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## **Curriculum Beyond Constraint: Stakeholder Perspectives on Innovation and Autonomy in a Free School**

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### ***Abstract***

Free schools in the UK, like international ones, were established to promote autonomy, innovation, and diversity in education. This case study explores how one such school in the South of England, leveraged these freedoms to co-construct a distinctive and socially just curriculum. Data collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with school leaders, teachers, trustees, and parents was analysed thematically and revealed how leadership, curriculum design, and the hidden curriculum intersect to support holistic development, equity, and community cohesion. Particular attention is paid to how extended opportunities in the arts, sport, and enrichment activities contribute to cultural capital and wellbeing. The findings reveal that shared leadership and inclusive governance structures have enabled sustained innovation, rooted in a clear values framework and strong parental engagement. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Dewey, Freire, and Bourdieu, the study illustrates how autonomy, when combined with reflective, community-based practice, can produce meaningful and contextually relevant educational outcomes. The school exemplifies an approach to innovation that balances academic rigour with care, creativity, and stakeholder voices. The paper concludes by discussing implications for policy and practice, offering a conceptual model for inclusive curriculum leadership in the context of school reform.

### ***Keywords:***

Free schools; curriculum innovation; autonomy; stakeholder engagement; holistic education

## ***Introduction***

Free schools in England and Wales are state-funded but independently run, enjoying autonomy over curriculum, staffing, and finances (DfE, 2014a; Higham, 2014a). Having autonomy positions them uniquely to deviate from traditional educational norms and experiment with innovative educational practices (Greany 2016; Wiborg, 2018). This case study explores how one free school in England has leveraged curricular freedom to foster creativity and innovation, focusing on the role of stakeholder voices; leaders, teachers, and parents, in shaping these changes (Ball, 2012; Fullan, 2016). It responds to Greany's (2016) call to reframe educational innovation by addressing three key tensions: the importance of balancing both *professional* and *structural* autonomy; the influence of vertical accountability mechanisms on how parents perceive and value innovation; and the challenge of securing legitimacy for innovative practices among key stakeholders. Quasi-market models, premised on school autonomy, parental choice, and vertical accountability, have often been promoted as the best means to drive innovation; however, evidence of their success remains limited. Focusing on adult stakeholders; leaders, teachers, trustees, and parents—this paper explores how their perspectives and agency shape curriculum innovation. The school at the heart of the study, opened in 2012 and fully established as an all-through institution by 2020, maintains a strong focus on academic excellence and holds high aspirations for all students, irrespective of background. Through its inclusive ethos and commitment to holistic development, the school offers an insightful case of how autonomy can be leveraged to pursue both excellence and equity. The core question asked is: *How has this free school exercised its curricular freedom to drive innovation, as seen through the perspectives of key stakeholders?*

## ***Curriculum Innovation***

Unlike traditional schools, free schools are not required to follow the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014b), enabling them to tailor learning to students' needs. This freedom aims to encourage innovation, diversity, and parental choice (Gunter, 2011). However, research suggests many free schools underuse this liberty, especially in curriculum development (Finch et al., 2014). Curriculum innovation involves introducing new content and pedagogies into teaching (Fullan, 2016; Kelly, 2009) and benefits from stakeholder involvement throughout planning and implementation (Fullan, 2016; Littlefair et al., 2023). The original Free School policy emphasized “innovation, diversity, and flexibility” (House of Commons Hansard, 2010), intending curricular freedom to rethink education for 21st-century learners. If this autonomy is underused, it raises questions about the policy's impact and the role of stakeholder agency. The curriculum places equal emphasis on music, sport, and a wide range of extracurricular activities alongside core subjects such as English, mathematics,

and science. These activities are not treated as add-ons but as integral extensions of the formal curriculum, reflecting evidence that participation in extracurricular programmes can enhance academic achievement (Broh, 2002). Through an extended school day, the use of specialist teachers, and strong community partnerships, the school embodies a holistic educational approach, one that fosters wellbeing, identity, and social participation. This aligns with John Dewey's vision of education as extending beyond academic attainment to support the full development of the child (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970; Priestley & Biesta, 2013). It views education as cultivating the whole child beyond standardized tests (Bates & Lewis, 2012; Bialik et al., 2015). While this paper focuses on the influence of adult stakeholders in curriculum innovation, a complementary paper (in press) will explore how *pupil voice* contributes to shaping curriculum and learning experiences within the same free school context. Examined through the method of photo-voice and a mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011), the extent to which students' perspectives are heard, valued, and acted upon, offers a more complete picture of participatory curriculum development in autonomous school settings.

Empirical research on the pedagogical practices within free schools remains limited, particularly in assessing whether their claimed innovations meaningfully enhance parental choice or lead to improved academic and social outcomes for pupils (Wiborg et al., 2018). Against this backdrop, this article examines how and why stakeholders at a free school in the South East of England have used their curricular autonomy to design an innovative programme that foregrounds foundation subjects such as music and sport, areas frequently marginalised in accountability-driven systems (Baer & Garrett, 2010; Hargreaves et al., 2023). Research is increasingly recognising the value of a broad and balanced curriculum, not only for academic development but for fostering creativity, engagement, and holistic growth (Alexander & Flutter, 2009; Hallam, 2010; Robinson and Aronica, 2015). By foregrounding voices of parents, teachers, and leaders, this study offers insights into how curricular autonomy can create inclusive, responsive, and innovative education. It adds to research examining how policy freedoms translate, or fail to translate, into meaningful change (DfE, 2014a; Greany, 2018; Littlefair et al., 2023). We adopted a qualitative case study approach, using document analysis, interviews with staff, and observational data to examine how curriculum decisions reflect principles of innovation and social justice. The case study method was selected for its strength in generating rich, contextually grounded insights and for its capacity to explore complex social phenomena as they unfold in real-life educational settings (Creswell, 2014; Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). Freire's (1970/1996) concept of conscientisation, emphasising critical reflection, dialogue, and learner agency, served as an analytical lens to evaluate the extent to which the school transcends passive models of instruction in favour of a democratic, student-centred ethos.

The school's emphasis on the 'hidden curriculum' (the implicit transmission of values, norms, and social behaviours) reflects Jackson's (1968) foundational work and aligning with contemporary priorities around the 21st-century '4Cs': critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (Bialik et al., 2015). These elements were explored through stakeholder perspectives on culture, relationships, and broader educational aims. By applying these theoretical lenses, the study critically evaluates how the school's curriculum fosters not only academic growth but also the holistic, equitable development of socially conscious learners.

