

# Creating a curriculum with culture at its core

We don't always question why we teach certain things, but a curriculum review provides the perfect opportunity to do just that. **Lesley Saddington** discusses the steps she took.

IT was a bold and, depending on your point of view, controversial move. Tasked by former head teacher Lascelles Haughton with redesigning the curriculum, Lesley Saddington dropped a topic taught at her school for more than 20 years.

"The Great Fire of London is a great subject, and I had taught it for five years in year 2, but we felt it wasn't really relevant for our children," explains Lesley. "We might expect children to feel like they belong to a city like London, but often they don't feel like they're Londoners."

Half of the pupils at Holy Trinity Church of England Primary School, in south London, where Lesley is assistant head, have English as an additional language. A high proportion are Portuguese and Spanish speaking. Three quarters are of Black African-Caribbean heritage.

Introducing a curriculum reflecting the pupils' cultural and socio-economic backgrounds – many come from low-income homes – was a priority. As important, of course, was making sure topics were interesting and engaging.

"We also wanted to broaden and deepen learning because we felt some

of the foundation subjects had not been taught as well as the core subjects," explains Lesley. "Our aim was also to look more in-depth at the long-term picture – the skills, knowledge and attributes the children will need when they go onto secondary and into the jobs market, to enable them to be successful."

That was in 2018. Then the work began. Topics were reviewed and taken apart, elements of some kept – just one aspect of Ancient Egypt, the River Nile, is now studied – while others, such as the Great Fire of London, were dropped.

Children were asked what they

## HOW I... DEVELOPED A NEW CURRICULUM

- Curriculum audit – what works, what doesn't? Does it fit our pupils? What's important for our parents, for the whole school community?
- Inform parents and carers the curriculum is changing.
- Staff meetings to discuss: what are our children's barriers to success? What type of curriculum will eradicate these barriers?
- Develop and build a profile of a year 6 pupil, as a learner and a citizen (led by the school council team).
- Research common school themes for the



Lesley Saddington

curriculum – link to skills/knowledge/disposition = learning goals.

- We want our children to be able to:
  - analyse/hypothesise/predict
  - obtain meaningful knowledge in depth
  - develop critical thinking skills
  - be able to reflect, evaluate and assess
  - develop oracy and debating skills
  - develop a passion and curiosity for learning.
- Whole school assembly on what new topics children would like to learn. Plus a workshop in class, teaching staff share their wish list.
- Whole school staff decided on the framework for the structure.



Lesley Saddington has revised the curriculum to make the topics more relevant to her students

wanted to learn about, what interested them. Teachers, who like parents and governors were also given a say, held workshops with children to find out.

Dinosaurs, technology, filmmaking and special effects now all have a place on the curriculum, which took a year to plan. A term is given to The power of the arts, where children learn about animation in reception, classical music in year 1, ballet in year 2, filmmaking in year 3, architecture in year 4, fine art in year 5 and drama and the performing arts in year 6.

"We were conscious of improving our children's cultural capital. They've loved learning more about the arts," says Lesley. "Our country is so skilled in the arts but in schools that's now really shut down."

The power of the arts is one of six pathways in the new curriculum. The other five are: journeys through time, place and mind; in the beginning; let's discover; the world within London and healthy living, healthy minds.

Starting in reception, the journey through time, place and mind pathway begins with children finding out more about their family and identity, then in year 1 they head into nearby Brixton on a quest to find out Is Brixton a cool place to live? As they move through their time at Holy Trinity, children's learning broadens from a study of their neighbourhood to the wider world, the contribution of the

Windrush generation in London, ending in year 6 with a focus on the concepts of freedom and slavery.

Notable Black figures are included, among them African-American aviator Bessie Coleman, who is studied in the year 2 topic how flying changed our lives. And in year 6 pupils learn about Olaudah Equiano, a west African slave who went on to become a writer and then abolitionist in the US and Britain. "We wanted to give children positive role models," explains Lesley.

Thinking about the curriculum content and its relevance has been paired with a fresh approach to delivery. Teaching is more creative too. Teachers' questions are more open-ended, their lessons more interactive. Topics begin with a question and then children launch their 'lines of enquiry', which often take them outside of the classroom, and into their neighbourhood and beyond.

"The more learning we have outside school, the more the children are able to remember. It's immersive and a much more rounded way of learning," Lesley believes. "It contextualises learning and it makes it more meaningful."

It also builds independent learning, helping children develop early some of the skills they will need in later life, she says, adding that problem-solving topped a recent list of the skills sought by the

## "CHILDREN ARE INTERESTED FROM THE VERY START"



Head David Winn

DROPPING a topic about a major historical event might raise an eyebrow in certain parts of the education world, but even if I had been here at the time (David joined the school in March) I would have backed that decision absolutely.

It is a very popular topic, but it feels so far away, and we were finding at times that children weren't engaged. Behaviour for learning was suffering because some of the topic content wasn't engaging for them or relevant. Children are now learning about things that they know and care about. The leadership team tell me the curriculum has had a massive impact on behaviour for learning. Children want to learn because they're interested from the very start.

As long as we are covering the appropriate skills and knowledge that the children require, there are a plethora of ways you can teach and deliver them.

world's top 20 CEOs, while creativity and collaboration were also prized.

It is just over a year since the new curriculum was introduced and work in the topic books is much broader. There have been improvements in vocabulary, says Lesley, with children using more tier 3 words, such as empire and immigration, rather than just everyday tier 2.

There are fewer problems with behaviour and disengagement, too.

"Teachers say the children are really immersed in their work," smiles Lesley.