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A Compendium of Presentations

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Foreword from Paul Givan, Education Minster

On 28 September 2024, the first researchED conference in Northern Ireland took place at Carrickfergus Grammar School and was attended by many hundreds of local teachers. I hope it will be the first of many such conferences.

researchED is a grassroots, teacher-led organisation started in 2013 by leading educationalist, Tom Bennett. The goal of researchED is to bridge the gap between research and practice in education. Researchers, teachers, and policy makers come together for a day of information-sharing and myth-busting. More information about researchED can be accessed here.

Many of those who presented at the inaugural Northern Ireland conference have distilled their presentations into short articles and I am delighted that the organisers have permitted my Department to share the enclosed compendium of essays, which I trust will be informative and thought-provoking. I would like to thank all of the contributors to the compendium and particularly James Maxwell and Mark Roberts for organising these articles.

Over recent months I have visited many schools and talked with school leaders and teachers. It is clear that our teachers want to access practical research that is relevant to their teaching practice and that we need to provide it.

The benefits of this sharing of knowledge are well documented, directly informing teaching practice through building confidence and understanding; articulating new ideas and ways of thinking; and encouraging reflection, dialogue and debate. I have asked officials in my Department to examine how we can provide regular access to educational research to all teachers.

High-performing education systems treat teachers as professionals investing in high-quality professional learning that supports teachers' development throughout their career by mentoring, direct instruction and collaboration. They help teachers refine their practices and stay updated with the latest educational research whilst empowering them in the classroom.

McKinsey's famous maxim that "the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" is perhaps better rephrased that no education system can exceed the quality of its teaching. For an education system to be excellent, it must prioritise investment in supporting teachers to continuously improve the quality of classroom practice. We can only do this by investing increased resources over the next number of years to support an effective and coherent approach to professional development.

I want us to be an evidence-informed system. Using the best available research, data and evidence to shape the policies, practices and decisions that will govern our education system for the next decade. I will, therefore, over coming weeks set out in more detail my plans for education reform.

I look forward to working with you all over the months and years ahead.

Paul Givan
Minister of Education

Developing the Education System

How to Change the Tide

Sonja Broerse

Education is facing challenges. Although international comparisons are complicated, a global trend of declining results in PISA scores is visible. In comparison to 2018 the average PISA scores in OECD countries dropped by nearly 15 score points in maths and 10 score points in reading. This drop in maths is nearly three times bigger than any previous change between assessments. Although some countries are doing better in education and some are doing worse, the overall situation is concerning. The dramatic drops in score points in reading and maths indicate a widespread problem affecting many countries at the same time.

One might think these declines are due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, scores in many countries already started declining in the years before the pandemic. This shows that the negative trend in results is also due to long-standing problems in education systems, not just a result of COVID.

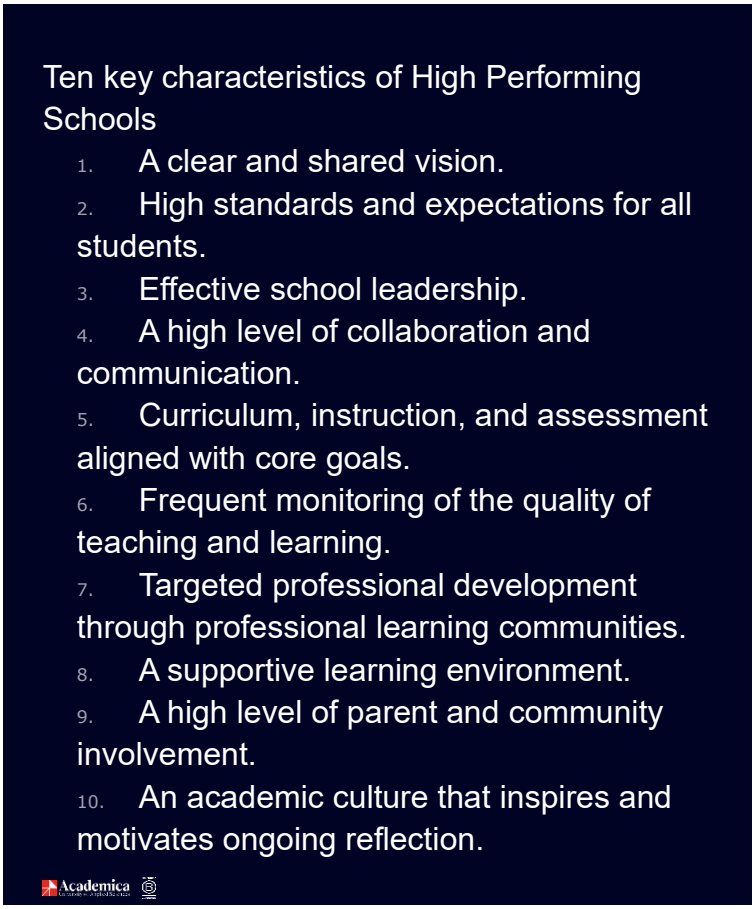
To ensure student learning, the current challenges in education require a shift in strategy, with an emphasis on improving the effectiveness of teachers in the classroom.

The High Performing Schools Programme

With this idea, Academica University of Applied Sciences developed the High Performing Schools (HPS) Programme: a change programme that combines insights from high performance organisations, research on the best performing schools in the world, cognitive psychology, sociology, organisational psychology and pedagogy. The HPS Programme strives to achieve high-quality education by creating a learning organisation that is permanently and continuously improving its education in an evidence-informed way, thus allowing all pupils to learn at the highest possible level for maximum opportunities in society. A significant theme in the governance of the HPS Programme is the central role of the teacher. Teachers not only carry responsibility for the quality of their lessons; mechanisms are set in place for teachers to influence organisational development.

Building on research- and educational practice-based principles, High Performing Schools can be recognized by ten key characteristics (Figure 1). The pillars of De Waal form the framework for improvement on the ten key characteristics during the Programme.

Figure 1: Ten characteristics of High Performing Schools.



Results

A study by Agirdag and Muijs (2023) shows that participation in the HPS programme had a strong positive relationship with learning gains compared to non-HPS schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers investigated the effect of two versions of the HPS programme ('HPS and Professional Learning Communities' and 'HPS and Leadership') on learning gains in maths, reading and writing and on the cumulative results. The cumulative results showed that the overall effect on learning in the 'HPS and Professional Learning Communities' version was eight months, whilst the effect of 'HPS and Leadership' was moderate but non-significant. The 'HPS and Professional Learning Communities' version led to six months of learning gains in maths and eight months of learning gains in writing, no significant effects were found for reading.

These results demonstrate that school improvement (changing the tide!) is possible. Although further research on the underlying processes and the long-term impact of the HPS programme is required, the study provides some evidence for the effectiveness of an integrated evidence-informed approach on school improvement. The authors stress that to improve the quality of education and as such learning outcomes in schools, an emphasis on Continuing Professional Development is key.

Academica University of Applied Sciences is looking forward to working with schools around the world to make the shift happen.

Biography

Sonja Broerse works as an assistant professor at Academica University of Applied Sciences with a focus on High Expectation Teaching and Equity. Furthermore, she is project leader of the Research@School programme, a programme that aims to bridge the gap between research and practice.

Further reading

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Developing an Evidence-Based Approach in Schools

James Maxwell

At researchED Belfast I gave an honest account from my own experience of what works and what doesn't work when implementing an evidence-based approach. I talked about the starting points, the marginal gains over time, what has worked in terms of enhancing pedagogical discourse amongst staff, the importance of an organic approach to implementation and the challenges and opportunities faced. I also mentioned the partnerships forged in the pursuit of an evidence-based approach, the books read, and how a focus on research is impacting on pupils' learning experiences.

What is an evidence-based approach?

There was one initial piece of research which was the game changer when I came across it back in 2015. That is the Sutton Trust's "**What makes Great Teaching?**", published in 2014. The Sutton Trust Report outlines what factors are most likely to have the strongest impact on learning, and there are two in particular that they reference

- Firstly, the deeper a teacher's subject knowledge, the more effective they are likely to be. When that deep knowledge is combined with quality instructional methods such as modelling, scaffolding and effective questioning, it has the potential for significant impact in the classroom.

- The Sutton Trust Report also identifies a further range of factors which have moderate impact in the classroom, including classroom climate – the rapport between pupil and teacher and how that is conveyed in the classroom through expectations, as well as classroom management − how well the teacher manages the room and manages behaviour. When all those factors – whether strong or moderate – come together in a happy melting pot, learning and teaching may be at its most effective.

Evidence-based research is most effective when it helps to identify 'nuggets' of practice which we want to develop further, based on our own professional experience and the context of our classroom.

By extension, that is exactly what research-informed practice should look like at a whole school level. And Jade Pearce gives a very good definition of this in her book "**What every teacher needs to know**", in which she talks about how evidence-informed teaching isn't something prescriptive which places emphasis on findings from research over teachers' experience. Rather, evidence-informed teaching combines evidence from research with teachers' experience and professional judgement, and also takes account of the context of the school or class.

It acknowledges that whilst research evidence can identify those practices that are most likely to be effective, this must be combined with teachers' judgement and experience of what works best and must also be modified to suit different schools and classes – what works for a certain group of pupils, a certain school or in a certain subject may not be effective elsewhere.

Why evidence-based research?

Firstly, because it allows schools to identify those 'nuggets' of professional practice which may have the optimal impact – based on the localised context of the school. If leaders choose those nuggets well – they will get buy in from teachers. Teachers have an in-built radar for what works and what doesn't.

Secondly, evidence-based teaching helps to debunk learning myths – It helps us understand what is ineffective. Ineffective practice includes VAK learning styles, and having to ensure that pupils are always 'active' (or 'kinaesthetic') in their learning.

Thirdly, an evidence-based approach can help to reduce workload – a significant marginal gain.

How do we embed an evidence-based approach?

There are 6 steps which I would identify as a framework for embedding evidence-informed strategies.

These 6 steps can be applied to any school, primary/post-primary, special, further education or otherwise wishing to develop a research-informed approach. These steps apply equally to any 'nugget' a school chooses to focus on for development, it may be an aspect of pastoral care, an approach to literacy or numeracy, the development of phonics, standards and outcomes for boys, metacognition, you name it.

- Step 1: Choose the focus – keep it narrow and specific
- Step 2: Emphasise and encourage the reading of research
- Step 3: Employ the experts – internally and externally
- Step 4: Allow time for trial and error
- Step 5: Keep refreshing the research base
- Step 6: Review, re-evaluate and re-employ

Being research-informed

- Helps to build the rationale
- Helps to map the journey and identify what the end outcome will look like
- Buys ownership
- Enhances pedagogical discussion
- Makes teachers feel like professionals
- Raises standards

Marginal Gains

- Research library for staff – keep low stakes
- Online CPD portal for staff – keep low stakes
- Allocate time for research – light-touch and linked to SDP priorities
- Ask the experts – internal and external!
- Invest in staff – books
- Keep the focus specific
- Keep the approach organic
- Keep it low-stakes

Generative AI from a Cognitive Science Perspective

Alistair Hamill

In a presentation at researchEd Belfast, I examined Generative AI (particularly Large Language Models, or LLMs) from a cognitive science (cog sci) perspective, posing six essential questions educators should consider to assess the benefits and risks of AI in education.

1. LLMs: Dystopia or Utopia?

The debate on generative AI often splits into two camps: utopia and dystopia. Are LLMs revolutionary educational tools, or do they risk undermining academic integrity? With the advent of tools like ChatGPT, students can easily create polished assignments, making it challenging for educators to verify authentic student work. Concerns from teachers and academic bodies, such as the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ), emphasise the potential misuse of AI when students submit uncredited AI-generated content. This phenomenon has even been termed "The Homework Apocalypse" – how can we ensure students truly engage in the learning process if we can't confirm they produced their work?