### ***Free Schools***

Free schools are state-funded but independently run institutions operating outside local authority control. Drawing inspiration from Sweden's *friskolor* and North American charter schools, they were introduced under the UK Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition government in 2010 with aims to enhance diversity, innovation, and parental choice within state education (Higham; Wiborg et al., 2018, 2014a). By 2023, over 650 free schools in England educate more than 350,000 pupils, evidencing the programme's expanding role in the educational landscape (Gov.UK, 2023). In the UK, the Coalition's *Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010) positioned free schools as mechanisms to raise standards and foster innovation, especially in disadvantaged areas. These schools, established by parents, teachers, and community groups, were distinctly defined as new entities rather than conversions, differentiating them from academies, and thereby granted curricular and pedagogical autonomy, including freedom from the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014a; Higham, 2014b). Cirin (DfE, 2014a) highlights that this autonomy, paired with accountability, holds promise for improved performance, particularly when innovation in teaching and learning is prioritised; an approach aligned with global discourses on market-driven education reform and school choice (Greany, 2018; Wiborg et al., 2018).

The free school model has however attracted critical scrutiny concerning its impact on equity, educational outcomes, and systemic coherence. The evidence for sustained improvements in academic achievement and social inclusion remains inconclusive (Morris & Perry, 2019; Wiborg et al., 2018). Critics warn that opening new schools can lead to duplicated provision and unnecessary surplus places, especially in areas where student demand is stable or declining (Finch et al., 2014; Higham, 2014a). Concerns also focus on social equity, with research suggesting that middle-class families disproportionately benefit from free schools due to their greater capacity to navigate complex admissions and choice processes, potentially reinforcing segregation along socio-economic and ethnic lines (Bunar, 2008; Morris & Perry, 2019).

Moreover, some free schools replicate traditional pedagogies, challenging claims of curriculum and pedagogical innovation (Greany, 2018; Wiborg et al., 2018). In contrast to academies that usually involve the conversion of existing schools, free schools are established entirely from the ground up. This offers potential for distinct curricular visions and novel pedagogical approaches, but entails greater uncertainty and challenges in establishing effective practices without established community ties or reputations (DfEa, 2014; Higham, 2014b; Littlefair, et al., 2023). The free school programme exemplifies a neoliberal shift towards decentralised, market-based governance in education (Ball, 2012; Hodgson, 2012). Yet, this model raises important questions about democratic accountability and the implications of removing schools from local authority oversight (Gunter, 2011; Higham, 2014b). Additionally, the focus on innovation is often insufficiently supported by rigorous, systematic evaluation, limiting opportunities to identify and scale effective practices (Greany, 2018). In response, there are calls for strengthened transparency, clearer definitions and measures of curriculum innovation, and safeguards to ensure equity within the free school sector. Without such frameworks, the risk remains that the programme prioritises institutional autonomy and parental preference over educational coherence and social justice (Priestley & Biesta, 2013; Wiborg et al., 2018).

### ***Innovative Practice***

Innovation in education can be universally understood as the introduction and implementation of new ideas or methods that transform established practices, enhancing learning experiences and improving outcomes for all learners (Fullan, 2016; Robinson and Aronica, 2015;). It involves doing things differently in ways that challenge traditional norms and lead to meaningful improvements (Peck, n.d.). An early Department for Education (DfE, 2014a) evaluation of free schools found that 57% of free schools reported running an extended school day, while 81% of respondents believed they offered something innovative in their curriculum delivery. Specific examples of innovation identified in the study included adopting alternative curricula distinct from the National Curriculum, developing unique school ethos or pedagogical styles, creating opportunities for pupils' personal development, employing specialist teachers for certain subjects, introducing additional subjects beyond the statutory framework, and lengthening the school day to provide more learning time (DfE, 2014a, p.17). Such innovations align with broader conceptualisations of school autonomy enabling tailored pedagogical approaches responsive to local contexts and learner needs (Greany, 2018; Higham, 2014b). However, scholars caution that claims of innovation must be critically examined, as some practices labelled 'innovative' may reflect incremental rather than transformative changes (Biesta, 2010; Graffino, 2015).

Moreover, the relationship between innovation and improved outcomes is complex and contingent on factors such as implementation fidelity, staff capacity, and wider system support (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves et al., 2014). In the context of free schools, innovation is often positioned as a core justification for their autonomy and distinctiveness (DfE, 2014a; Wiborg et al., 2018). Yet the transformative potential of such innovation depends on whether it fosters democratic participation, social justice, and holistic development rather than simply offering market-driven parental choice or superficial pedagogical change (Apple, 2004; Biesta, 2010). The case study described here highlights the importance of critically examining if and how free schools' innovative practices empower marginalized learners and contribute to more equitable education systems that transform curricular for 21<sup>st</sup> century learners (Greany, 2018; Morris & Perry, 2019).

### ***An Innovative Curriculum***

The UK education system has evolved from a divided structure to a formally integrated, yet still fragmented, comprehensive model (Bunar, 2008). Within this context, national policy increasingly positions innovation as essential to educational reform and economic growth. Greany (2018) argues that schools must adopt innovative curriculum and pedagogical practices to prepare learners for the complexities of a diverse, technologically advanced world—a view echoed in international discourse (OECD, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2020). Innovation in education spans three levels: curriculum design by leaders, classroom practice by teachers, and mindset development in students (Williamson & Payton, 2009). Developing 21st-century competencies—Creativity, Critical Thinking, Communication, and Collaboration—is essential for meaningful learning and societal participation (Bialik et al., 2015; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Embedding these “4Cs” into curricula ensures relevance and equips learners for real-world challenges (Saavedra & Opfer, 2012). These imperatives are particularly salient as the UK undertook a Curriculum and Assessment Review to modernise learning for students aged 5–19 (Gov.UK, 2024), reflecting a global shift toward learner-centred, flexible education. However, despite their intended purpose, many free schools have struggled to realise meaningful innovation. Wiborg et al. (2018) report that inspection pressures and institutional isolation often stifle experimentation. Greany (2018) identifies the core challenge as balancing autonomy, accountability, and professional capacity. Without strong leadership, teacher development, and supportive evaluation, innovation risks becoming fragmented or unsustainable (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves et al., 2014).

