extensive primary school experience and was a nationally acknowledged expert in the use of ICT in Design & Technology. Nina Towndrow (Figure 3) was appointed Project Administrator and was responsible for diary management, meetings organisation, financial management, production of trial materials and maintaining the project website. In the light of the progress made in the first phase the Trustees agreed funding for a further three years in the autumn of 1997.

Figures 1 and 2. David Barlex and Jane Mitra – the project directors for the Nuffield Primary Design & Technology project.