Alternatively, some are lauding LLMs' potential to advance education, particularly through personalised learning. Bloom's goal of mastery learning through tailoring the pace to individual students might become more feasible with AI, they argue.

2. Framing LLMs as Tools

Viewing LLMs as tools could provide a more balanced perspective between these two conflicting views. Historically, transformative tools like writing and the printing press sparked initial scepticism, yet they ultimately enhanced cognitive capacities by enabling us to store information externally and process complex concepts more effectively. Cognitive science concepts like The Extended Mind (Clark & Chalmers, 1998) and Miller's (1956) research on working memory limitations highlight how external aids (like writing) serve as cognitive extensions – ideas that have been translated well into education contexts by Oliver Caviglioli.

Seen through the extended mind lens, LLMs could similarly act as (to use Ethan Mollick's phrase) a "co-intelligence" by working alongside us, extending our ability to brainstorm, iterate and refine ideas. LLMs aren't meant to replace human thinking but to collaborate with it, enhancing reflection and deeper understanding.

3. How Do People Think?

If we are to maximise the potential of AI as a cognitive partner, two key dimensions that cognitive science has taught us about how learning works are helpful to consider.

- **Building Mental Models (schema building)**
  According to Jerome Bruner, a key goal of learning is to help pupils construct mental models to understand the world. Effective teaching goes beyond imparting facts; it helps students develop interconnected mental schemas. To construct those mental models, the pupils must think deeply. The Independent Review of Education in NI (2023) says that Bruner's contention was 'that learning is an active process conducted in the brain of the learner.' The review goes on to say that 'the teacher may provide information, but nothing is learned unless the pupil creates understanding for him/herself'. Daniel Willingham underscores this in his important phrase: "memory is the residue of thought." We remember what we think deeply about.

- **The Power of Desirable Difficulties**
  Research by Bjork and Bjork demonstrates the benefit of learning challenges, or "desirable difficulties," which strengthen understanding and retention. It is through that challenge that these processes help build mental models. A risk of LLMs is that they might encourage students to avoid these challenging steps, undermining long-term learning by bypassing the effort needed to internalise knowledge.

4. What is an LLM, and How Does it "Think"?

Understanding how LLMs generate responses is important for contextualising their strengths and limitations. While LLMs simulate human language and even seem conversational, their operation is statistical, not reflective. Generative AI LLMs work through complex probability algorithms; LLMs are essentially predictive text on a vast scale, trained on extensive datasets to identify probable sequences in language.

Two implications arise from this:

- **LLMs Prioritise Probability Over Truth**
  LLMs may produce plausible-sounding but incorrect responses (hallucinations) because they generate text based on patterns, not factual understanding. Therefore, critical evaluation of their output is essential, especially in educational settings.

- **LLMs are Designed to be Cooperative, Not Challenging**
  LLMs aim to be helpful, offering quick answers, which can conflict with educational goals that require effortful, deep learning. Their tendency to offer immediate solutions risks reducing students' motivation to engage in challenging cognitive processes.

5. How Should Teachers Use LLMs?

LLMs present opportunities to reduce teachers' workloads. Research by Keppler, Sinchaisri, and Snyder (2024) identifies two primary applications in education:

- **Creating Outputs:** Teachers use AI to streamline the creation of assessments, learning materials, and lesson plans. However, the AI-generated content often requires refinement to align with teachers' specific goals.

- **Seeking Input:** Teachers can also use AI to inspire and refine ideas. This "co-intelligence" approach aligns with Mollick's notion of AI as a thought partner. By iterating on initial ideas with AI's support, teachers may achieve greater productivity and creativity than by merely automating tasks.

To maximise AI's potential, teachers can use a model based on thoughtful prompting. Instead of merely requesting answers, educators could prompt LLMs to take on coaching roles, asking reflective questions that stimulate deeper thinking and iterative improvement.

6. Guiding Students to Think with LLMs

For students, the risk of "cognitive shortcuts" is high, as AI tools may tempt them to bypass deeper learning processes. Some schools have chosen to try to ban AI use outright; but given AI's ubiquity and increasing integration into the apps we use for our writing (Word and Docs), this approach might be unsustainable. Instead, educators can guide students on how to use AI effectively by teaching them three key principles:

1. **Understanding How LLMs Work**
   Students should know that LLMs operate as advanced predictive text tools, helping them prompt effectively and critically evaluate AI outputs.

2. **Knowing How Learning Works**
   Educators can emphasise the goal of schema-building and the role of "desirable difficulties," so students use AI to support – rather than shortcut – these cognitive processes.

3. **Learning to Prompt for Reflection**
   Teaching students how to prompt LLMs for guidance (rather than direct answers) fosters critical thinking. For instance, a prompt like, "You are a teaching coach for a secondary school student. Offer feedback that helps me reflect and think about my process," encourages AI to act as a study companion rather than an answer-giver, reinforcing meaningful learning.

Conclusion

By exploring these six questions, educators can better integrate LLMs into learning, balancing their benefits and limitations. Understanding the cognitive science behind learning and how LLMs operate enables teachers and students to use these tools effectively, promoting genuine learning and critical thinking rather than mere convenience.

Personal Development

Coaching and Mental Models

Haili Hughes

In the last ten years, there has been a great deal of work helping teachers understand the science of learning to help them become more effective teachers. However, there has been less about how cognitive science may also help us coach more effectively. Coaching has been growing in popularity in England, with many schools and trusts embedding it into their professional development. If done well, coaching can be truly transformative, but it needs to be responsive to teacher needs, taking into account their prior experiences rather than being constantly directive.

One crucial factor in coaching for teacher agency is episodic memory. Episodic memory is a type of long-term memory which involves the recollection of specific teaching experiences, including the emotions associated with them. It allows us to mentally travel back in time to relive moments and plays a crucial role in sensemaking about new problems. It plays a key role in coaching by shaping how we reflect on and learn from our experiences. We often rely on episodic memories of past teaching events, such as challenges or successes, during reflective exercises.

Video is a fantastic tool for coaches to use because videos of teaching sessions can trigger episodic memories, helping teachers analyse their actions more accurately and refine their practices. This reflective process, linking past experiences with new knowledge, enables deeper learning as it facilitates problem solving because:

- Episodic memories are rich with contextual details – specific events, emotions and sensory experiences. When a teacher encounters a new challenge, retrieving a similar memory helps recognise underlying patterns or connections between seemingly unrelated problems.

- Episodic memories also often contain emotional significance, which makes the retrieval of relevant past events more vivid. Emotions help prioritise which solutions worked and which didn't. This can lead to better decision-making when facing complex or novel situations.

- Complex problems require adaptive thinking, where teachers need to apply insights from a previous context to a new, more complex one. Episodic memories are detailed and unique, they allow individuals to reframe and tweak old solutions to fit the new problem.

- Episodic memory stores more than just explicit facts. It also holds tacit knowledge, or know-how, which includes intuition, judgment and personal strategies. These are difficult to articulate but crucial for solving challenges.

- There's a cognitive load reduction from familiarity. When a new challenge resembles past experiences, episodic memory retrieval reduces cognitive load by providing frameworks or analogies. This frees up mental resources to focus on the more complex aspects of the new problem.

Therefore, drawing on episodic memories in coaching makes complex challenges more manageable by providing mental shortcuts, promoting creativity and engaging emotional and tacit knowledge. This transforms problem-solving from a purely analytical task into a holistic, experience-informed effort.

How does this link with mental models? Mental models are internal representations of how things work, which influence teacher's decision-making. Episodic memories help shape and update these mental models over time. So, when teachers reflect on specific classroom events, their episodic memories serve as raw material for adjusting their mental models, allowing them to identify patterns and align theory with practice. This reflection helps them refine teaching practices through experience.

But the episodic memories of experienced teachers differ from those of novice teachers, as experienced teachers have a deeper repository of teaching events, enabling them to recall complex classroom situations and patterns with greater detail and nuance. They can more easily identify recurring themes and adapt strategies from previous experiences. Experienced teachers may also have less emotionally charged memories, so can reflect objectively, while novices might experience heightened emotions linked to stressful situations. They can often also better integrate episodic memories into mental models, using their past experiences to make decisions intuitively and efficiently.

So how can coaches use this information practically?

Coaches can help teachers leverage episodic memories by fostering reflective dialogue, supported by video analysis. Videos of classroom sessions can prompt teachers to recall specific events and discuss challenges or successes. It can also guide teachers to analyse these memories in light of research, enhancing mental models. Videos can also help teachers recognise recurring themes and help them refine strategies from previous lesson clips, alongside expert feedback.

However, to do this, a focus on proper dialogue is vital. Asking probing questions encourages teachers to reflect on their experiences in depth. For example, 'Can you walk me through a moment when a lesson didn’t go as planned?' This stimulates

detailed recollections, activating episodic memory by linking the discussion to specific events.

Video-based reflection plays a powerful role by allowing teachers to revisit past lessons and evaluate their decisions. Coaches can facilitate reflection by asking: 'What were you thinking at this moment?' or 'How did the students respond, and how did that shape your next steps?' This type of dialogue aligns with Schön's concept of 'reflection-on-action,' helping teachers connect their memories with goals.

Coaches can also draw out teachers' emotional experiences, which are deeply tied to episodic memories. 'What were you feeling in that situation, and how did it impact your response?' Acknowledging emotions linked to past teaching moments helps teachers process both positive and challenging experiences, linking with future practices.

There is even a link between teacher retention and episodic memory. It influences how teachers reflect on their professional experiences and derive personal meaning from their work. Teachers face emotional and cognitive challenges throughout their career. When they can recall positive teaching experiences, their episodic memories contribute to higher job satisfaction and resilience. These act as emotional anchors, helping them persist in difficult periods. Negative episodic memories, if not addressed, can increase stress and burnout. Effective coaching encourages teachers to reflect on both positive and challenging memories and can reframe these experiences, helping teachers build stronger mental models to manage future challenges. Coaches who facilitate reflective conversations can guide teachers to reinterpret difficult memories, fostering a sense of growth and mastery rather than frustration. Helping teachers connect episodic memories with actionable teaching strategies builds confidence and competence.

Professional Learning Conversations: Understanding and Adapting Your Stance

Richard Reid

In the landscape of modern education, professional conversations are a constant – some are planned, others spontaneous, some formal, others informal, but all serve as a vital element of an educator's professional journey. The essence of these conversations is not merely the exchange of information but the cultivation of growth, development and collaboration among educators. This article seeks to unpack the concept of *professional learning conversations*, asking educators to consider their "stance" in these interactions: How do you show up? What's your role? And how might a shift in your approach benefit the other person and enrich the conversation?

A Continuum of Stances in Professional Conversations

Inspired by Chris Munro's "Continuum of Professional Learning Conversations," my presentation examined the breadth of conversation stances educators might adopt, from a highly facilitative stance focused on listening and inquiry to a more directive stance that involves offering guidance and advice. This continuum reflects the diversity of roles we play as educators, whether in mentoring, coaching, or supporting colleagues.

The concept of a continuum is essential here. As Munro and others, including Downey and van Nieuwerburgh, have argued, the nature of effective professional learning conversations does not fit neatly into fixed categories. Myles Downey's work on the range of directive to non-directive coaching skills helps illustrate this. At one end, non-directive skills such as active listening, reflecting, and asking open-ended questions foster a facilitative environment. At the other end, directive skills like giving advice, offering guidance, or setting explicit goals provide structure and clarity. By presenting this range of conversational stances, educators can better understand how to adapt their approach in response to the needs of the person they're engaging with. As the 'conversation leader', how can we best serve the thinking and progress of our conversation partner?