## *Policy Implications*

The drive for innovation in free schools and the wider education system brings critical policy challenges. While the free school programme promotes autonomy and decentralisation, reflecting neoliberal priorities of choice and competition (Ball, 2012; Gunter, 2011), this shift complicates efforts to ensure equitable access, quality, and coherence across schools. A central tension lies between autonomy and accountability. Although free schools are designed to innovate, inspection frameworks like OFSTED can inadvertently limit creativity (Greany, 2018; Wiborg et al., 2018). To support meaningful innovation, accountability must evolve beyond narrow metrics to include qualitative indicators of student engagement, curriculum relevance, and holistic development (Biesta, 2010; Priestley & Biesta, 2013). Importantly, innovative curricula foster not just academic achievement but also the "hidden curriculum", the implicit teaching of values, social norms, and life skills (Jackson, 1968). These "softer skills" such as resilience, collaboration, and ethical reasoning are increasingly seen as essential for lifelong learning (Johnson-Mardones, 2015). Equity remains a pressing concern. Research shows that school choice can reinforce social segregation, as advantaged families are better positioned to navigate the system (Bunar, 2008; Morris & Perry, 2019). Safeguards such as fair admissions, targeted support, and community outreach are essential to prevent innovation from deepening inequality (Gorard & See, 2013; Reay, 2017). Innovation also depends on teacher capacity and leadership. Professional development and collaborative school cultures are key to sustaining change (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves et al., 2014). Policies should invest in continuous learning and support structures that empower educators to experiment and share best practices (Stoll et al., 2006; Vescio et al., 2008). System coherence is equally vital. Without coordination, the growth of autonomous schools risks duplication, inefficiency, and misalignment with national priorities (Higham, 2014a). Building networks across schools can help share innovation, ensure consistency, and uphold shared goals (Greany & Higham, 2018; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). The current Curriculum and Assessment Review (Gov.UK, 2024) offers a timely chance to embed innovation more systematically. Policymakers should support greater curricular flexibility that responds to local contexts, while also establishing clear, evidence-based frameworks for evaluating impact, striking a balance between local autonomy and system-wide accountability (Schleicher, 2018). Transparent evaluations can guide the scaling of effective practices and avoid repeating ineffective ones (Fullan, 2016). In sum, policy must strike a careful balance, between innovation and equity, autonomy and accountability, local flexibility and system-wide coherence. Evidence-informed, inclusive policymaking is key to ensuring that innovation benefits all learners. To explore what this balance might look like in practice, the following section builds on the work of educational theorists John Dewey

(1916, 1938) and Paulo Freire (1970, 1996), examining how innovative curriculum frameworks can support the holistic development of learners.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Exploring whether conditions within one free school support an innovative and socially just curriculum and guided by Lattuca and Stark's (2009) broad definition of curriculum as an "academic plan" encompassing purpose, content, pedagogy, and evaluation, we drew on Dewey's (1916, 1938) view of education as experiential and socially grounded, Freire's (1970/1996) emphasis on participatory, transformative learning, and Bourdieu's (1986) theories of cultural capital and social reproduction. John Dewey (1916) famously called for education to "get out of its isolation and secure the organic connection with social life" (p. 29). This idea remains highly relevant to contemporary curriculum re-thinking, especially in the 21st century where the future is uncertain and rapidly changing. Dewey emphasized that education should prepare students not only by transmitting knowledge but by cultivating effective habits, adaptability, and the capacity to "learn how to learn" (Dewey, 1938). Central to Dewey's philosophy is the concept that learners become collaborators with peers and teachers, actively constructing knowledge through inquiry and problem-solving across diverse contexts (Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p.13). However, this approach to pedagogy is often seen as risky or challenging within today's results-driven, high-stakes assessment environment, and tends to be more established in early years education than in upper primary or secondary settings (Biesta, 2010; Klenowski, 2017). Despite the dominance of market-oriented education policies emphasizing standardization and accountability (Ball, 2012; Gunter, 2011), models of progressive pedagogy inspired by Dewey's ideas continue to thrive in some schools (Bates & Lewis, 2012). The free school in this study explicitly rejects what Paulo Freire (1970/1996) termed the 'banking concept of education', where "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those they consider to know nothing" (p. 65). Instead, this school embraces active learner participation, fostering dialogue and critical engagement, aligning with Freire's concept of *conscientisation*—a process of developing critical awareness that situates education within the social, cultural, and political realities of learners and educators alike (Aubrey & Riley, 2016, p.131; Freire, 1970/1996). For school leaders, *conscientisation* acts as a catalyst in decision-making about pedagogy, encouraging democratic and reflective educational practices (Giroux, 2011; McLaren, 2003). The focus on the holistic development and well-being of children further resonates with international rights-based frameworks, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Article 29 asserts that education should aim to "develop your personality and talents to the full" (UNCRC, 1989, Article 29). A socially just and inclusive curriculum, therefore, is one that nurtures every child's personality, talents, and mental and

physical abilities to their fullest potential, promoting participation, equity, and respect for diversity (Biesta, 2007; Hargreaves, Quick, & Buchanan, 2023, p. 546). This vision challenges narrow conceptions of schooling focused solely on academic achievement and aligns closely with Dewey's and Freire's emphasis on education as a means of personal and social transformation, and with Bourdieu's call to interrogate which forms of knowledge are valued, and for whom.

### ***Case Study and Methodology***

A qualitative case study approach (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2017) yields rich, context-specific insights suited to complex social phenomena (Creswell, 2014; Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). The single case was purposefully selected as an example of an innovative curriculum and holistic, inclusive ethos. Data included interviews with leaders, teachers, and parents; document analysis; and field observations. Triangulating these sources enhances trustworthiness and validity (Flick, 2004; Quintão, Andrade and Almeida, 2020). Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019) identified patterns in stakeholder narratives, with attention to reflexivity and positionality for transparency (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The study focuses on curriculum innovation in practice, including foundation subjects, specialist teaching, extended hours, and community partnerships, emphasizing how collaboration shaped these developments. While findings from this in-depth study are not generalizable to all free schools, they provide analytical generalizations (Yin, 2017) that offer a conceptual lens for similar contexts.

### ***Main Research Questions and Sub-Questions***

1. To what extent has the school successfully developed an innovative curriculum and implemented pedagogical practices that align with the government's Free School policy as well as the school leadership's vision?

What specific elements of the curriculum are considered innovative by the school leadership and teaching staff?

How is autonomy exercised in curriculum design and delivery within the school?

2. How do key stakeholders perceive the benefits and challenges of establishing a free school characterized by an innovative curriculum and a distinctive pedagogical approach?

What are parents', teachers', and pupils' perceptions of the curriculum and teaching methods?

How do stakeholders view the impact of the extended school day and extracurricular activities on pupil development and wellbeing?

What are stakeholders' perspectives on the school's ethos and its contribution to social justice and inclusion?

