



Centre for the Use of
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Evidence In
Education

Putting the pedal to the metal: Gaining momentum in accelerating pupil progress

Most school improvement reports tell us that consistency is key to pupil progress. But our new research for Teach First is helping me understand more about what we need to put alongside consistency. Of course, consistency is an important starting point. But, it is obviously not an end in itself. Consistency is only ever any use if the focus is on consistently good and excellent practices and if it is monitored in relation to its effectiveness for learning rather than simple compliance. What this research, and later this blog, explores is the importance of focussing on consistency in ways that lead to coherence.

Take behaviour and behaviour for learning as a starting point. Where behaviour threatens safety and undermines learning, schools need a strong behaviour policy that is used consistently. Consistency helps establish clear boundaries and expectations about what is and is not acceptable, and helps secure behaviour that fulfils these norms. And it depends on good systems. Since the practices being established involve significant changes in routinised classroom interactions between human beings, they will also need monitoring. As Dylan Wiliam so powerfully points out, changing habits is hard; the pull of the status quo is compelling. Monitoring helps us all push through these difficulties; in this sense monitoring for consistency offers a Jiminy Cricket service to everyone, not least those doing the monitoring.

But the systems and effort involved in achieving and monitoring consistency around behaviour (and in this research a number of other issues including the quality of teaching, feedback and approaches to literacy across the curriculum) also acted as a barrier to further progress in some of these schools. For example, a strong focus on consistency in behaviour management, which had been essential to establishing order, sometimes obscured the moment when the majority of the pupil community had internalised behavioural expectations and were ready to move on to focus on behaviour for learning.

Similarly, in the face of multiple priorities, a focus on consistency through systems alone seemed to be linked with attention on the surface features of interactions, particularly for teachers whose practice was still developing. In schools struggling to gain momentum an over focus on behaviour systems also distracted teachers' and leaders' attention away from building deeper learning relationships with pupils. Above all they focussed attention on presenting problems and responses and away from the underlying obstacles to learning that were triggering the problem behaviours for vulnerable learners. What the Exceptional Schools were able to do, by contrast, was use negative changes in pupils' behaviour as an indicator of a need for a learning intervention. In those schools the emphasis on consistency was rooted in a comprehensive model of teaching and learning; a model whose purpose (the identification and removal of barriers to learning) was both widely understood and owned. For schools attempting to gain momentum there are obviously important

questions about when and how to review the systems that may have been necessary to establish a base line, in order to create greater headroom.

Noticing when a focus on consistency has eroded into a form of inappropriate compliance is just one of several obstacles to accelerating progress faced by the schools serving vulnerable communities, whose work we explored in our new study for Teach First. Comparing these schools' valiant approaches to overcoming these obstacles on multiple fronts, with the characteristics and practices of strong and exceptional schools serving equally vulnerable communities, has pushed my thinking about consistency a step further.

The systems that helped the Exceptional Schools consistently achieve excellence in learning for their students seemed to us to be made meaningful and capable of continuing refinement and improvement by two key factors:

- a relentless focus on identifying and removing barriers to learning (rather than simply achieving excellence in teaching); and
- the existence of protocols and systems to reinforce a whole school model of pedagogy *and* an emphasis on in depth subject knowledge, which, in combination gave teachers space and resource to explore and make use of their pupil's experiences beyond school. In combination these factors also;
 - helped pupils build their own control over, usually unfamiliar, learning strategies by working with them repeatedly and cumulatively, in different subjects and contexts;
 - helped teachers make learning in school relevant and accessible; and
 - enabled teachers to combine and make good use of the shared model of pedagogy and their in depth understanding of pupils' starting points.

It strikes me ever more forcefully that this is a description of not just consistency but of coherence; coherence that derives from clarity of purpose and developing systems that create and then remove scaffolding for teachers and for pupils. Our research, equally forcefully underlined just how hard such coherence is to achieve when improvements are needed across many fronts.

For the project schools, creating a sustainable momentum of accelerating improvement depended on the school leaders having a clear understanding of the underpinning purpose of the strategies they were putting in place and the connections between them. Simply "doing the right things" was not enough in these communities. School leaders need to ensure everyone understands the purpose and principles well enough to use them to remove the complex obstacles to learning for vulnerable learners. Similarly, when priorities were being set on the basis of external requirements and support from others via, for example extensive external CPD programmes, even dramatic steps forward were almost impossible to sustain or use as a platform for further . Making sustainable use of such support depended wholly on school leaders understanding why as well as how support mechanisms were working; not least so they could align them with existing developments.

The new, in-depth, qualitative study of schools setting out to gain momentum whilst serving vulnerable communities was carried out for Teach First and is published on our web sites [here](#). It builds on our earlier study of strong and exceptional schools serving such communities which can be read [here](#).

The studies are qualitative and help pose important questions rather than offering definitive and generalisable findings. But we think they are helping to build a 3D picture of the realities and possibilities facing schools seeking to gain, regain or sustain momentum in accelerating pupil progress. They also pose important questions for everyone focussed on helping such schools achieve sustainable momentum. This includes all of the work CUREE does to support school improvement and my own work as a Chair of Governors of a school with a high proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals, serving a white working class community and as a trustee of a family of academies serving similar communities. For example, the research has generated not just questions about consistency, as indicated here, but also questions about the risks associated with developing pockets of excellence and about the lack of capacity to, and understanding of, the potential role and contribution of in-depth subject expertise – the focus of my next two blogs.

Meanwhile, we have worked hard to make the report accessible and our recommendations interesting useful, and clear. I would greatly value comments, questions and observations online! Or come and join me in a workshop to launch this research at The Inspiring Leaders conference in June.

Read the full report on our website [here](#), and [subscribe to our regular updates](#) to stay up to date with all of our exciting work in evidence-informed educational practice.

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