The Facilitative, Dialogic, and Directive Stances

In exploring professional learning conversations, three stances are particularly useful: facilitative, dialogic, and directive. These represent different points along the continuum and serve unique purposes within educational settings:

1. **Facilitative Stance** – At the facilitative end, the primary focus is on inquiry and tapping into the other person's strengths and resources. Here, the "helper" adopts what's often called a "beginner's mind," setting aside their own expertise to be fully open to their partner's perspective. This stance is ideal for fostering

deep reflection and empowering the other person to explore their own solutions.

2. **Dialogic Stance** – Situated between facilitative and directive, the dialogic stance maintains a balance between inquiry and suggestion. This approach is common in instructional coaching, where the coach brings specific subject or pedagogical knowledge but seeks to draw on the coachee's insights. It is collaborative, ensuring that the coachee remains in the "driver's seat," yet the coach may offer options or insights when needed. We are thinking and sense-making together.

3. **Directive Stance** – At the more directive end of the continuum, the helper takes a more active role in providing specific guidance, training, or advice. This stance is particularly helpful when the person being supported is new to a role or situation and needs explicit direction to move forward. In these cases, the helper's expertise provides a clear roadmap, temporarily positioning their partner in the "passenger seat" to absorb new knowledge and strategies. The aim here is to shift back to a dialogic or facilitative stance as skill and confidence grow.

Jim Knight's work on the "Impact Cycle" process for Instructional Coaches aligns well with this continuum, describing how different coaching approaches can help educators improve their practice. Whether employing a facilitative, dialogic, or directive approach, the key is to meet the individual where they are and provide the level of support that best serves their growth.

The Fluidity of Roles and Responsive Adaptation

One of the most important aspects of professional learning conversations is understanding that roles are fluid, and effective educators often "hop" between facilitative, dialogic, and directive stances based on the situation. This fluidity acknowledges that no single approach fits every scenario; rather, it requires responsiveness to the unique needs and goals of each conversation. The key here is discernment.

Holding labels such as "coach" or "mentor" more lightly can further enhance the effectiveness of these interactions. Instead, those who lead these conversations should focus on developing a framework and skill-set that supports a range of responses. Core practices such as active listening, asking thoughtful questions, building on strengths, and empathising can benefit any role dedicated to professional growth.

Fostering a Culture of Growth Through Stance Awareness

Bringing awareness to stance within professional learning conversations has implications for how educators interact with one another and with their students. By reflecting on their conversational stance, educators can cultivate a more intentional and adaptive approach to their professional relationships. For example, in a mentoring context, an educator may take a directive stance to provide clarity on specific teaching methods. Conversely, in a coaching setting, adopting a facilitative stance might encourage a colleague to discover their own path, deepening their learning and sense of ownership.

These conversations are not only essential for personal development but also contribute to a collaborative and supportive culture within schools. As educators become more discerning and skilled in adapting their stance, they can inspire openness to change, critical reflection, and a commitment to continuous improvement among their peers.

Conclusion: Beyond the Badge

Ultimately, effective professional learning conversations are not defined by titles or labels but by the ability to adapt one's approach to suit the needs of our conversation partner in the moment. Whether you are an instructional coach, mentor, school leader, or teacher, the skills and dispositions needed for these conversations remain remarkably consistent. The goal is to foster a learning environment that respects the individuality of each educator and empowers them to grow.

Through understanding and adapting our stance in professional conversations, we can create a more responsive, supportive, and growth-oriented culture in our schools. This continuum-based approach provides a pathway for educators to engage more meaningfully with one another, promoting a shared journey of learning and development. In this way, every professional learning conversation becomes an opportunity for educators to not only support each other's professional goals but to inspire one another towards excellence in teaching and learning.

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For more information on Growth Coaching International visit our website www.growthcoaching.com.au

Teaching and Learning

Leading Teaching and Learning – A Journey from Autonomy to Compliance and Back to Autonomy

Richard Wheadon

At researchED Belfast, I shared our school's five-year journey in developing the quality of teaching and learning, which began with a shift from teacher autonomy to a compliance-driven model before gradually returning to autonomy, with the ultimate aim of cultivating adaptive expertise. When I joined the school, while our outcomes were commendable – positioning us among the city's leading schools – a deeper analysis of data revealed opportunities for improvement. I encouraged Heads of Department to seek granular insights to identify strengths and weaknesses within examination results, especially in comparison to schools with similar contexts. In one telling analysis, the Head of Science noted that while our students generally performed well, they underperformed on questions requiring basic recall.

This revelation did not come as a surprise. Early learning walks had already hinted at "lethal mutations" of Bloom's Taxonomy – a situation where evidence-based practices are adapted to the point where their original intent becomes distorted. Such mutations often arise when teachers modify educational research to fit their context, inadvertently creating practices that contradict the intended pedagogical benefits. In our case, the school's strong historical performance had fostered a prevailing belief that students should quickly progress to higher-order thinking skills, bypassing the foundational knowledge essential for mastery. As a result, not only was core knowledge undervalued, but the mechanisms supporting its retention were largely absent. Opportunities for recall and retention-focused activities were minimal, creating a gap that, over time, began to impact results. We were not alone with this problem, leading educators across the sector were identifying this trend. As Lemov noted, "the pyramid image, which puts knowledge at the bottom, suggests that knowledge-based questions, especially via recall and retrieval practice, are the least productive thing they could be doing in class."

Other "lethal mutations" were also evident within the school, including a misapplication of dual coding principles. For instance, presentation slides were often overloaded with images that distracted rather than supported learning. However, the devaluation of core knowledge stood out, both in data and in classroom observations, providing a clear starting point for re-evaluation.

With these insights, and after consultation with our Heads of Department, we established a set of guiding principles for teaching and learning, loosely inspired by Rosenshine's principles but thoughtfully adapted to suit our school's unique context:

- Independent practice to deepen and challenge student learning
- Scaffolded instruction to ensure accessibility for all pupils
- Assessment for learning to identify and address misconceptions
- Effective questioning strategies
- Modelling to support student understanding
- Low-stakes testing to reinforce the retention of core knowledge

We then focused on fostering staff buy-in and establishing a developmental cycle to embed these practices meaningfully within classroom teaching. Staff were asked to select a principle to prioritise as part of their appraisal target and were subsequently grouped into “Teaching and Learning Communities” (TLCs) alongside colleagues who shared the same priority. The concept of TLCs draws on the work of Dylan William, who has long critiqued the inefficacy of typical professional development approaches. As he noted, “not enough thought was given to how to support teachers in making changes to their practice when they returned to their classrooms – the process of teacher change”.

To ensure our TLCs achieved their desired impact, we incorporated insights from the Education Endowment Foundation’s research on effective professional development, emphasising four critical mechanisms:

1. Building knowledge
2. Motivating staff
3. Developing teaching techniques
4. Embedding practice

At researchED Belfast, I discussed in depth how each of these elements was integrated into our TLC programme. More details can be found in the EEF report.

After a year of professional development, each staff member produced a one-page summary of their findings and reflections, which has collectively informed our teaching policy. A copy of the policy can be found here.

Following this foundational year, we introduced a quality assurance process to measure alignment with these principles. In the second year, our focus shifted from compliance to assessing the quality and depth of engagement with the principles.

It was around this time that Ofsted visited and their feedback included commendations on our teaching quality and educational standards: “Leaders have developed a programme of staff development based on current educational thinking and research. Staff feel well supported with their workload and wellbeing. They value the investment that leaders make in their professional development.”

The shift to increase compliance was necessary to reduce lethal mutations and ensure our teaching practice was evidence informed, however I had some concerns about our compliance-driven culture we had created, a sentiment that was also resonating within the EduTwitter community. Enser aptly expressed this shift: “Rosenshine… was like a gateway drug luring teachers into the exciting world of research and pedagogical discussion… but for some, it risks becoming either a stick to beat them with, a performance to put on, or a rigid checklist.”

In response, we embarked on the final phase of our journey – a return to autonomy, with an emphasis on cultivating adaptive expertise. This goal to empower teachers to make evidence-informed decisions in the moment, in response to student needs. To support this shift, we have replaced quality assurance lesson observations with a coaching model. Our current focus is not on adherence to set principles but rather on fostering teachers’ mental models, helping them to make nuanced, context-responsive decisions in real-time. We are still early on this journey but further detail can be found here.

Further reading

www.teachlikeachampion.org

www.researchgate.net

www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk

www.teachreal.wordpress.com

Why Learning Fails (And What To Do About It)

Alex Quigley

Let me introduce you to the conundrum of Craig.

I can still see Craig in my mind's eye, smiling at his desk and coasting through his GCSE qualifications. After a jovial hello at the beginning of each lesson, followed by a rummage through his cluttered school bag, Craig would settle into his chair and wait for you, his teacher, to work hard.

Polite, compliant – and never a behaviour problem in the conventional sense – Craig would routinely avoid thinking hard. He would be slow to start tasks and do little to no independent study outside the narrow confines of the classroom under the scrutiny of supervision. Effectively, with a serene smile, he was playing truant whilst still sitting at his desk.

Craig would routinely engage in 'one shot thinking' that would result in regular failures. Faced with a complex question, he would quickly expel the first thought from his mind. Despite being implored to devise essay plans, mind-maps, and similar strategies, he would do the bare minimum, awaiting a nudge or exasperated instruction.

If his response was incorrect or required yet more forethought and planning, then Craig would give up. He would reject reflection and push back on any demand to plan out his learning.

Does Craig sound familiar? It is common for teachers to share stories of pupils struggling and failing to access the curriculum or to achieve exam success. My researchED talk on '*Why Learning Fails (And What To Do About It)*' explores the issues that lead to learning failure, along with practical strategies.

Teaching 'learned industriousness'

We can too easily assume that pupils like Craig are plainly lazy, or 'not the academic type'. But it is often the case that we can be more explicit as teachers about how to work hard and strategically – that is to say, how to practise 'learned industriousness'. We can encourage evidence-informed planning strategies to enhancing pupils' planning. For example:

- **'Cleared for take-off checklists'**. This checklist strategy helps in complex multi-step tasks that require deliberate, effortful thinking and a necessary degree of preparation. For instance, in mathematics, if pupils are solving a range of algebraic equations, then their '*Cleared for Take-off Checklist*' may start with an identification of equation types (e.g., *linear*, *quadratic*, etc.) before then including problem-solving strategies (e.g., *factoring*, *completing the square*, etc.).

- **'Planning check-points'**. Pupils can easily run out of mental energy, so chunking down the task into smaller timeframes – with a return to their checklist or outline – at an identified checkpoint, can help pupils better take on a tricky task.
- **'Reverse engineering'**. Instead of attempting to complete the task itself, pupils are given the model response and must reverse engineer a plan for it. For instance, with an excellent solution in maths or an animation in computer science, pupils are asked to explain the solution and planning steps, thereby reflecting upon the principles and planning that steered the final product.

For many pupils, including Craig, we need to be more explicit in modelling planning and independent learning. Whether it is establishing rituals and routines around lunchtime in early years, or how to revise for multiple exams for older students, learners need to be taught the 'why', 'what', 'when', and 'how' of purposeful learning.

Focus on failure…to achieve success

It appears paradoxical – or downright negative – for teachers to focus on failure, but the reality is that learning is so complex, and teaching is so challenging, that it happens routinely.