This study used a descriptive case study approach to examine the free school within its real-life context, ideal for exploring complex educational practices like curriculum design (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2017). To ensure trustworthiness, credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), data were triangulated across multiple stakeholder groups. Over two site visits (four days), qualitative data were gathered through interviews with the headteacher, Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo), and music director; focus groups with parents, teachers (including the business manager), and trustees; and observations supplemented by informal staff conversations. This multi-method strategy captured rich, nuanced perspectives, supported by Geertz's (1973) concept of *thick description*, which interprets both behaviours and their underlying meanings.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

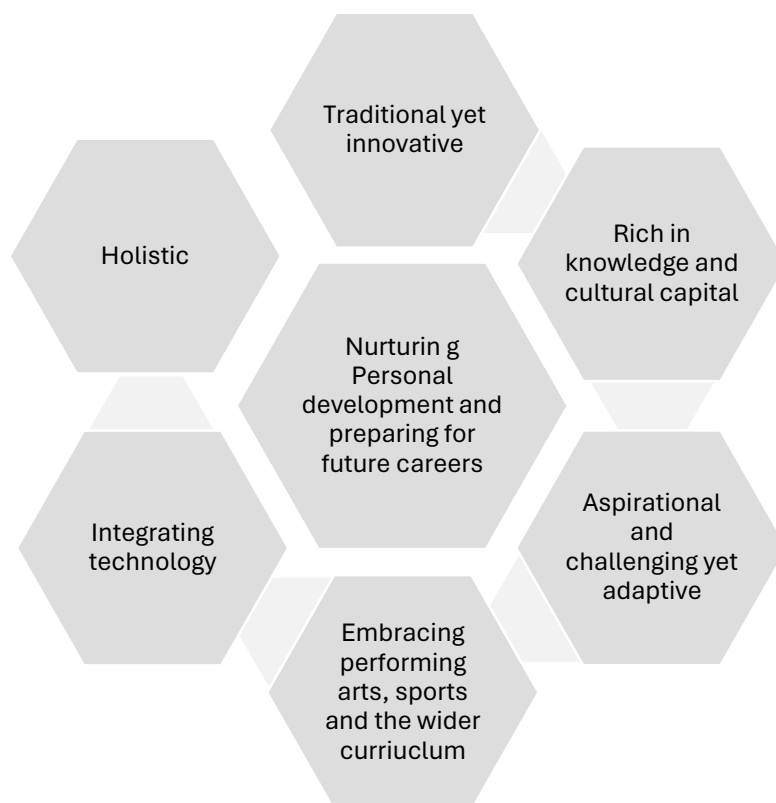
Ethical approval was granted by the university's Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including parents (focus group), teachers (interviews, observations, focus group), and trustees (focus group). Participants received detailed information sheets outlining the study's purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through secure data storage and pseudonymisation in all reporting.

### ***Data Analysis Process***

We used Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013, 2019, 2023) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) to code and interpret data from interviews and focus groups. RTA allows for the identification of meaningful patterns or themes related to the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Following familiarisation with the data through repeated listening and reading, all authors independently noted potential themes. The team then collaboratively coded transcripts and refined these codes into broader themes through iterative discussions. The lead researcher synthesised the final thematic framework to ensure coherence and alignment with the study's aims. This reflexive, collaborative approach supported a rich, nuanced understanding of the school's innovative curriculum practices.

***Findings:***

**Table 1: The Free School’s Framework for Curriculum Innovation**



***Case study school: The ‘all-through’ curriculum vision for this school***

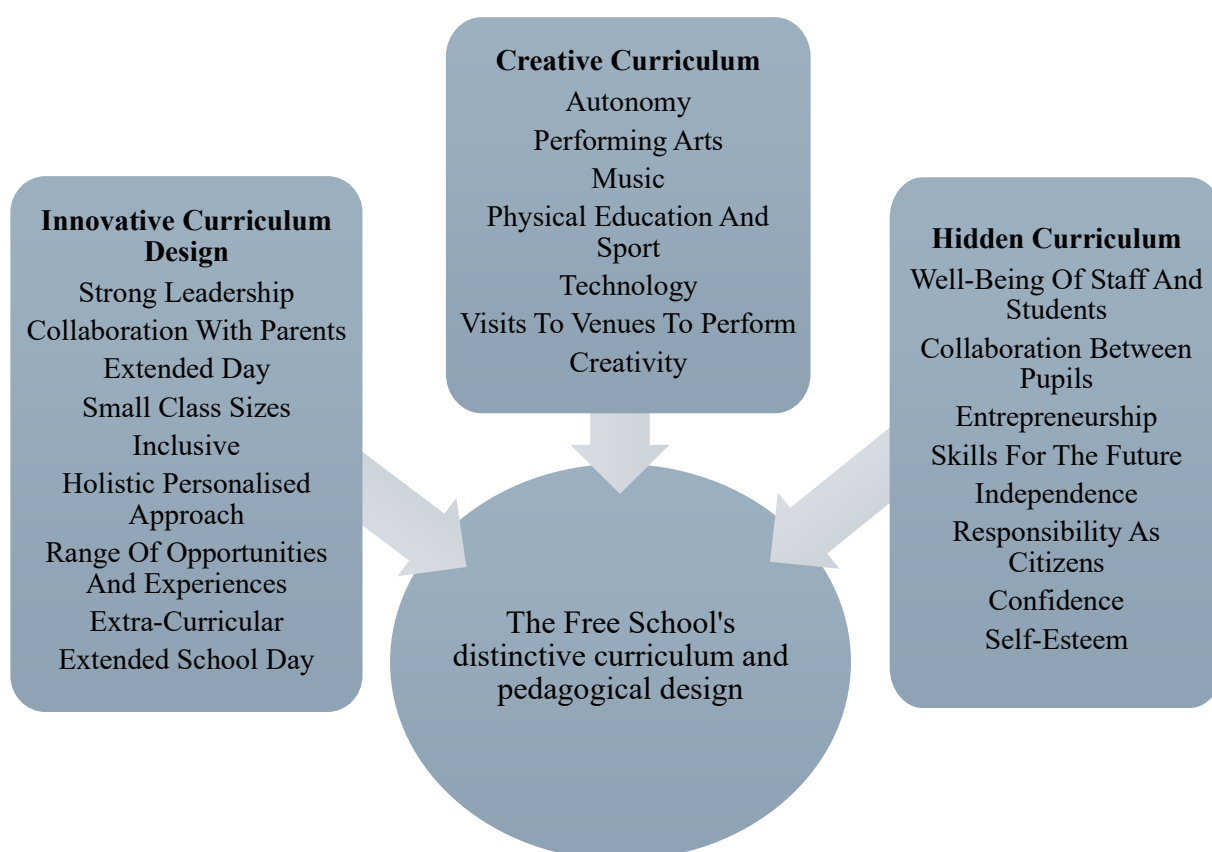
Table 1 presents the framework for curriculum innovation that underpins this free school’s all-through model, which supports students from ages 4 to 18. The structure offers a continuous and integrated educational journey, uniting primary and secondary phases. At this school, the core values and ethos are consistently embedded across all year groups, from Reception to Sixth Form, fostering coherence and continuity throughout students' learning experiences.

