



Centre for the Use of
Research and
Evidence In
Education

Leaders need a holistic view of their school if they are to set priorities that will truly accelerate learning for all of their pupils and especially for the most vulnerable, says Philippa Cordingley

Beyond Data

As a school leader you have lots of data and information at your disposal. But new research exploring what helps schools to build momentum and become exceptional suggests that leaders who want to accelerate progress need more than data: they need a holistic, evidence-based, bird's-eye view of their school, organised around questions capable of firing everyone's commitment and imagination.

Our new research for Teach First explores the challenges facing schools needing to build momentum and the practices of exceptional schools. It points to two powerful organising questions:

- What are the barriers to learning that our pupils are experiencing?
- What can we do to remove them?

Answering these questions means looking not at the data alone. In the current system, schools are often data rich but also, frequently, evidence poor. Data sets certainly help point leaders towards potential barriers to progress. However, it is qualitative and quantitative evidence – not just what people do but also why they do it and how they feel about it – that helps us pinpoint key questions and ways forwards.

Making use of a broader range of evidence for a small number of strategic purposes helps school leaders prioritise for accelerating learning, especially for their most vulnerable pupils.

Factors in exceptional schools

Some schools are truly exceptional in transforming life chances. In these schools, all pupils make rapid curriculum and cognitive progress and develop social skills and cultural capital.

Such schools have several key measures in place to align everybody's efforts and use evidence to ensure that those efforts are focused where they can make most difference. They provide, model and support intensively a single, evidence-informed model of pedagogy designed with the needs of vulnerable learners in the foreground to ensure they can genuinely benefit from more complex approaches. These approaches enable teachers and leaders to concentrate on:

- getting to know their pupils in the round
- understanding how pupils experience the curriculum in life outside school so they can make lessons meaningful

Exceptional schools also develop a sophisticated mix of systems, professional skills and attitudes designed to synthesise different kinds of evidence about pupils in order to identify and remove barriers to learning, pupil by pupil.

For example, when a pupil's behaviour is challenging, teachers and leaders have the necessary systems in place to deal with it. But they also have a mindset that means that colleagues respond by using the behaviour as a trigger for asking, "What are the barriers to learning that are causing or are represented by this behaviour and how can we remove them? What else do we know about this pupil or this group of pupils that can help us identify and remove barriers to learning and thus resolve the behaviour issue?"

There seem to be several springboards in exceptional schools that help staff behave and respond in this way.

For example, colleagues are confident that they will understand and be able to relate to evidence from other teachers and leaders because the school's single model of pedagogy builds a shared language and frame of reference that, in turn, speeds up the exchange of relevant evidence. The extensive information systems about pupils, teaching, learning and the curriculum are driven by a purpose that colleagues care about and understand – identifying and removing barriers to learning.

Extensive support for continuing professional development (CPD) and learning provided by schools is another key factor. This is especially true if such support contains structured opportunities to exchange information about different pupils and how they are responding to everyday development work and learning and if it is the pupils' responses, rather than the classroom practices themselves, that are the focus of professional learning conversations and the tools that underpin them.

In exceptional schools, staff are also confident that the school has strong partnerships with parents and the wider community that help them identify issues in pupils' lives beyond school accurately, so they can know about and support pupils' learning in the round in partnership with others. ***You can find out more about exceptional schools on our website.***

Building momentum

Not every school yet has the capacity to do these things, of course.

Schools at earlier stages of development are inevitably battling on several fronts at once. They usually receive copious advice and prompting about things to try. But they need to choose what is right for their context and for their pupils and they need to be in a position to set priorities that align with one another and with what they know about their pupils.

Monitoring, for example, is an obvious source of evidence in every school leader's toolkit. We know that teaching and learning are complex and challenging and learning to develop them is even harder. Educators at every level need us to follow changes through to help everyone resist the pull of the status quo. Monitoring matters. But it can represent either a source of high-quality evidence or superficial data.

In our research, the difference between monitoring in these schools and in exceptional schools was the degree of clarity about why particular practices were being introduced and monitored. Without such clarity, monitoring all too often lapsed into a compliance culture.

Beyond pupil progress data, school leaders need systematic, qualitative evidence about how learners at every level (including educators and leaders in the school community, too) are experiencing their life and work in school.

With this in place, monitoring helps to create coherence. It builds an environment where each individual's effort contributes to a whole bigger than the sum of the parts. So, for example, in one exceptional school the humanities department delayed using a sophisticated form of co-operative group work until all pupils, and especially the most vulnerable ones, had been specifically taught the social skills to succeed in its use across the curriculum. This delay in subjects where co-operation is easy to deploy meant that vulnerable pupils, instead of withdrawing from or resisting challenging pedagogic strategies, could develop and refine their social skills and cultural capital cumulatively in every subject.

As I said at the beginning, a focus on evidence linked to a meaningful purpose can help. Progress data is an important starting point but it needs to be considered alongside evidence about how approaches are helping everyone identify and remove barriers to learning for every pupil.

Further reading

CUREE's Gaining and Sustaining Momentum research explores how schools in which progress has stalled can gain or regain momentum. It identifies key building blocks to help school leaders ensure that all the core activities in their schools are working together and heading in the right direction.

In a new partnership, ASCL consultants will work with CUREE's experts to provide tailored support for schools and multi-academy trusts using tools and other resources derived from the research.

The new service takes the form of a diagnostic and development process. It uses information provided by the school, including pupil performance data, interviews and discussions, focus groups, observations and surveys.

This is assessed using the criteria and benchmarks identified in the research to produce a confidential evaluation report setting out detailed, practical and evidence-based recommendations.

School leaders are then supported through one or a number of action research processes for implementing the plan, followed by a concise implementation and progress review. For more information about this service and how it could help you and your school, please email pd@ascl.org.uk or visit www.skeinuk.co.uk/skein-momentum

Read the full report on our website at www.curee.co.uk, and *subscribe to our regular updates* to stay up to date with all of our exciting work in evidence-informed educational practice.