Professor Dylan Wiliam puts it concisely:
"*Every teacher fails on a daily basis. If you are not failing, you are just not paying attention because we all fail all the time*."

By engaging with research evidence focused on teaching practice, teachers can be more confident in the strategies they develop in the classroom. It can help complement their hard-won professional expertise. The likes of cognitive psychology, or the research guidance of the Education Endowment Foundation, can support teachers and school leaders to make a transformative difference for their pupils.

I did not solve the conundrum of Craig easily, nor was there some Hollywood success story ending, but there was an evidence-informed approach to reflect on the challenge and to act with confidence and assurance about what is likely to work best. When we better understand how learning might fail – aided by the use of apt evidence – we can increase our likelihood of teaching and learning success.

Biography

Alex Quigley is the author of '*Why Learning Fails (And What To Do About It)*'

Myths about Education

Daisy Christodoulou

When I trained as a teacher in England in 2007, these are some of the things I was taught: it's better for pupils to discover a fact than to be told it. Children learn best working on authentic, real-world projects. Schools and traditional subject boundaries are silos which stifle the natural creativity we all have within us. And this last fact especially: there is no point teaching a body of knowledge, because within a few years it will be outdated and useless. Don't teach the what, teach the how. 'Drill and kill' and 'chalk and talk' will lead to passive and unhappy pupils.

Many teachers globally are still taught the same messages. So it's unfortunate that these ideas are deeply flawed. There's solid evidence that mostly, the exact opposite is true. Discovery learning is hugely inefficient and ineffective. Authentic projects overload working memory and confuse pupils. Skills are domain-specific and depend on a well-organised body of knowledge securely committed to long-term memory. Deliberate practice – what might be called 'drill' – is necessary for mastery. Here's the real truth: direct teacher instruction is good for pupils' academic achievement and their self-esteem.

Over the past 50 or so years, scientists have discovered more about how the brain learns than ever before. Their findings have profound implications for education, but too few of these are known or taught within education.

One of the interesting things about the prevailing myths of teacher training is that they are not new. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was pushing them in the 18th century. Since then, despite a consistent lack of success, they've persisted, under different names and with different justifications.

For example, one popular buzzword at the moment is '21st-century skills', which sounds about as cutting-edge and modern as it gets. It's often defined in terms of modern technology and the demands of the modern economy. Generally, it tends to mean not burdening pupils with knowledge, because facts are so easy to look up on the internet and now change so fast.

But a similar case was made at the start of the 20th century. In 1911, a prominent US educationalist criticised the way that schools taught pupils 'a mass of knowledge that can have little application for the lives which most of them must inevitably lead'. Today we also hear a lot about the importance of 'innovative' project- and activity-based learning. But in England in the 1930s, the Hadow Report into primary education counselled that the curriculum should be thought of 'in terms of activity and experience rather than knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored'. We've been trying these ideas, and failing with them, for a very long time.

So how have the myths survived? One reason may be that they tell us something that we want to hear. They sell a vision of a world in which we all have fantastic talent just waiting to be unleashed; in which learning is as natural and as inevitable as growing up. Education, the myth-peddlers will tell you, means ‘drawing out’. In fact, that’s not the word’s real etymology – and what is ‘put in’ is vitally important.

Compared to the myths, the reality can sound a bit depressing. While we learn to speak and to understand speech naturally, most of the other things we want our pupils to learn – including reading and writing – will always require effort, and there are few shortcuts. However, there are also some encouraging aspects of this research. Because learning is about hard work and quality of instruction more than it is about innate genius, all pupils are capable of achieving academically. There will always be differences in innate talent, of course, but we have more in common than we have apart, and so it is possible to identify teaching methods that will succeed for most pupils.

And just because learning is hard work doesn’t mean it isn’t enjoyable. Quite the contrary: often we derive the most satisfaction when we put in the most effort. We also derive satisfaction from success. That’s why ‘direct instruction’ teaching has been shown not only to result in more academic success than other methods, but also in pupils having more self-esteem.

One other reason why these myths have proved so pervasive is because, unfortunately, so much of the research evidence to the contrary is not part of teacher training in the UK or the US. Some of the scientists who did the research have noticed this and protested.

Take Herbert Simon. Simon is one of the major intellectual figures of the 20th century. He was a pioneer of artificial intelligence, and won a Nobel prize for his work on decision-making. His research into memory forms the basis of much of the evidence I’ve summarised above, and he was deeply concerned about the failure of the American educational establishment to consider his findings. Together with two colleagues, he wrote an article challenging what he called some of the ‘frightening’ misconceptions of modern education.

Likewise, the reading researcher Keith Stanovich has argued that ‘education has suffered because its dominant model for adjudicating disputes is political rather than scientific’. In his view, this has left education susceptible to romantic fads such as whole language reading methods.

However, over the last decade or so, there’s been a grass roots fight back against many of these bad ideas. More and more teachers are realising the gap between the theory they are taught and their practical experience. More and more books are being published which explain the insights of cognitive science and the implications

they have for classroom teachers. The researchEd conference has enjoyed global success by giving teachers a forum to hear the real evidence about what works in education. Instead of the warmed-through fads of the past century, I think the next few years will see evidence-based reforms that lead to genuine educational improvements.

Further reading

Seven Myths about Education

The Above and Beyond Project: High Effort Learning at Carrickfergus Grammar School

Ryan Reaney and Suzy Patterson

No student at the beginning of their academic journey – be that at the start of a key stage, or the start of an academic year – sets out with the goal of failing in a subject. So why is it that some students succeed and some fail? What can be gained from comparing the effort levels of both successful and unsuccessful students? More importantly, for educators, can we engage with students who display low effort learning? Can we facilitate students as they journey towards high effort study habits, and ultimately lead them to better academic outcomes?

Based upon insights gained from James Clear's book *Atomic Habits* and work by Steve Oakes and Martin Griffin on student mindsets, participation, and motivation, the Above and Beyond: High Effort Learning team carried out action research, using samples of students of varying academic ability and perceived effort level.

The objectives of this research were as follows:

- Use academic data, staff feedback, and student survey responses on study skills to identify a cohort of students that may be perceived as low effort.
- Form a sample research group of students from that cohort using academic data and teacher input to select high, middle, and low effort learners.
- Explicitly define what high effort learning involves to students.
- Measure effort levels of students within the sample using student and parent feedback.
- Compare and contrast reactive and proactive effort.
- Nurture a culture of high effort/hard work allowing the development of expectancy of future happiness. A breakdown of the Expectancy-Value theory and its three components was utilised in the workshops.
- Engage with students through a series of interactive workshops as they compared the learning strategies implemented by high effort learners and low effort learners. Set students effort challenges between workshops which were designed to take them out of their comfort zones. These challenges were differentiated and provided personalised target setting for each student based upon where they were in their learning journey.
- Provide all stakeholders (staff, parents, and students) the opportunity to engage with the project and better understand how to support high effort learning.
- Compare the academic performance of the students in the sample after the Above and Beyond Project in summer assessments compared to before the project.
- Compare the perceived effort level of students within the sample using feedback from students, parents, and staff.

The impact

Pupils' mean standardised score from Christmas assessments and Summer Assessments were compared:

- Year 9: 58% of students achieved higher grades
- Year 10: 67% of students achieved higher grades
- Ethos and mindset change noted from staff members
- Findings from parent survey influenced a whole school focus on homework for next academic year

This project emphasised the importance of the systems that students put in place and the effort necessary throughout the academic journey to achieve their goals.

Work was done to help students manage their own emotions and actions as they went on a journey of raising the effort they placed into their study habits.

Challenging current student habits using self-reflection opportunities provided opportunities for the sample group to voice their concerns, worries, and positive thoughts in a safe environment.

Action researchers coached students through each individual journey.

A common thought shared by several students in the sample group is that they did not necessarily see the impact of their effort on their academic performance immediately; like many aspects of life, when high levels of effort are placed into a project for a number of weeks, but little progress appears to have been made. Students at times felt disheartened. Researchers supported students within the sample during this time and highlighted that early progress can seem invisible.

It was noted that students within the sample had preconceived notions regarding their ability to succeed in a subject or not. "I'm not very good at maths" one student stated. "I am bad at English". These reflections highlighted issues of identity for the students within the sample. All wanted to do well in their academic subjects. Yet many stated they were not good at those subjects! There was a clear disconnect between the outcomes students desired and their identity in many incidences.

Another common finding, and what separates successful students from unsuccessful students in relation to high effort learning, is a plan! Students identified as low effort simply did not know what high effort behaviours looked like. This was the benefit of providing students with a list of explicit study effort challenges ranging from easy to difficult which enabled them to implement high effort study habits. This focus on understanding the processes required to be a high effort student, encouraged students to change their own beliefs regarding their ability in those subjects.

Student misconceptions regarding being good or bad at a subject, began to be replaced by a sense of, “if I do x, y, and z. Then I will get better at this subject.”. This eureka moment boosted the self-confidence of students in the sample group as they moulded their self-identity, they realised they could in fact achieve their outcomes, by having a plan which they would follow.

The value of discipline and following structured study habits became apparent to students at times when they felt disheartened as it carried them through when motivation fell away. This in turn boosted feelings of self-worth and achievement when researchers conversed with the students.

Next Steps

The action researchers feel there would be significant value for students if they had a peer role model that they could compare their journey to. Students would be able to compare their personal study habits, and effort levels compared to a student that has just been through that key stage successfully. The team feels this could inspire students to reach for their wanted outcomes, by seeing the value of focusing on the processes earlier and thus sparking that transformation in their self-belief system earlier. We believe this can be achieved in the following ways.

- Interview and record students that have just left Years 14, 12, and 10 asking them about their key study tips, WWW/ EBI, future plans. These interviews will be shared with students starting Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4, and Key Stage 5 thus providing current Year 8, 11, and 13 students with a realistic flight path of success from a peer.
- We aim to interview past students who have completed or are in their final year of a degree. Specifically targeting students attending Oxbridge and Medicine, Dentistry, Architecture, Engineering, and Law. The school aims to increase the number of students applying to and being accepted into top universities and these courses. Interviewed ex-students can provide a clear flight path for ambitious current students.
- Alumni community being a focus for improvement. Engaging with the alumni to share insights into a wide range of employment fields.
- Develop an effective high effort study habit page on the school website where interviews can be viewed and accessed by our students.
- Publish a habit tracking and progress monitoring document to be provided to Lower 6th form students as they journey through this phase of their academic life.
- Encourage staff involvement in the project and disseminate the impact of phase 2 of the project to all staff.
- Roll this initiative out to larger sample sizes each year until the whole school population has had intervention within 5 years.

Further reading

Clear, J. (2018). *Atomic Habits: an easy & proven way to build good habits & break bad ones*. New York: Avery.

Nalband, A. (2024, 11 12). *A Visual Book Summary of Atomic Habits* by James Clear. Retrieved from Thunk Notes: Available here.

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What We Can Learn From Recent Research on AI

Bradley Busch

The AI Problems

There are two big problems when it comes to AI and student learning. The first problem is that us humans are not very good at being able to detect whether student work is actually their own or if it is AI-generated. One recent research paper found that only 38% of teachers can accurately detect whether work submitted by their students is their own or AI generated. And just to make things worse, the same study also found that teachers tend to be over-confident in the ability to detect this. We call this the “Detection Overconfidence”.

Problem number 1 wouldn’t be such a big issue if it wasn’t for Problem 2.

Problem number 2 is that, currently, AI detecting software isn’t very good. Researchers have found that the best AI detection technology is accurate on average around 67% of the time. This means that a lot of students are either a) wrongly accused or b) getting away with it. The researchers could not be clearer when they state that “*detection tools are neither accurate nor reliable*”.