The school’s curriculum vision is distinctly learner-centred, integrating performing arts, sports, and the wider curriculum closely alongside a strong academic foundation in core subjects such as English, mathematics, and science.

This holistic approach reflects Baer and Garrett’s (2010) assertion that “teaching for creativity and teaching specific content knowledge need not be in opposition” (p. 6). Lattuca and Stark (2009) describe a curriculum plan as “a total blueprint for action, including purposes, activities, and ways of measuring success” (p. 4).

In line with this, the school’s mission is to provide a unique education that is freely accessible to all students, combining academic excellence with best practices drawn from both state and private sectors. Importantly, despite the school’s growth, its leaders have maintained fidelity to the original ethos, developed collaboratively with parents and the wider community.

**Table 2: Themes and Sub-themes from the Thematic Analysis.**



**Theme 1:** The School's Innovative Curriculum Design

**Theme 2:** The Creative Curriculum

**Theme 3:** The Hidden Curriculum

The empirical findings of this study, summarised in **Table 2**, are organised into three broad themes derived through reflexive thematic analysis. In the following section we examine the perceptions of stakeholders of the school through the themes of Innovative Curriculum Design, Creative Curriculum and Hidden Curriculum.

### *Theme 1: An Innovative Curriculum Design*

#### *Music as a Core Driver of Innovation*

Music is not positioned as an extracurricular enhancement but as a central pillar of the school's curriculum and ethos. The school's *Chance to Play* programme provides all Year 3 pupils with free, specialist-led instrumental tuition—an approach underpinned by an inclusive, equity-driven philosophy.

As the headteacher asserts:

*“We have excellent music provision and the opportunities for children from all backgrounds to learn an instrument... and to have a culture-rich environment.”*

This quote emphasises music as a vehicle for cultural access and levelling opportunity, particularly for pupils who might not otherwise engage with instrumental learning. It suggests that music functions not simply as artistic expression, but as an entitlement contributing to social mobility that aligns with arguments about expanding access to elite cultural forms through schooling. Empirical and theoretical work rooted in Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital shows that music training, particularly in genres associated with elite taste, provides students with embodied habits, tastes, and competencies that signal social status and privilege. The school rebalances the power relations that are mediated with music (Bates, 2021). Pupils from diverse backgrounds accumulate cultural capital typically reserved for higher socio-economic groups (Archer et al., 2015; Bourdieu, 1986).

Parents reinforce this inclusive framing. One comments:

*“They may not like violin... but at least they've tried it.”* (Parent )

Here, value is placed on exposure and experience, rather than proficiency. This reflects a commitment to broad educational entitlement and challenges the instrumentalist view of education as achievement-centric. The emphasis on trying, rather than excelling, aligns with Dewey's (1916) experiential pedagogy, where learning is about exploration and growth.

The music director reinforces this vision:

*"We're not trying to create people that are going to go into music as a career... but to give every child the opportunity to develop their musicianship."*

This perspective places emphasis on process rather than product, developing musicianship as a form of identity, confidence, and self-expression (Lamont, 2011; Welch et al., 2014). It reflects progressive, human-centred aims and reframes music education as a universal developmental right (Hallam, 2010; Wright, 2010).

The structured curriculum includes composition, listening, and performance, ensuring breadth and depth. The headteacher links this to holistic development:

*"Music increases pupils' ability to work collaboratively, improving their focus, self-confidence and self-esteem... contributing to academic successes."*

Stakeholders reframe music as an enabler of wider outcomes, both social and academic (Fitzpatrick, 2006) rather than as a 'soft' or peripheral subject. It supports claims by Hallam (2010) and Winner et al. (2013) that music enhances cognitive and emotional capacities, and reflects a holistic view of education.

A trustee adds a cross-disciplinary perspective:

*"Studies have shown that music really helps with academic success. Similarly, sport... the team aspect, working with people... It's obvious to us."*

By embedding music and sport into the core educational experience, the school fosters essential personal and social skills that extend beyond academic achievement. These subjects provide rich opportunities for experiential learning, helping pupils to develop emotional intelligence, teamwork, resilience, and self-regulation. Such competencies closely reflect the "4Cs" of 21st-century learning, communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (Bialik et al., 2015).

Beyond their intrinsic value, these skills also translate into workplace readiness. For example, students learn to work productively with others toward shared outcomes, to set and pursue meaningful goals, and to sustain motivation and focus over time, hallmarks of employability and lifelong learning (Bates, 2021).

The school offers a range of pathways, from orchestras and choirs to backstage roles, broadening definitions of participation and creativity. This pluralistic model, rooted in Burnard's (2012) work on inclusive creativity, ensures that students engage with music in diverse and meaningful ways, regardless of skill or interest. The school follows Burnard's challenge of traditional, individualistic notions of creativity, advocating for a pluralistic approach that acknowledges diverse musical practices and cultural contexts.

### *Sport and Physical Education*

Physical Education also plays a central role in the school's identity, with primary pupils receiving four sessions per week, an unusual commitment in a system where foundation subjects are often deprioritised. One parent highlights the school's sporting success: "*They won a Netball Cup... tri-counties in hockey... The girls won a Football Cup.*" While this quote reflects traditional markers of achievement, it also demonstrates that sport is taken seriously as a curricular domain, on par with academic subjects. Recognition of girls' achievements also suggests a commitment to gender equity in physical education. A more developmental framing is offered by a teacher: "*We look at success globally... Nine Year 6 girls, including one registered blind, reached the South of England finals in three sports.*"

This reframes success not only as competition, but inclusion. The mention of a visually impaired pupil participating at a regional level highlights the school's adaptive and inclusive practices. It supports Bailey's (2006) assertion that sport can be a tool for inclusion, resilience, and wellbeing—especially when delivered intentionally. Mental health benefits are also foregrounded: "*It really helps their mental health... just to get out and work as a team.*" (Teacher). Underscoring the school's holistic philosophy and the recognition that PE contributes to emotional regulation, teamwork, and self-concept is especially valuable in a post-pandemic educational landscape. The school's physical education strategy aligns with Dewey's (1938) emphasis on experiential learning and Freire's (1970) vision of education as humanising and empowering.

