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# WHERE WILL I DO MY PINEAPPLES?

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*The little book of building  
a whole new school*

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Gill Kelly Edited by Ian Gilbert



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Crown House Publishing Limited  
[www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk) - [www.crownhousepublishing.com](http://www.crownhousepublishing.com)

First published by

Crown House Publishing Ltd  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
www.crownhouse.co.uk

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC  
6 Trowbridge Drive, Suite 5, Bethel, CT 06801, USA  
www.crownhousepublishing.com

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First published 2011.

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**British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

A catalogue entry for this book is available  
from the British Library.

**Print ISBN 978-184590696-2**

**Kindle ISBN 978-184590761-7**

**ePub ISBN 978-184590762-4**

**LCCN 2011925282**

Printed and bound in the UK by  
Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion



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## **Introduction: Don't Let the Bean Counters Take Over!**

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*When I heard the news, I literally let out a scream of joy and hugged the nearest person. This happened to be the other deputy head, Steve Richards, but if it had been anyone else I would have done just the same.*

*Nailsea School had just been given the news that we had been allocated £32 million as part of the government's Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme to rebuild our ageing 1959 school. But don't get me wrong. It wasn't just about the money. For too long the buildings of this large secondary school in the south-west had dictated the teaching that went on in the classrooms, often with scant regard for the learning. The campus was made up of 'boxes' of a uniform nature of the sort you may well see if you are a teacher reading this at school and look out of your window. There was a regulation assembly hall, sports hall, school playing field and everything else you would expect from a late 1950's school. As a result, a nineteenth century, broadly didactic form of pedagogy prevailed.*

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*But now the school was being given the chance to transform learning, and we were going to grab it with both hands.*

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So began the three-year process that led to us moving into our shiny new building in September 2009; three years of hard work that resulted in a resounding success story in terms of academic achievement and community building and a rapturous response from staff, students and parents. What was our secret? In a nutshell, we had been radical in our vision, firm in demanding adherence to our moral purpose and quick on our feet when it came to problem solving.

Easy to say now, but a great deal harder to achieve when you are in the thick of it and the clock is ticking.

It is all too common, when faced with a build project, for schools to focus on details like the number of rooms needed, the length of cable required for ICT and the best furniture for the school canteen – and to do all of this *before* you have even considered the nature of learning and how it can be enhanced by a new environment and the technology in it.

Too many schools are still making this mistake. When we began our project in September 2006, Nailsea was in the second wave of the BSF roll-out. However, although we saw sparkling new schools in beautifully landscaped surroundings from the first wave, we did not witness a radical approach to learning being promoted through the build programme.

## Introduction

My challenge, as part of a team, was to transform learning and, as far as I was concerned, I would not settle for anything less. This required a great deal of input from all the key stakeholders – governors, teachers, students, parents, the education authority and, importantly, the leaders of the wider community. However, this was to be not a school designed by committee, but one that took the views of a wide range of people, turned them into a vision and used that as the backbone for the entire project.

If I had to identify one element that was the key to the success of the project – from the design and erection of the new building to the choice and installation of the ICT equipment – it was this: keep the human element uppermost in all discussions and at all times. This is very easy to lose sight of when you are discussing how many RJ45 sockets you want in the school and the perceived merits of either Cat 5 or Cat 6 cabling. Which is where I came in.

As deputy head in charge of curriculum and standards my role during the build project was not only to contribute to the design stages but also, more importantly, to represent the school's vision for learning, especially in the ICT contract element of the project. As a self-confessed 'non-techie', this was no mean feat. Entering the world of ICT was a bit like being parachuted into a foreign country in the middle of a civil war, in the dark, with no torch, no map and no ability to speak the language. In fact, one of the very first things I had to do was to find an 'inter-

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preter' who could translate the technospeak. Only then could I actually start the job of designing the school.

This book is a result of my sink-or-swim experience – an opportunity to share what I learned with colleagues who find themselves in a similar situation, in the hope that I can help you to avoid some of the mistakes we made, as well as enabling you to take on board our successes and adapt these for your own school.

It is aimed primarily at senior leaders engaged in a rebuild or refurbishment programme and focuses on a range of strategic issues that you will need to get right, each one followed by a checklist of do's and don'ts. Think of it as a guidebook for your own voyage of discovery where, apart from finding out about the nature of a complex build programme with multiple funding streams and 'competitive dialogues', you will also discover much about yourself, what you stand for and what kind of leader you are.

You will be challenged to think differently and you will need to encourage others to think differently too; you must take these people with you (or nearly all of them) on their own journey to make what is on paper and in your heads become a reality. In fact, if you get to the end of a three-year educational build programme and you have not challenged yourself in these areas, then you will have failed.