The Awkward AI Homework Question

So, to summarise, students are using generative AI a lot, and we can’t accurately tell when they do. So, what does this mean for homework? How do we know that they are doing the work and learning from it, as opposed to copying and pasting from ChatGPT?

One natural conclusion is that the value of essay writing at home has been seriously diminished. It seems harder now to justify that set of homework given the capabilities of Large Learning Models.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a foolproof answer. But it is a question that needs answering, and a conversation that needs to be happening in the staff room. The game has changed. Pandora’s box has been opened and there is no going back. This stuff is impacting student learning right now.

Further reading

Fleckenstein, J. et al. (2024) ‘Do teachers spot AI? Evaluating the detectability of AI-generated texts among student essays’, Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence. 6.

Weber-Wulff, D. et al. (2023) ‘Testing of detection tools for AI-generated text’, International Journal for Educational Integrity, 19. 10.

What We Can Learn From Recent Research on Feedback

Bradley Busch

Giving your students good feedback is essential to helping them develop their learning in the classroom. Although research agrees that feedback is highly influential for student learning, knowing the different types of feedback is important. What matters most is the type of feedback you provide and the way that you deliver it.

A review of the existing research on feedback by Hattie and Timperley looked at how effective it is for enhancing student learning. It suggests that the main purpose of feedback is to reduce discrepancies between a student's understanding of a concept or idea and their performance.

They concluded that for this to happen and be effective, the feedback you provide must answer three questions:

1. *Where am I going?* This helps students identify key goals.
2. *How am I going?* This gives students an indication of progress.
3. *Where to next?* This helps students understand what actions they need to take to make progress

Researchers also identified four different types of feedback:

1. *Feedback about the task*

This is where the feedback is focused on whether a task is done successfully. This is the most common type of feedback. It can be effective when used in the right context, which is when students have misunderstood a concept, rather than when they have not learned the concept yet.

Although this type of feedback can be effective, it might not be as effective as others. Feedback about a specific task is not generalisable and might encourage students to focus on getting the current task right instead of encouraging them to learn strategies that can be used in other tasks in the future.

2. *Feedback about the process*

This type of feedback focuses on the decisions, strategies and techniques students used during a task. It is about whether students have actually understood and implemented a concept or idea and can be highly effective for enhancing deeper learning.

Research suggests that combining feedback about the process students used with goal setting can help them develop a good "task strategy". This will help students perform better not only on current tasks, but also on future ones. This makes it highly effective for improving student learning.

3. *Feedback about self-regulation*

Feedback about self-regulation addresses the way that students monitor, direct and regulate their behaviour when they are learning. This includes behaviours like a student's ability to create internal feedback or their willingness to engage with feedback and apply it to future tasks.

4. *Feedback about the person*

This type of feedback is personal and often leads to labels like "good girl" or "you are smart". It contains very little task-related evaluation. Research suggests that personal feedback does not encourage student engagement, goal setting, or understanding about the task and is generally not effective at enhancing student learning.

Giving your students feedback on tasks is vital to improving their academic performance and enhancing their learning. However, what matters even more is the type of feedback you provide, and how you deliver it. Make it mainly about the process and self-regulation, which are more generalisable, to help your students improve their performance on current and future tasks. By prioritising feedback that is concise, clear and in an actionable way, we give them the best chance of improving their learning and performance.

Further reading

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Stretching the Learning of Able, Gifted and Talented Learners

Sarah Mullin

Able, gifted, and talented (AGT) learners thrive in settings where the highest levels of aspiration, expectation, and cognitive challenge exist. It is therefore essential that educators develop a repertoire of strategies, inspiring intellectual curiosity, and ensuring learners have access to a vast range of opportunities, experiences, and reflection exercises which maximise academic outcomes. It is important to acknowledge that able, gifted, and talented learners are not a homogeneous group; it is necessary to adapt practices according to situational context, recognising individual strengths, limitations, and motivations, so that bespoke learning opportunities can be provided. Here are five recommendations for stretching the learning of AGT students:

Assessing prior knowledge

In addition to drawing on prior assessment data, it is helpful to use retrieval exercises to ascertain what AGT learners may already know about a topic to help with lesson planning. A low-effort, high-impact strategy might be incorporating a 'brain dump' starter activity where children write down everything they already know and things that they would like to find out. This information can help teachers to plan appropriate depth and breadth in lessons, accelerating learning by lesson content and providing complex extension activities which enhance learning potential. It is important to note that increasing workload of the same level of challenge can be demotivational, therefore providing opportunities to build on students' prior knowledge is important for increasing engagement, such as delivering presentations to peers, engaging in wider reading opportunities, or accessing enrichment opportunities such as competitions, educational visits, attending related guest lectures.

Lesson planning

Stretching the learning of AGT learners requires careful planning. What is it that AGT learners should know by the end of the lesson and by the end of the topic? What tasks will AGT learners complete? What resources will be required to capture interest and further develop knowledge? Which questioning techniques will be required to deepen understanding and foster independence? What methods will be employed to assess learning outcomes? Whilst it is important to ensure that mandatory lesson content is covered in-depth, stretching the learning of AGT learners allows educators the opportunity to go beyond the curriculum.

Open communication

Open communication between education staff, students and parents/carers is an important part of establishing and sustaining positive working relationships, welcoming parents/carers to share in the child's learning journey. It is helpful to enquire about the child's interests and achievements outside of school, such as career ambitions and involvement in extra-curricular activities, so that accomplishments can be supported and celebrated. Regular communication also allows potential issues to be quickly identified and addressed.

Considering the child's social and emotional wellbeing

In addition to nurturing the intellectual needs of AGT learners, it is imperative that the social and emotional needs of the child are carefully considered. Some children may be acutely aware of their academic abilities and may experience a wide range of emotions such as perfectionism, sensitivity, perceptiveness, excitability and entelechy. It is important that children are taught social skills which will help them with self-awareness, managing their emotions and developing empathy so that they can thrive as individuals. Peer buddies can provide a safe, welcoming space for children to talk, reflect and build positive relationships at school.

Collaboration: sharing strategies

Ensuring meaningful transfer and transition practices is essential in order to help children continue to make rapid progress, sustaining their engagement and motivation for learning. This is particularly important where children move between classes, key stages and schools. It is important that education staff share information so that matters pertaining to planning, assessment, monitoring and evaluation of pupil progress can be utilised in a timely manner. The dissemination of information relating to AGT learners is helpful for teachers to share good practice, this may be in relation to teaching and learning strategies used, cross-curricular learning opportunities, or extra-curricular offerings, for example. Observing children in various lessons can also help teachers to identify trends and patterns which can strengthen the provision being offered.

Provision for able, gifted and talented students should always have a clear focus and a purposeful sense of progression. The provision for AGT learners will be shaped by the needs of the individual and the resources available, ensuring that the child makes significant progress relative to their baseline data. As educators, it is our duty to ensure that opportunities are created to help each student develop a thirst for knowledge, sustaining the personal dedication necessary to fulfil their potential.

Scaffolding, not Differentiation

Rachel Ball and Alex Fairlamb

For over a decade now, a lethally mutated form of differentiation has darkened the doorway of classrooms. This mutation has led to a culture of a complex array of tiered learning objectives, multiple worksheets, 'chili' challenges and the grouping of students by 'ability' according to data. Mulholland explains that differentiation like this leads to the "juggling of micro lessons" resulting in an enormous workload for teachers due to endless photocopying, different coloured worksheets etc.

Equally concerning is the impact that differentiation has upon teacher expectations of students and a student's mindset about their own potential. As Roberts argues 'what we are saying is that we expect much less from some students than others. We are advertising our low expectations to the class … The impact on motivation, effort levels and outcomes are catastrophic'.

Moreover, by pre-determining the curriculum and tiering work we are acting as gatekeepers as we are denying some students the opportunity to engage with the same curriculum that the chosen privileged ones are given access to, limiting their potential. We are effectively saying that there is a world that they cannot access, denying them the opportunity and support to experience it and indeed thrive. Myatt adds to this by arguing that 'above all, differentiation goes against the heart of the principles of the curriculum which is that all children should be following the same course of work, are entitled to do difficult things and are supported on the way**'.**

So if not differentiation, then what is the alternative?

The answer lies in a culture of 'teaching to the top' using scaffolding and adaptive teaching to achieve this. Instead of planning with the lower attainers in mind first, then adding on additional challenges, we should instead be starting with the highest expectation and outcome and then identifying scaffolding that will enable each child to get to that point. This differs from differentiation as we are not pre-determining tasks and what a child can do, instead we are preparing scaffolds based on our knowledge of the students then using checks for understanding to then unpack what scaffolding is needed during a lesson, which is responsive to need.

What is scaffolding and adaptive teaching?

A key question that is often asked is 'what is scaffolding?' Scaffolding is temporary support that is put into place with the intention of supporting the child to successfully engage in their learning with increasing autonomy and independence. Adaptive teaching is when a teacher uses checks for understanding in the lesson to adapt the lesson live in that moment by either removing or providing additional scaffolds. Adaptive teaching means being responsive to the feedback from the students, and expertly deploying appropriate scaffolding strategies to respond to that feedback.

For example, with an extended piece of writing, this could look like:

- Heavy scaffolding: Writing structure and frame including sentence starters for each paragraph and content nudges (what to include)
- Medium scaffolding: Writing structure and frame with sentence starters for just the first paragraph with a reduced amount of content nudges
- Light scaffolding: a verbal check-in about the structure and sentence starters, and students using their books to identify the content needed for the response

Scaffolding can be used throughout all aspects of a lesson, including retrieval, modelling, explanations, literacy, oracy and homework.

How can I approach knowing when and how to scaffold?

A helpful way that teachers can plan to provide scaffolding and then adapt live in the moment can be by using Jon Eaton's approach where he advocates using a three-step process:

- Anticipate barriers
- Use assessment to elicit understanding
- Make in the moment adaptations

In advance of the lesson, we will use a multitude of sources to identify what the barriers may be for students. These sources can include: formative assessment from prior lessons, knowledge of curriculum misconception hotspots, pupil passports etc. Using this information, teachers can then plan and prepare what scaffolds may be needed and by whom. This does not mean creating different resources with varying scaffolding strategies on it; it may be as simple as verbally reminding a few students about how to start a paragraph or referring some to a writing frame which is already in their books.

During the lesson, a teacher will then carry out checks for understanding using strategies such as whole class questioning, 1:1 check-ins and live marking. From doing this, teachers can determine who may need additional scaffolding and who may in fact need a scaffold reducing or moving. This is why checks for understanding are vital to the practice of scaffolding; if we are not finding out what they can and can't do, we cannot scaffold appropriately. It would be a mistake to plough on through a lesson using predetermined scaffolds without checking if they are having the intended impact. The key is to be responsive then and there in the moment.

Summary

There is so much that can be explored and said when it comes to scaffolding. So much so that there have been many articles, blogs and books written about it.

A simple way of summing up scaffolding is:

What is scaffolding?
- Considering potential barriers to learning
- Making adaptations as appropriate before and within the lesson
- Using assessment for learning to guide
- Using visual, verbal or written supports as needed
- Temporary support removed as students become more proficient

What is scaffolding not?
- Deciding in advance what work students are capable of
- Creating multiple worksheets
- Different learning outcomes
- Making the work easier
- Using a writing frame every lesson
- Something you add for senior leaders to look at
- Permanent

Biography

Alex Fairlamb: @lamb_heart_tea

Rachel Ball: @MrsBallAP

Alex and Rachel recently co-edited the book '*What is History Teaching, Now*?' and their new book '*The Scaffolding Effect*' is due to be published in 2025 as part of a series with Inner Drive.