### *Innovative Technology as a Catalyst for Modern Learning*

The school's early integration of cloud-based platforms, 1:1 Chromebook provision, and Google Apps has transformed teaching and learning into a highly collaborative, digital-first environment. A parent remarks: *"They're on the Chromebooks from such a young age. That is the future... the other schools didn't have anything like that."* Parental recognition of the school's forward-thinking digital strategy is seen as both future-oriented and distinctive. The phrase "that is the future" suggests a sense of preparedness that other schools lack. Another parent adds: *"My seven-year-old is typing up her homework and sharing it with her teacher."* which points to real-time communication and feedback, illustrating how digital tools can increase learner autonomy and engagement. These practices reflect pedagogical models that support agency, choice, and personalisation (Voogt & Roblin, 2012; Bialik et al., 2015). Rather than viewing technology as a supplement, the school embeds it as an essential medium for expression, collaboration, and independent inquiry, key features of student-centred learning and progressive pedagogy (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970).

### *Teacher Autonomy as a Foundation for Innovation*

Central to the school's innovation is the professional agency afforded to teachers. Staff are empowered to design creative flexible learning tailored to their pupils. One teacher explains: *"You can be as creative as you want to... The teachers who find it most difficult here are the people who don't have flexibility."* A culture of professional trust, where innovation is expected and supported aligns with Hargreaves & Shirley's (2012) notion of "professional capital," where teacher autonomy is key to school improvement. The quote also signals that innovation requires a mindset shift, not all educators may be comfortable in such an open environment. Another teacher contrasts the school with more rigid systems: *"Most schools... are very set in stone. Whereas here, we are open, 'Yes, that sounds great, let's do that.'"* suggesting a rejection of prescriptive curricula in favour of co-construction and responsiveness that is core to Freire's (1970) idea of dialogical education. It also resonates with Fullan's (2016) advocacy for innovation through shared vision and distributed leadership. Across interviews, teacher autonomy is not depicted as laissez-faire, but as structured freedom, within a mission-driven culture that values experimentation and creativity. This contributes directly to the school's innovative practices, allowing the curriculum to evolve responsively rather than reactively.

## ***Theme 2: Innovative Curriculum Design – Leadership***

Leadership plays a central role in shaping the school’s innovative curriculum. As a single academy trust, strategic oversight lies with the Board of Trustees, while day-to-day operations are led by the Executive Headteacher and Senior Leadership Team (SLT). This distributed leadership structure supports shared ownership and long-term innovation (Harris, 2008; Spillane, 2006), and reflects an intentional departure from top-down governance. The founding stakeholder team capitalised on the autonomy afforded by Free School status to design a curriculum free from legacy systems or imposed structures (Littlefair et al., 2023). One trustee reflected: *“You must really believe in the concept of a free school”*, signalling the ideological commitment required to embrace the Free School model.

The emphasis on belief highlights that curriculum innovation here is not only technical but value-driven, involving risk, imagination, and disruption of the status quo. It reflects a deeper alignment with entrepreneurial forms of educational leadership that thrive on autonomy and vision-setting (Higham, 2014a). That vision was central to staff recruitment and culture-building, as one teacher recalled: *“I was sold by the headteacher’s vision”* which reveals the magnetic role of leadership in securing staff buy-in. It echoes Fullan’s (2016) argument that deep change is propelled by leaders who inspire moral purpose. The term “sold” suggests that the headteacher effectively communicated a compelling narrative of what education could be, persuading staff to join a venture characterised by uncertainty but driven by conviction. Leadership here is not managerial, but transformative and purpose-led (Littlefair, et al., 2023).

### *Navigating Parent-School Partnerships*

A defining feature of the school’s leadership style is its partnership with parents. From inception, families were treated as co-creators of the educational vision, reflecting Epstein’s (2001) model of family-school partnership. However, this inclusive approach introduces **tensions** around boundaries and authority. As one teacher observed:

*“Parents... still feel that they have the right, which they do, to comment. It’s a fine balance between who is leading it, the parents or not.”* (Teacher).

This highlights the delicate negotiation between parental agency and professional autonomy. While valuing family voice aligns with democratic educational ideals, it also raises questions about leadership legitimacy and decision-making authority.

The teacher's tone reflects both respect and concern, a recognition that co-production must be balanced with pedagogical leadership, which is particularly relevant in Free School contexts, where founding parents may maintain strong ownership expectations. Leadership, therefore, must operate with both openness and clarity, ensuring that participation does not undermine professional judgement and value the importance of role clarity in sustaining effective collaboration (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

### *Flattened Structures and Collaborative Culture*

Teachers describe a non-hierarchical organisational culture that empowers staff agency. One staff member commented that the headteacher: *“Doesn't lord it over everyone else.”* illustrating the ethos of horizontal leadership; a relational approach where status is downplayed in favour of collaboration. The use of informal language (“lord it over”) suggests a rejection of authoritarian models in favour of collegiality and mutual respect. Such environments are more conducive to innovation, as they reduce fear of failure and encourage risk-taking (Gronn, 2002; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). The culture is one of distributed responsibility, where innovation is seen as everyone's work, not the sole domain of senior leaders, reflecting a broader shift from compliance-driven leadership to capacity-building leadership, rooted in trust and teacher professionalism (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009).

### *Parental Perspectives on Curriculum Leadership*

Parental responses reveal alignment between the school's values and family aspirations. Beyond logistical factors like location, parents emphasised the school's holistic curriculum, particularly its commitment to enrichment through music, sport, and small class sizes. One parent shared: *“Small class sizes, small nurturing environments... swimming and music... aren't offered in some of the bigger state schools, which conveys appreciation for the personalised and enriched learning environment. The parent's comparative framing (“aren't offered...”) positions the school as distinct from mainstream provision, suggesting that leadership has succeeded in articulating and delivering an alternative educational offer. It also reflects a growing demand among families for whole-child development, as theorised by Noddings (2005) and supported by research on enrichment's role in cognitive and emotional growth (OECD, 2018). Importantly, these shared values foster social trust and cohesion. The alignment between what the school provides and what families value supports a relational climate where collaboration is more likely to be constructive than conflictual (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). This atmosphere is not accidental, but the result of intentional leadership practices grounded in inclusion and transparency. In sum, **Theme 2** illustrates how visionary and distributed leadership has enabled innovative curriculum design, built strong community relationships, and maintained a values-led approach.*

Quotes from trustees, teachers, and parents show that leadership here is relational, strategic, and grounded in moral purpose, creating the structural and cultural conditions for sustained innovation. Table 3 exemplifies the viewpoints of stakeholders at the school for each theme.