In the same way that a building needs a foundation, a change process needs a structure and the one that worked well for us was the stages of human evolution designed





## Chapter 5

# I Think It Went OK but Not Really Good

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*Big Owl continued. 'Nothing,' he said, 'nothing is more dangerous than an oak when it is the only oak you have. If you try to solve the problem with the first right answer that comes your way, then there is no guarantee that you'll be solving it with the best right answer. You have to come up with as many right answers as you can and then – and this is the gilded rule of problem solving – evaluate second. You should fly narrow only once you have flown broad.*

*Ian Gilbert, Little Owl's Book of Thinking*

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If asked, most people could list at least one or two individuals who have made an impact on their professional lives. For me, Mick Waters is one of those people. I first heard him speak at a Leading Aspect conference in Manchester where our school was receiving an award in Active Citizenship. As I watched and listened to Mick speak, I noticed that he was presenting entirely without notes and, to my amazement, actually included young

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people in his talk where they spoke for themselves about their learning. He also referred to learning throughout his presentation; a refreshing departure from the constant focus on targets and processes from other people at the top of the heap.

When, in 2007, I heard that he had taken the job of Director of Curriculum at QCA I was delighted. It coincided, of course, with our school build programme, so it was a heady cocktail of dynamism and moral imperative that drove us to develop our new curriculum and approach to learning. Mick had given the curriculum back to the teachers, and there was real sense of freedom that we had not had before.

In Chapter 1 I described the school's Learning Manifesto and the way in which we had decided to construct our own language for learning after examining a whole range of teaching and learning approaches. It was a quote from Carl Rogers and Jerry Freiberg in *Freedom to Learn* that most struck a chord with me:

*I believe that all teachers and educators prefer to facilitate experiential, meaningful, whole person type of learning rather than the nonsense syllable type. When we combine certain elements into one scheme – a prescribed curriculum, similar assignments for all students, lecturing as almost the only mode of instruction, standard tests that externally evaluate all students, instructor-chosen grades as the measure of learning – then we can almost guarantee that meaningful learning will be at an absolute minimum.*

*(Rogers and Freiburg, 1983: 37)*

## I Think It Went OK but Not Really Good

How, then, was I going to engage all of the staff in an exploration of what learning was? We had a golden opportunity to create a change in culture and ethos at Nailsea School, so how would we do it?

While all of the educational models I had examined had been proven to work, staff felt they wanted to utilise their own expertise and establish a model of learning that was not ready-made – rather like all the other aspects of the BSF journey up to this point.

As a deputy head in charge of curriculum and teaching and learning, I was encouraged by this. So, buoyed up by the Curriculum Review led by Mick Waters and the QCA, and with a mandate from the staff to explore thoroughly a new way of doing things, I strove forward into uncharted territory, feeling like a true pioneer. The Curriculum Tree (overleaf), which originated in QCA materials designed to help schools focus on the important ingredients for effective curriculum design, sums up my approach. Instead of just focusing on the knowledge required to pass exams, I also wanted to raise the importance of attitudes to learning as well as specific learning skills.

At the same time that developments were taking place at a national and school level, the local authority was adopting a county-wide model of teaching and learning called ‘Critical Skills’. All primary schools in the Nailsea area had been trained in this pedagogical approach, so I invited the proponents of the strategy to our school to begin the process of exploration. The advisors we worked with, Tim and Andrea Sully, are two of the best authority

# WHERE WILL I DO MY PINEAPPLES?

is not about a new building, it is about building a whole new school and the struggle, against all odds, to keep people and learning at the centre of the whole project.

It's about how to manage change and deal with the pressures of the day job at the same time. Perhaps more significantly, it's about people and the potential to change thousands of lives.

Written from the perspective of a senior leader, with many amusing and bizarre stories, this book describes how to keep sound educational principles at the heart of a project to build a new school.

*"This book shows us the importance of vision, bravery and the human touch in making lasting sustainable change to the way a school is run."*

Andy Colley, Advanced Skills Teacher.

*"I would recommend this book to anyone in school management, not just those involved in building a new school site. The nuggets of wisdom in the appendix are almost worth buying the book for on their own."*

Jane Werry, Director of Music & Lead Teacher, Hayes School

During **Gill Kelly's** career in the educational sector she has worked in an inner city school in Swindon and two large 11-18 schools in North Somerset before becoming the principal at The City Academy, Bristol. Her previous role, as deputy head teacher of Nailsea School in North Somerset, gave her the opportunity to provide the ICT solution for the school rebuild under the BSF (Building Schools for the Future) project.



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[www.crownhousepublishing.com](http://www.crownhousepublishing.com)

ISBN 978-184590696-2



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