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How Might We Enhance Student Engagement in Lessons?

Sonya Lanckham

What do we mean by student engagement, and why does it matter?

Let's start by asking the question: if you walked by a classroom and student engagement was high, what would you see? When we think about student engagement in lessons, we think about seeing students who are *motivated* to participate – by listening, but also by speaking, reading, and, crucially, by valuing their thinking enough to develop it in writing. Cognitive scientist Maryanne Wolf notes, "What few people ever appreciate is how central attention is to every function we perform." This reminds us that what students focus on shapes what they learn. Attention is a prime indicator of learning, making it essential for teachers to consider how to maximise students' attention on things that matter.

Students thrive academically when they work within their 'zone of proximal development' because this is closest to the frontier of their knowledge and understanding. Therefore, we need to create a *think-hard* culture where our students are having the mental workout in lessons by being engaged and actively learning.

In 'How Do We Learn?', Héctor Ruiz Martín writes: "Active learning is often confused with educational practices in which the student 'does things' or what is known as 'learning by doing'... active learning could be better defined as learning by thinking." If we are to develop our students as learners who are motivated to think hard to succeed, and committed to self-regulate their learning, then focusing our efforts on student engagement is crucial.

The impact of deep engagement goes beyond participation; it also fosters a sense of belonging, enabling all students to engage and flourish as they feel safe in their ability to contribute. As Owen Eastwood, author of *Belonging: The Ancient Code of Togetherness*, explains, "To feel a sense of belonging is to feel accepted, to feel seen, and to feel included by a group of people, believing that we fit in, trusting we will be protected by them. To not feel belonging is to experience the precarious and insecure sense of an outsider." When students feel this sense of belonging, we see the tangible impact in the classroom: greater collaboration, deeper thinking, and a willingness to take intellectual risks that drive meaningful learning.

How did we identify the highest levers for change?

Guided by Stephen Covey's principle of "beginning with the end in mind," we set out to identify high-leverage techniques that would drive meaningful change. Alongside two senior leaders, I attended a two-day 'Teach Like a Champion' workshop in London, where we gained a clear mental model to anchor our approach. We were clear on our goal – increased participation and deeper thinking.

We were inspired by the Teach Like a Champion model: a focus on maximising engagement through thoughtful participation, writing, and meaningful classroom dialogue.

Following this, we spent the next half term consulting with leaders and staff to co-construct our approach, identifying key techniques to help staff implement this vision with clarity, consistency and a common language.

What are the highest leverage techniques that we have implemented to enhance student engagement?

The key techniques include:

- Wait time
- Cold Calling
- Turn and Talk
- Everybody Writes

The magic happens when a teacher combines these techniques intentionally around a central question or task, creating a “means of participation” (MOP) sequence.

What has been the impact so far?

There are leading and lagging factors in any wide-scale organisational change. In some of our schools where the strategies are deeply embedded, we have seen the highest attainment in the history of those schools. Others have improved student progress by, on average, half a grade across all subjects and all students.

Amid a recruitment crisis, we have seen some teachers who were not enjoying teaching thriving through the success that they are experiencing in lessons and, indeed, our trust’s teacher turnover rates are well below those seen nationally. The embedding of the strategies was recently recognised by the school inspectorate: ‘in lessons, pupils are engaged in making the most of every moment … pupils have a strong understanding of the expectations for them … teachers make excellent use of information about pupils’ learning … pupils’ attitude to learning exemplary … [pupils] produce high quality written work and take pride in this’. (Ofsted report 2024)

I have an insatiable desire to replicate and scale up the phenomenal teaching I was fortunate to have as a student at St Ciaran’s and St Patrick’s Girls Academy. So often, what works is left to chance. At Windsor Academy Trust we are taking an evidence-led approach and seeing students and teachers thrive in deeply engaging classrooms.

Further Reading

1. Teach Like a champion 3.0 – Doug Lemov
2. Why don’t students like school? – Daniel T Willingham
3. How Do We Learn?: A Scientific Approach to Learning and Teaching (Evidence-Based Education) – Hector Ruiz Martin
4. Evidence Snacks Weekly Email – Peps McCrea

Curriculum

The Need for Knowledge in a Curriculum for the Future

Daniel Muijs

The curriculum debate

Curriculum has very much come to the fore in educational policy in recent years. Many countries have reformed or are reforming their curriculum and a lot of debate has been taking place in education about different curriculum models.

Much of this debate has been around two competing models: on the one hand, a so-called competency-based approach, and on the other hand a knowledge-rich one.

A competency-based curriculum aims at developing generic skills (the term '21st century skills' is often used). The exact nature of these skills is somewhat nebulous and changes from one author to the other. Common examples are critical thinking and communication skills, but many others (e.g. 'global awareness') appear in different documents. Competency-based curricula tend to be organised into cross-curricular themes or areas rather than subjects. They tend to be low on actual content to be taught as the skills are supposed to be acquired largely independently of any particular knowledge base. A well-known example of a competency-based curriculum is Scotland's 'Curriculum for Excellence'.

A knowledge-rich curriculum, by contrast, is based on the premise that skills can only be developed on the basis of a sound core of knowledge. This core knowledge forms the basis for the development of skills. A knowledge-rich curriculum builds in a structured and coherent way, with each grade level designed to layer on previous knowledge. This allows students to deepen their understanding progressively. Knowledge is organised sequentially so that students revisit and build upon concepts over time, making connections across disciplines and integrating new information with prior knowledge.

Why knowledge matters

While competency-based models have been popular, there is increasing evidence that knowledge matters.

A major source of evidence for this is cognitive science, which tells us about how our brains work and how we learn. This has shown the key role that memory plays in learning. Short-term and long-term memory work together to facilitate learning by handling and retaining information. Short-term memory, also known as working memory, temporarily holds information for immediate use or processing, typically /lasting from a few seconds to a minute.

If this information is rehearsed or deemed important, it can be encoded into long-term memory. Long-term memory is where information is stored more permanently and has a far greater capacity. It allows us to retain knowledge and experiences for days, months, or even a lifetime. Learning is enhanced when we repeatedly engage with information, strengthening neural connections in the brain and moving knowledge from short-term to long-term memory through processes like practice, review, and meaningful association. This transfer from short- to long-term memory and the ability to retrieve knowledge from long-term memory and connect it to new information, is crucial for building a lasting foundation of knowledge and skills.

You have probably heard the idea that acquiring and remembering knowledge doesn't matter anymore, as we have an enormous amount of knowledge at our fingertips which we can look up in a search engine or a generative AI chatbot.

This is a bit of a misconception. While it is of course true that we can easily look up information, we need knowledge to make sense of it. We will not, for example, easily recognise hallucinations in AI chat bots if we don't have prior knowledge to help us do that. And while we can easily google the key equations that form the basis of the standard model of particle physics, if we lack physics knowledge we will not understand them.

This is not to say that skills don't matter, or, as some have claimed, don't exist. Skills matter, but to develop them we need knowledge. To illustrate this, think about correctly kicking a football. As well as knowing the rules of the game, you will need to know the basic mechanics of kicking, like positioning the non-kicking foot next to the ball, locking the ankle of the kicking foot, and striking the ball with the correct part of the foot. None of this necessarily comes naturally to us, so we will need to be taught or modelled. Of course, this knowledge in itself won't allow us to effectively kick the ball, and we will need extensive practice to develop this skill.

The evidence for a knowledge-rich curriculum

There is growing evidence that a knowledge-rich curriculum can boost learning. A number of evaluations have shown positive effects on learning outcomes. A methodologically strong recent study from the US, for example, showed that the Core Knowledge curriculum improved students' reading test scores by 16 percentile points.

Looking at international comparative assessments like PISA, some countries, such as Portugal and England, saw notable improvements in student attainment. As a result, many countries, such as New Zealand, Flanders (Belgium) and parts of Australia are reforming their curricula to make them knowledge-rich.

What about Northern Ireland?

The Northern Ireland curriculum as it stands is primarily competency-based. The primary curriculum, for example, is organised along 6 cross-curricular areas for learning, and does not spell out a great deal of actual knowledge content.

A content analysis of the curriculum suggested that the words signifying a competency-based approach, such as skills and area, were more commonly used than those suggesting a knowledge-rich approach, such as knowledge or subject.

In light of the evidence reviewed above, I would suggest that reforming the curriculum to enable a more knowledge-rich approach would be desirable.

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How can we Create a Successful Knowledge-Rich Music Curriculum at Primary Level and Why is it Important?

Naomi Pilling

There is a nervousness about answering the question of how to teach arts subjects with a 'knowledge-rich' approach. This seems to stem from the idea that 'knowledge' and 'creativity' are diametrically opposed, or at least somehow in conflict. I would say that in the arts generally, and in the case of music in particular, such a view is mistaken. Learning music should involve the creation of music and the exploration of music as a vital and important vehicle for expression. However, it is also a technical subject, which requires a structured approach to teaching and learning. If we hope to enable future generations fully to explore their own creative powers within the rich and diverse nature of musical language, we need a coherent, sequenced music curriculum throughout the primary years which utilises everything we know about learning from cognitive science and which acts as a comprehensive, clear guide for non-specialist music teachers who teach music to most primary pupils within the United Kingdom.

If we seek to create and utilise a 'knowledge-rich' music curriculum, we need to understand what musical knowledge is. Toyne (2021) describes it as knowing how to *make* music, knowing *musical practices with critical insight* and knowing how music *enriches the inner life*: in summary, music *making* and music *thinking*. A knowledge-rich curriculum can be misinterpreted as being about knowing 'facts'. Within the discipline of music, this would be a misconception: an understanding of music can only begin to develop when the language of music is explored through experience. Such a misunderstanding is perhaps where the false dichotomy of 'knowledge' and 'creativity' arises.

Developing musical knowledge within the conceptual framework of music *making* and music *thinking* is, in fact, the basis for the broad ideas which form the backbone of various national curricula. Both the curriculum for Northern Ireland and England conceptualise musical learning into key musical activities, including singing, listening, composing, practising and performing, through which pupils can experience music *making* and *thinking.* If we learn the language of music by experience or by *doing* music, these activities are essential in any structured curriculum.

Developing music-making and thinking by *doing* music (listening, singing, composing, practising, and performing) can be seen as a mixture of learning *how* to do these activities, learning about the *building blocks of music* (sometimes known as the dimensions of music, such as pulse, rhythm, and pitch), learning about music from a *diverse and broad range of cultures and styles*, learning *musical vocabulary* and learning how we can use *visual symbols to show music* (notation) *through* these activities. As such musical knowledge cannot be learnt in a compartmentalised way.

It has to be learnt in an integrated and an active manner. For example, no one can really understand the meaning of pulse by merely learning that it can be defined as “the steady heartbeat of the music”.

To *understand* pulse, we need to learn that it is like the steady heartbeat of the music at the same time as finding the pulse by clapping or moving our bodies to the pulse in the music we listen to. We can then begin to understand how different styles of music use pulse in various ways. For example, rock and roll music often uses a strong ‘off-beat’, where the pulse in a group of 4 beats strongly emphasises beats 2 and 4.

As well as developing a depth of understanding of how music works, a good music curriculum will allow children to explore a broad and diverse range of music from different cultures and styles, broadening a student’s own musical experience at the same time as seeing their own culture represented and mirrored through the music they encounter. Such breadth promotes inclusivity and can play a critical role in developing empathy and social awareness. Students gain insights into different cultures and perspectives when engaging with diverse artistic traditions and narratives. This exposure helps them to understand and appreciate the experiences of others, fostering a more inclusive and compassionate worldview.