**Table 3. Curriculum Perspectives Across Stakeholders**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Leadership</b>
<b>Curriculum Priorities</b>	Value music, sport, and enrichment	Embrace wide-ranging opportunities	Designed a balanced, integrated curriculum
<b>Innovative Features</b>	Praise early Chromebook use	Appreciate creative freedom	Implemented tech and arts from inception
<b>Holistic Development</b>	Emphasise mental health, personal growth	See success as social, emotional, academic	Promote whole-child ethos
<b>Voice &amp; Agency</b>	Feel heard in school design	Value professional autonomy	View parents as “critical partners”
<b>Tensions</b>	Occasionally challenge decisions	Note challenges of high parental involvement	Work to balance input with professional leadership

### ***Theme 3: Personalised Inclusion and the Hidden Curriculum***

#### *Support and Class Size: Personalised Inclusion*

Small class sizes are central to the school's commitment to equity, inclusion, and individualised learning. These are not incidental, but a deliberate structural feature embedded in the school's design to support visibility, care, and tailored pedagogy (Blatchford et al., 2011).

A parent explains: *"In a bigger school, you get lost more easily... slip through the cracks."*

This statement reveals a concern with institutional anonymity and reflects a broader desire for settings that prioritise the individual child. The phrase "slip through the cracks" underscores how easily pupils can become invisible in larger systems, especially those with additional needs.

The parent's language highlights the protective function of a small-school environment in safeguarding belonging and attention. The SENCo echoes this point: *"What's been the real key draw [is] the curriculum and the size."*

Here, curriculum and size are linked not only as practical advantages but as inclusive mechanisms. The SENCo emphasizes that structural elements are fundamental to the school's identity, indicating that inclusion is deeply embedded in the institution's core rather than being an add-on or afterthought. Staffing ratios also reflect a quasi-independent model:

*"We have 23 or 24 pupils with two adults always in the room... more like the ratios you'd find in a private school."*

This comparison is significant. By referencing the independent sector, the speaker suggests that the state-funded provision here equals or even surpasses fee-paying schools in delivering personalized attention. This challenges the traditional equity gap and redefines what can be achieved in state education, demonstrating how expanded opportunities can promote greater inclusion and educational justice.

#### *Wellbeing and Belonging*

Wellbeing is portrayed as a core element of the school's ethos—deeply embedded and proactively addressed, rather than treated as a reactive or marginal concern. The staffing of pastoral support with an Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA), a counsellor, and pastoral leads reflects a whole-school commitment to emotional development.

*"It's an incredibly happy place to work."* – Teacher

*"My son knows every kid in the school... it's very much a home from home."* – Parent

*“It’s always felt like a family, hasn’t it?”* – Teacher

These comments collectively construct the school as a relational space—a “family” where individuals are known, valued, and supported. The repetition of familial metaphors suggests that the school has successfully cultivated a climate of trust and emotional safety, foundational to motivation and academic engagement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). The parent’s observation that her child “knows every kid” underscores the school’s strong sense of community and social cohesion, qualities that are increasingly undermined by neoliberal education policies emphasizing competition, standardization, and efficiency at the expense of relational and communal values. Remarkably, this close-knit environment is maintained even as the school grows to accommodate 948 pupils, demonstrating that scale need not come at the cost of connection.

*“The kids are well cared for on an individual basis.”* – Teacher

This quote reinforces the school’s ethic of care (Noddings, 2005). “Well cared for” suggests that wellbeing is not abstract policy but experienced in tangible, everyday interactions, furthering a model of education that values each learner as a whole person, not just a performer of outcomes.

### *Equity Through Enrichment*

The school’s extended day and integrated enrichment programme reflects a reimagined curriculum that addresses both opportunity gaps and real-world learning. Crucially, enrichment is non-optional and cost-free, signalling a commitment to removing barriers to access. Fraser’s model of social justice, spanning redistribution, recognition, and representation, provides a powerful analytical framework for understanding how curriculum and enrichment practices can challenge both material and symbolic forms of educational inequality (Power, 2012).

*“Learn further by having exposure to different kinds of activities beyond the classroom.”* –Trustee

*“All the extracurricular things... don’t always happen in other state schools.”*  
– Parent

*“The extended day and extended holidays was one of the reasons I chose to work here.”* –Teacher

*“They mirror the private holidays... a big advantage for some families.”* –  
Parent

These quotes together show how the school has blurred the lines between formal and informal education, giving all students access to experiences that are often the preserve of more advantaged families (Bourdieu, 1986). The trustee's focus on "different kinds of activities" implies a broader definition of learning, one aligned with the cultivation of 21st-century competencies (Greany, 2018; Morris & Perry, 2019).

The comparison to the independent sector re-emerges, not as aspiration to exclusivity but as a strategy to democratise access to high-quality provision. Gardening clubs feeding into the school kitchen further exemplify sustainability education and practical citizenship, reinforcing learning through lived experience.

#### ***Theme 4: Hidden Curriculum – Character, Confidence, and Cultural Capital***

The school's ethos goes beyond academic outcomes to focus on developing the whole child, aligning with social justice principles and a vision of education as a route to empowerment (Freire, 1970; Nussbaum, 2010).

The Headteacher states:

*“We prepare each child for their future, giving them a strong foundation in numeracy, literacy and a full range of other traditional subject areas, as well as the skills to succeed in life.”*

This quote encapsulates the school's mission to integrate academic rigour with personal development. The reference to “skills to succeed in life” reflects Dewey's (1938) and Jackson's (1968) ideas that the most meaningful lessons are not always explicit. This “hidden curriculum” encompasses confidence, agency, and resilience—traits that scaffold both academic and societal success.

Teachers articulate how these skills are cultivated:

*“They can really present themselves in any forum... we're giving them the skills in the class, how can you translate that, use them and show them off.”*  
*“We are producing a generation of children who are so confident and so eloquent.”*

These reflections position oracy, self-expression, and presentation as deliberate outcomes. By emphasising real-world application (“any forum”), staff demonstrate how classroom learning translates into cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

The term “so eloquent” suggests high expectations for communication, irrespective of background, reinforcing equity by offering all children tools traditionally associated with privilege. A trustee reinforces this vision: *“If you stand on stage in front of parents and play an instrument and perform, you take that with you through your life.”*

Here, performance becomes a metaphor for confidence, competence, and embodied learning. This echoes Reay’s (2017) critique of stratified education systems and reflects a model in which symbolic and cultural capital are made universally accessible, not inherited. The school’s ethos also promotes civic engagement and values education: *“They are encouraged to be courageous, innovative, caring citizens, making the local community a better place to live.”* – Teacher

This aligns with Nussbaum’s (2010) concept of global citizenship and reflects Freire’s (1970) belief in education as a tool for social transformation. It suggests that children are not simply absorbing knowledge but are being equipped to act ethically and compassionately in the world. Through stakeholder narratives, the school emerges as a values-driven, community-oriented, and equity-focused institution. The quotes demonstrate how inclusive structures (class size, staffing, enrichment) combine with a hidden curriculum of confidence, care, and cultural capital to produce a transformative educational experience. This model challenges conventional hierarchies, blurs sector boundaries, and repositions public education as a site of opportunity, dignity, and social mobility.

## ***Discussion***

This case study reveals a powerful story of curriculum transformation driven by intentional design, stakeholder engagement, and visionary leadership. Through interviews and observations, three key themes emerged: curriculum design, innovation, and the hidden curriculum, showing how this free school has reimagined education within the freedoms of the Free School policy in England. Central to its distinctiveness is intentionality from the start: a clear, coherent, yet flexible curriculum shaped collaboratively by leaders, teachers, parents, and community partners (Lattuca & Stark, 2009; Littlefair et al., 2023). This democratic process embeds ownership, responsiveness, and relevance at the core of the school’s offer.

### *Creating Innovation Within Constraints*

Despite pressures from market competition and accountability (Wiborg et al., 2018), the school fosters teacher autonomy and pedagogical innovation. Moving beyond scripted teaching, it embraces adaptive, inquiry-based learning that blends formal knowledge with enriching experiences. This flexible, inclusive curriculum supports differentiated and emotionally responsive education, embodying Dewey's (1938) experiential learning and advancing transformative education.

### *Stakeholder Benefits and Collaborative Power*

The school's culture of co-construction shares power and values all voices. Distributed leadership engages children, parents, teachers, and community partners in shaping practice, echoing Ken Robinson's (Graffino, 2017) view that innovation springs from interaction. Though tensions around parental roles exist, stakeholders overwhelmingly see collaboration as a strength (Littlefair et al., 2023). Teachers gain agency and shared purpose; parents feel invested. Strategic partnerships with sports and arts institutions extend learning and deepen community ties, enhancing authenticity and engagement.

### *The Hidden Curriculum as Equity Driver*

Most profoundly, the school's hidden curriculum redefines success by centering confidence, communication, and care. Activities like music, sports, and public speaking build resilience, character, and self-efficacy; essential human skills for today's world. This focus on creativity, collaboration, communication, and critical thinking aligns with OECD (2018) and thinkers like Nussbaum (2010) and Freire (1970), preparing students not just for work but for meaningful life. Music education supports socio-emotional growth and democratizes access to cultural capital often reserved for elites (Archer et al., 2010; Bourdieu, 1986), reinforcing the school's commitment to equity and inclusion (Trevarthen & Malloch, 2002).

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital offers a vital lens through which to understand the school's commitment to arts education, enrichment, and inclusive pedagogy. By embedding music, sport, and public performance into the core curriculum, the school works to democratise access to forms of knowledge, skill, and expression often reserved for the socio-economic elite (Archer et al., 2010; Reay, 2017). This deliberate distribution of cultural capital challenges traditional patterns of social reproduction, positioning education as a means of social mobility rather than a mechanism of inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In this context, curriculum design is not just a pedagogical choice, but a political one, aimed at widening opportunity and

disrupting entrenched hierarchies. For Goldthorpe (2007), for instance, in reducing education to an engine of class inequality, Bourdieu neglects the ways that modern educational systems loosen inequalities and provide opportunities for children from lower class backgrounds (Prior, 2013).

### *Limitations*

This qualitative study uses a single case to offer deep, context-specific insight (Geertz, 1973). While limited in generalisability, it offers transferable lessons for similar settings (Wellington, 2000). Drawing on Yin's (2017) comprehensive case study methodology, it explores curriculum innovation through the voices of adult stakeholders, leaders, teachers, trustees, and parents (Littlefair et al., 2023). However, the absence of pupil voices is a key limitation, which future research will address to provide a fuller understanding of curriculum impact.

### *Conclusion*

This case study presents a compelling model of what a future-facing, socially just, and community-rooted curriculum can look like. It shows how the freedoms granted by Free School policy can be harnessed not for standardisation or marketisation, but to foster meaningful innovation, collaborative leadership, and transformative learning experiences. While any school has the potential to develop an innovative, holistic curriculum that nurtures the whole child, many are constrained by the dominant forces of neoliberal education policy and the prescriptive nature of the National Curriculum. The marketisation of schooling, through league tables, performance metrics, and accountability regimes, has prioritised standardised testing and narrow definitions of success, often at the expense of creativity, wellbeing, and broader developmental aims (Gunter, 2011; Robinson and Aronica, 2015). Schools face significant pressure to demonstrate rapid, measurable academic outcomes, which can discourage risk-taking, interdisciplinary learning, and the integration of arts, sport, or socio-emotional education. The National Curriculum, while offering some flexibility, still reinforces subject hierarchies and a one-size-fits-all model that limits local adaptation and culturally responsive pedagogy. As a result, even visionary leaders and educators may feel unable to fully realise more expansive educational models, despite having the expertise and commitment to do so. The issue, therefore, is not a lack of capacity or imagination within schools, but the systemic constraints that curtail autonomy and innovation, especially in under-resourced or high-stakes environments. Addressing these barriers requires a shift in policy discourse toward trust, flexibility, and a broader conception of educational purpose. Curriculum innovation is not a luxury but a necessity in a rapidly changing world.

As Mitra (2015) warns, education must evolve to meet new societal and technological demands. Innovation, as Gilbert (2020) argues, can disrupt entrenched inequalities by expanding access to rich, relevant learning. This school exemplifies such change, embedding creativity, lateral thinking, and the 4Cs of 21st-century learning into its curriculum. Building on Dewey's (1916) vision of education for both personal growth and the common good, this study reinforces innovation as a moral imperative. Education must support who students are now and who they might become (Petrovic, 2016), creating environments where all feel seen, valued, and empowered.

With its extended school day and a curriculum enriched by music, sport, and an inclusive ethos, this school broadens the definition of success beyond standardized test scores. It creates a professionally rewarding environment for teachers and offers parents holistic opportunities they themselves believe are frequently absent in local state schools. Its strong leadership, ongoing teacher development, and supportive evaluation ensure that innovation is cohesive and sustainable (Fullan, 2016; Hargreaves et al., 2014). As a Free School, this institution serves as a test-bed for innovation. Its journey provides practical lessons and conceptual insights for others designing equitable, creative curricula. It shows not only how to innovate, but why we must. Free schools were intended to be engines of innovation, but as Wiborg et al. (2018) note, many have fallen short. This case demonstrates what is possible when autonomy is embraced. It shows that innovation, when grounded in care, community, and creativity, can transform schools into places where all children can thrive.

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