A curriculum that does not provide a depth and breadth of knowledge most noticeably disadvantages those pupils who are socio-economically disadvantaged: a lack of music education for a student whose parents/carers can afford to pay for extra-curricular opportunities to learn a musical instrument or take part in musical activities is not going to have the same negative impact as it will for those for whom school is their only opportunity to encounter a wide variety of music.

There are many issues facing music education at the primary level. Music is mostly not taught by subject specialists in UK primary schools. Whilst the National Curriculum for Northern Ireland does concentrate on key musical activities which should be the backbone of any music curriculum, it is very short and expressed in very general terms. Whilst such general guidance could be seen as providing a specialist teacher with the freedom to explore their subject in their teaching, for the non-specialist this lack of specificity is a barrier to providing a coherent education in music. The integrated nature of what constitutes musical knowledge necessitates a highly specified, clear, detailed and carefully sequenced curriculum to enable children to make progress. Primary school teachers need clear and specific guidance about what they should teach, in what order and how they should teach it. Anything less leaves what children learn to chance.

Literacy

The Science of Reading (SoR)

Geraldine Magennis-Clarke

Dugdale and Clark's research for the National Literacy Trust back in 2008, declared that literacy is a public health issue. They went on to starkly set out the reality of how low literacy levels can be a contributing factor to seriously compromising one's life chances. However, despite the creation of a 'revised curriculum' the previous year in Northern Ireland, and subsequent policy moves to capacity-build across all educational sectors, issues of underachievement remain. Perhaps at the granular level, the question then becomes, *'why is it that some children learn to read with little effort while others struggle greatly, despite receiving focused help, over an extended period?'* The answer to this question has eluded many parents and educators alike. Moreover, even though Northern Ireland fared very well in the most recent round of the Progress in International Literacy Reading Study (PIRLS) outcomes, there are a significant number of children who can read well but do not freely choose to do so, for pleasure. Precipitated by the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the literacy research community received a 'call to action' that manifests in the form of a renewed interest in the science behind how humans learn to read.

Knowing how the 'master computer' processes information is a complex and challenging area to study. However, as Professor Timothy Shanahan, an eminent figure in the field of literacy research puts it, *'we want to promote practices and policies that will have the greatest possibility of ensuring equity and excellence in reading. We seek to reduce our uncertainty and to decrease the size and consequences of the inferences we must make, to make that work.'*. Gough and Tunmer in the mid-80s, created a 'simplified' conceptualisation of such a complicated process as learning to read, in the graphic known as the Simple View of Reading [SVR]. Consisting of decoding and language comprehension, it demonstrates that the likelihood of attaining accurate reading comprehension is increased, when both aspects are achieved in combination. Further updates have been made on the SVR, the most recent being Duke and Cartwright's Active View of Reading. The SVR theoretical framework was later expanded upon by the now famous graphic known as 'Scarborough's Reading Rope'. The components of Scarborough's Reading Rope reflect the broad aspects of instruction, outlined in the National Reading Panel's Report the previous year, as a result of a significant meta-analysis of an array of reading research, up until that point.

The important message being imparted here is that the above information has led to the identification of the types of instruction associated with how the brain processes information.

Perhaps more fundamentally, it enables educators and teacher educators to judiciously choose pedagogical practices and materials that align with 'the grain of the brain'. For instance, educators are reminded of the necessity for structured code-teaching, explicit orthographic-mapping, the provision of ample opportunities to practice 'lifting the print off the page' and applying it in writing. Coupled with this, central voices in the field advocate for a knowledge-rich curriculum.

Adhering to the science base challenges the long-held misconception of what is meant by 'reading comprehension' and how to teach to it effectively. The significance of these messages cannot be understated, considering the upsurge in trends, programmes and appealing resources, over the years, that do not necessarily create positive and lasting educational impact, when it comes to literacy instruction. This shift in emphasis, back to the neuro-scientific research base, has important implications for the way forward in Northern Ireland, as it enters a new era of curriculum reform.

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Using Reading Age Data for Effective Intervention and Targeted use of Writing Scaffolds

Martin Ferguson

This article explores how reading age data can be utilised to improve educational outcomes at classroom, department and school levels.

After reading the GL report entitled 'Read All About it' and Alex Quigley's blog, I created a pilot for testing reading ages within the English Department. A sample class were tested and the results provided a 'picture of need' which led to discussions around shaping and adapting strategies at classroom level. I found that reading age data provided a translatable picture across all subjects that was easier to communicate to staff when compared to other data used in the past. It is important to note that the reading standardised score is equally as significant as reading age, along with passage and sentence completion (a two-stanine difference is often an indicator for other screening). A Standard Age Score (SAS) of 85-115 shows that they are where they should be.

In the GL report, it also highlights the correlation between reading ages and GCSE predictions so you can show how this influences outcomes for different subjects. You might also want to use CAT4 testing or dyslexia screeners to check for other underlying issues. There are several ways that this data can be used in a positive manner to help shape your lesson structure, classroom practice and wider interventions on a system level.

Classroom level

Use of reading age data can range from strategic seating plans, predictions for GCSE and how much support might be required daily. The main aim is to ensure pupil support is more consistently applied and can be shared for example with classroom assistants, teachers and SLT or SIP groups. This is also useful in terms of circulating the room and prevention of pupils going off task. Adaptive teaching can happen because you have primed your environment and know your pupils. If you know a pupil has a reading age and SAS below expected levels, you can then create support scaffolds or structure strips for writing. You can anticipate where support will be greatly needed or select pupils for pairing or use more targeted approaches with classroom assistants.

An example: to begin a writing task, you might start with a series of cloze passages, then progress to sentence openers for each paragraph (this will vary depending on the form of the writing of course), vocabulary explanations to help form context and understanding, or provide edited pieces of text for accessibility and finally vocabulary word banks so that pupils can choose enhanced vocabulary in their writing.

This is creating conditions for success, builds ‘daily wins’ into your lessons but also remember that not every pupil will need these – however, once they are created, you can edit and tweak and then pupils can avail of them if they wish. From a SEND perspective, I would suggest using Copilot AI to generate images or graphic organisers alongside the scaffold. Support scaffolds also aid ‘rich talk’ and oracy in the classroom as you can use them as a script or for choral speaking. Key to success is having a granulated approach to the writing task when planning and an awareness of potential pitfalls, then develop how challenge can increase using the ‘goldilocks principle’ and ensure that all pupils are aiming for the top. This is also beneficial for professional development within the department.

Department level

Prevention first – spotlight the pupils who require the most support by using the reading age data and the standardised average scores and present them to staff. Again, if you teach a range of abilities, you will find this very useful and you might gather a team of department heads who are in the traditionally literary based subjects and then scale out to others – build awareness first. Next, you might want to provide your department teachers with pupil data or profiles and actively include reviews and updates in your department agenda or meetings. This focus can range from KS3 to GCSE (depending on the focus or the data) and include attendance too, so that you can refine your resourcing and flag pupils with pastoral leads and share who might be missing lessons and require one-to-one recovery support. Perhaps you could assign a teacher to each class group, year, key stage or pilot with a selection of pupils and they can monitor and feedback. Reading support, spelling strategies and comprehension programmes could then be provided. Discussions around key assessment tasks and the scaffolds and supports provided, can lead to refining and developing elements of your curriculum and classroom practice across the department and school. You could offer workshops on interpreting and using reading age data to tailor instruction or encourage collaboration or Learning Leaders.

School level

Interventions become more targeted and sharing data across the school becomes common place. All teaching staff should know who the pupils are that require support. Why? If they are attending regularly and every teacher they encounter is aware of their reading age and needs, then a scalable model for addressing need can be used to support grouping pupils and better targeted interventions. It also creates a cumulative impact in terms of support, expectation and agency, all of which can be very powerful. This school-level understanding of data, effective strategies, and a clear line of sight, all seek to aid a collective vision for self-improvement and evaluation that is measurable, tangible and translatable the whole school community. It is one way of triaging your KS3 and will aid better transition from primary to KS3 and subsequently GCSE.

By effectively using reading age data, schools can create a supportive learning environment that meets the needs of all students.

Biography

X account: mrferguson85

Further reading

GCSE English: See One Do One Teach One provides scaffolds and lesson structures that can be used as a springboard for teaching or approaches in the classroom. Each one has been tried and tested successfully in a mixed ability setting and includes oracy scaffolds too.

www.teach-lead.com

Spelling Matters

Ryon Leyshon

Is learning to spell important in a modern world?

With the wide range of advanced technological tools at our fingertips, it might be easy to think that learning to spell isn't as important as it once was. It is now easier to mask or circumnavigate the symptoms of poor spelling with tools like spell checkers – though this isn't without issues (see Montgomery, Karlan and Coutinho, 2001, for discussion of the high error rates). Still, this overlooks a critical idea: that spelling is a visual record of language processing (Moats, 2006). If pupils are struggling to spell, we cannot ignore this. We must learn to dive deeper into their spelling choices, not taking a binary 'right or wrong' view to responses, but instead analysing which aspects of our written language are understood and which aspects need to be (re)taught.

Spelling acts as both a window into language understanding and also, when instruction is effective, as a powerful vehicle for improving it too.

Does it really matter if pupils can't spell effectively? Does it need to be a high priority in schools?

Many studies have been conducted into the impact that spelling difficulties have on pupils' writing development. Here are a few key takeaways that emphasise the importance of raising spelling standards to improve writing outcomes:

- Many children simplify their vocabulary choices to avoid needing to spell difficult words, reducing the overall effectiveness of their writing.
- Poor spelling ability increases the cognitive load at the point of transcription, consuming valuable cognitive resources that could have been used to improve writing quality in other ways (Singer and Bashir, 2004).
- Poorer spelling decreases writing fluency, meaning that pupils can struggle to keep up with the pace of their idea formulation.
- Perceived spelling ability is heavily linked to wider writing self-appraisals, so poor spelling can often lead to children being 'turned off' from writing and develop a negative attitude towards written tasks (Graham, Harris and Adkins, 2018).

Do we need to actually teach spelling? Can't we just get pupils reading and hope they pick it up?

The meta-analysis conducted by Graham and Santangelo (2014) provided strong and consistent support for the need to formally teach spelling. The positive outcomes associated with explicit spelling instruction were generally consistent, regardless of pupil age or literacy skills. They found that:

- Explicit spelling instruction improved spelling performance when compared to no/unrelated instruction or incidental approaches.

- Increasing the amount of spelling instruction significantly improves outcomes.
- Gains in spelling from explicit instruction were maintained over time and generalised over to writing tasks too.

It is important to note that 'assigning' spellings for pupils to copy in different ways or to test themselves on repeatedly does not count as 'teaching' spelling. This may work in the short term (for a weekly test for example), but if they don't really understand where the spelling fits in with the different layers of the English language and why it is spelled the way it is, it will be quickly forgotten.

So, yes – we must find time within our limited timetables to explicitly teach spelling both for its own sake and for the many benefits it offers to other areas of literacy development discussed below.

How can spelling instruction contribute to improved literacy outcomes?

A range of studies have shown that spelling instruction is hugely important for reading development, especially in the early stages of learning to read. This is largely because the act of spelling a word forces pupils to engage more deeply with its orthographic structure than reading alone does, setting up richer, more robust mental models (often referred to as orthographic representations) in long term memory (Shahar-Yames and Share, 2008; Ouellette, 2010; Conrad et al., 2018). Whilst the act of reading has, naturally, been shown to create these orthographic representations of words, when reading connected text, the reader can be supported by contextual and syntactic cues (Holmes and Carruthers, 1998), often meaning that less of the reader's attention is directed at the specific orthographic features in words. This can result in the production of partial orthographic representations of words (omitting/confusing letters or not remembering the exact order of letters) that aren't as effective in promoting instant, context-free word recognition or accurate spelling in the future.

Still, because reading and spelling largely rely on the same body of knowledge and skills to create these mental models of words, they are inevitably mutually reinforcing of one another. Explicit, systematic phonics instruction coupled with ample opportunities to apply what they've learned in connected texts will create pupils with effective decoding habits (using letter-sound correspondences regularly rather than guessing at unknown words), which will support spelling via the multiple exposures of words and orthographic patterns they will gain over time; and the integration of high-quality spelling instruction will amplify this rate of development by refining and deepening both new and existing orthographic representations.

Research by James and Engelhardt (2012) emphasised how important it is for pupils to regularly spell/write words to develop the neural pathways that lead to successful reading. They demonstrated that the kinaesthetic act of handwriting words supports the formation of neural networks that connect the letters and sounds within words to the motor regions of the brain, the same kind of network activation that we see in literate adults. They also highlighted that, when handwriting words, the word will appear in their visual field to be verified through reading. Because pupils will naturally transcribe letters slightly different to the modelled example or even their own previous attempts, they are forced to engage in self-appraisal over whether their written transcription contains the correct visual features for each letter; this process strengthens their ability to categorise and mentally store letters, improving recall accuracy and speed for future use.

The support for using spelling instruction as a vehicle for accelerating early literacy development is clear, but what about beyond these early years of development?

The research base in this area is less robust, but a recent meta-analysis by Colenbrander et al. (2024) found that morphological instruction was effective for improving spelling of the morphologically complex words that children are likely to encounter as they are required to read more challenging texts across the curriculum. This is potentially very powerful when coupled with other research which found morphological knowledge to be a very strong predictor of reading comprehension, even more so than vocabulary knowledge itself (Kieffer and Lesaux, 2007). This might suggest that high-quality morphological instruction may not only be able to significantly improve spelling standards, but also contribute to raising reading standards more broadly, though the research is not able to confirm this currently.

What is evident, however, is that explicit spelling instruction matters and is a vital part of primary literacy development with the power to contribute greatly to improved literacy outcomes for all.

Biography

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Behaviour

Why Reframing Your Language Will Lead to Better Classroom Behaviour

Mark Roberts

Dealing with behaviour can be exhausting. A telling off leads to an angry retort. An angry retort results in an official sanction. An official sanction provokes a public meltdown and the pupil's ejection from the class. All too quickly, we've gone from rebuke to removal.

Situations like this may seem unavoidable. But, by stepping back and carefully reframing our language, we can achieve behaviour nirvana: issues addressed, conflict avoided, a teacher free of stress.

Avoid threats and ultimatums

To achieve this blissful teaching state, first, avoid using the threatening language of the ultimatum. When faced with poor behaviour it's tempting to draw lines in the sand:

"If you do that again, I'm giving you a sanction"

Threats like these, however, often produce defiant responses and a swift escalation of the situation. Instead, calmly reinforce your classroom norms:

"I'm just going to remind everyone about my expectations … I don't want to have to start giving out sanctions"

Turn down the heat

Direct but non-threatening language stops behaviour management becoming gladiatorial. When a pupil raises their voice at us, for example, we might instinctively respond with heated language:

"Don't you dare raise your voice at me!"

As calm communicators, however, we need to dampen the emotional temperature. Rather than meeting fire with fire, we can quell the heat by politely stating:

"I'm not shouting at you, so I'm not sure why you're raising your voice at me." This reframing usually leads to pupils recognising their overreaction and modifying their behaviour.

Tackle behaviour discreetly

Another common error is to make behaviour management a public spectacle. When dealing with an irksome issue, we can feel the need to admonish a pupil publicly:

“Jacob! Turn around and face the front!”

But a quiet word or, better still a non-verbal signal, is much more effective. When teaching a new pupil who behaves like this, reframe your communication with a discreet word:

“I’ve not met you before but you haven’t created a good first impression. I want you to show me the real, polite, hard-working you.”

Reset the room

Similarly, rhetorical questions, which are often accompanied with a sarcastic tone, can provoke negative responses from students:

“Why are you talking when I’m talking?”

Instead, focussing our language on positive expectations generally elicits the desired result:

“Some of you have forgotten their manners and are speaking over me. A reminder that …”

Give precise instructions

Behaviour management also fails when our expectations are unclear:

“You’re being too noisy. You need to work quietly.”

How much noise is too much noise? What exactly do you mean by quiet? These vague instructions lack the necessary precision to produce an optimal learning environment. Instead, reframe your instructions like this:

“So we can fully focus, we’re going to work in silence” or “During this task, I only want to hear whispering voices”

Adopt a calm, direct persona

To avoid behaviour management becoming a draining grind, therefore, maintain an open and calm persona. Negative behaviour can’t be ignored but by taking a proactive stance and thinking very carefully about how you communicate with disruptive students, you can avoid the unpleasant aftermath of a confrontational approach.

Background

Mark Roberts teaches English and is Director of Research at Carrickfergus Grammar School
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Further Reading

The Behaviour Whisperer (2024, Routledge)

Behaviour is Curriculum

Miriam Hussain

As an Assistant Principal with experience across multiple schools, I've seen first-hand and experienced how the approach to student behaviour can dramatically shape learning outcomes. Inspired by Tom Bennett's 'Running the Room' and my own leadership and experience in education this article explores how behaviour management can be embedded within the curriculum especially with challenging school settings. A behaviour curriculum is the philosophy that behaviour should be intentionally taught, practiced, and reinforced as a core part of students' educational learning journey – just like any academic subject.

1. Teaching Behaviour

Students are products of their environment and as such they need to be taught the skills, habits and values often through structured guidance. Students enter schools with varying behavioural backgrounds, and for some, essential social behaviours may not have been established. The role of educators and in particular leaders within schools should teach these foundational behaviours. At its core, a behaviour curriculum involves moving from merely telling students how to act to systematically teaching and modelling appropriate behaviours. This supports instilling values that empower students to make positive behavioural choices.

2. Establishing Predictable Routines and Norms

Effective behaviour management requires clear, consistent routines that help students understand and meet expectations. In my experience, more challenging schools benefit from a codified approach to systems and processes whilst implementing a very clear behaviour policy. Predictability in routines provides students with a sense of security and clarity, minimising confusion about what is expected at each point in the day. These routines aren't about creating a silent classroom but about embedding an environment where positive behaviour becomes a natural outcome of well-defined practices. For example, routines like a Do Now or Cold Call have a powerful impact on the overall school culture.

3. Frontloading Expectations

Frontloading expectations involves teaching and rehearsing desired behaviours at the outset rather than waiting to address issues as they arise. By establishing behavioural expectations early and reinforcing them consistently, teachers prevent many common disruptions. Doug Lemov's idea, noted in 'Teach Like a Champion', complements this approach by highlighting the importance of pre-teaching routines and rehearsing them until they become second nature. By setting expectations clearly and practicing them, we avoid the common pitfall of reacting to poor behaviour only once it has disrupted the class. Instead, students learn to navigate the school environment with a clear understanding of what is expected.

4. Creating a Culture of Belonging and Respect

Behaviour management isn't solely about rules and consequences; it's about cultivating a school culture where students feel they belong. In schools I've worked in, fostering a positive culture has required addressing basic needs for safety, respect, and recognition. Bennett emphasises that for students to behave positively, they need to feel connected to their community and confident in their role within it. Lekha Sharma in her book 'Building Culture' mentions the same. Psychological safety is imperative. A culture that celebrates positive behaviour through meaningful recognition and consistent, fair consequences can drive student engagement and motivation.

5. Behaviour Management as an Academic Subject

To truly treat behaviour as curriculum, we must approach it with the same intentionality and rigor as we would any other subject. In a well-structured behaviour curriculum, we teach behaviours through explicit instruction, model expectations and provide opportunities for practice and feedback. Similar to an academic subject, this curriculum requires planning, assessment and adjustment based on observed outcomes.

For example, teachers can employ formative assessment techniques to gauge students' behavioural progress, adapting strategies as needed. This may involve setting individual behaviour goals or holding regular check-ins to address specific behavioural challenges. Just as a teacher might adjust a maths lesson based on students' understanding, educators can refine their approach to behaviour management based on students' responses and needs.

Finally, integrating behaviour as a structured component of the curriculum empowers students to develop essential life skills. Through deliberate teaching, clear routines, frontloaded expectations and a supportive culture, we can create a school environment where positive behaviour flourishes. This approach and experience treats behaviour as foundational to learning, ensuring that all students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have the behavioural tools needed for academic and social success.

Biography

Miriam Hussain is an Assistant Principal for United Learning. She is a teacher of English and author. Over her career she has worked as an Assistant Headteacher, DSL, Chair of Governors, and Head of Year. She is a Teach First Ambassador. Miriam presents at conferences internationally and across the United Kingdom. Her X is @MiriamHussain_ and her website is www.miriamhussain.education.

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Beyond the School Gates

Everyone looks perfect on Instagram. Except me.

Deborah Webster

We have all heard about the possible impacts of using social media faced by young people, but what does the evidence tell us? Is there really a link between endless scrolling and the wellbeing of teenagers? Does it impact their mental health and wellbeing? Does it make them feel anxious? Does it increase their depressed mood? Or is it a case of scaremongering by the press and a few overly concerned parents?

This qualitative research undertook to find out how using social media can have an impact on the subjective wellbeing of young people. The presentation covered the methods, findings, challenges and recommendations from this PhD research project which was achieved in 2021.

Context

According to a recent report by Ofcom, 21% of three-year-olds in the U.K. have their own mobile phone. The prevalence of mobile phone ownership and social media use by children is getting younger and younger. Furthermore, children and young people are spending an increasing amount of time online for it has become ubiquitous to their lives.

Recent research undertaken by Stranmillis University in the ‘Growing up Online’ project found that 20% of eight- to thirteen-year-olds living in Northern Ireland feel their parents are not interested in their online activities. Therefore it is critical to ascertain if their wellbeing is detrimentally impacted by social media use, so that educators and parents alike can become informed and can help them to become digitally resilient.

Methods

The first part of the research involved a systematic review which reviewed all the evidence to date regarding the impact of social media on the wellbeing of young people. The systematic review found that while there are many positive impacts of using social media, it can also have a detrimental impact on wellbeing in several different ways.

Once ethical approval was sought, a selection of three schools were recruited which involved nine different focus groups with pupils and parents. Interviews with teachers who have a pastoral care responsibility also took place. Recording, transcription and thematic analysis was carried out using NVivo software.

Findings

The research found that using social media can impact the subjective wellbeing of young people in both positive and negative ways. Themes found from the research were: happiness; connection; comparison; sleep; pressure to be popular and no escape.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from the research:

1. To educate children and young people on the negative impacts that using social media can have on their wellbeing
2. To equip parents on how they can help their children to become more digitally resilient
3. To inform educators and those who work with children and young people about both the positive and the negative impacts that using social media can have on the wellbeing of children and young people.

Thrive Academy

Based on these recommendations, Thrive Academy was born. Thrive Academy is a social enterprise set up with the aim of equipping parents, educating young people, and informing those who work with them about digital wellbeing and resilience. Workshops and training take place regularly across both primary, post-primary and special schools in Northern Ireland and further afield. To organise workshops for your school or organisation, please get in touch using the contact details below.

Biography

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