

Inspiring leaders to
improve children's lives



National College
for School Leadership

Schools and academies

The importance of teaching

Thinkpiece

Resource

The importance of teaching – securing consistency

1

Overview

This think piece reviews the evidence around the problem of in-school variation and inconsistency. It begins to explore issues in closing the gap in achievement – the moral issue of enhancing equity in society, your school, your team and every classroom- which is developed further in the module

In-school variation

Fundamental to any discussion of the leadership of teaching and learning is the issue of equity. In essence it is not enough to secure excellent teaching and learning for the few; it has to be for all, however challenging that might be. In the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) international survey of educational performance (PISA) for 2009, quoted in the Department for Education publication *The Case for Change*, (2010) (the evidence base published with the *White Paper The Importance of Teaching*) the central issue for English schools is defined in the following terms:

England had one of the highest gaps between high and low performing pupils and a strong relationship between social background and performance. 13.9% of the variance in performance of pupils in England could be explained by their social background, as compared to just 8.3% in Finland and 8.2% in Canada. For a very long time in this country, the 'long tail of underachievement' has been tolerated; sometimes it has been seen as an inevitable consequence of a system which does a very good job for some.

DfE 2010 p2

The gap refers to the range of pupil performance that is wider in England than in most developed countries – this is the key leadership issue – for school and team leaders. There is no doubt that there are many factors which explain the gap; some are cultural and historic, others social and economic. In the school it is the 'factors closest to student learning' that have the greatest effect. This relates directly to the quality of teaching and learning and the effectiveness of teachers. In many ways this is the pivotal point of this programme – it is the fundamental purpose of team leaders to work on the quality of teaching and learning. Nothing is as important; it's why schools have team leaders.

Strategies to close the gap work on many levels but the area of greatest impact is ensuring the consistent quality of teaching and learning.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) variation in performance within schools is four times as great as variation in performance between schools. The result is that the UK has one of the biggest class divides in education in the industrial world.

In comprehensive school systems, within-school variation in pupil attainment seems to be much greater than between school variation...a recent DfES study of 2003 data showed that in value-added terms, Key Stage 2 (KS2) within-school variation is five times greater than between school variance, for KS3 it's 11 times greater and for KS4 it's 14 times greater.

NCSL 2005: 3

The biggest single variable (30 per cent) that explains within-school variation is teachers – teaching strategies, professional characteristics and classroom climate explain the disturbing levels of variation in some schools. Achieving consistency means eliminating variation and that in turn involves identifying the 'non-negotiables' – those aspects of teaching and learning which have been identified as essential to raising performance and achievement. In very broad terms high performing schools are those schools with the lowest levels of variation ie the highest levels of consistently outstanding practice. The leadership of subject or phase teaching has to start and end with the issue of consistency and variation.

The impact of in school variation is shown in the Sutton Trust report *Improving the impact of teachers on pupil achievement in the UK – interim findings*:

The difference between a very effective teacher and a poorly performing teacher is large. For example during one year with a very effective maths teacher, pupils gain 40% more in their learning than they would with a poorly performing maths teacher.

The effects of high-quality teaching are especially significant for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds: over a school year, these pupils gain 1.5 years' worth of learning with very effective teachers, compared with 0.5 years with poorly performing teachers. In other words, for poor pupils the difference between a good teacher and a bad teacher is a whole year's learning.

Sutton Trust 2011: 2

These points are reinforced by another piece of research focusing on the impact of poor teachers:

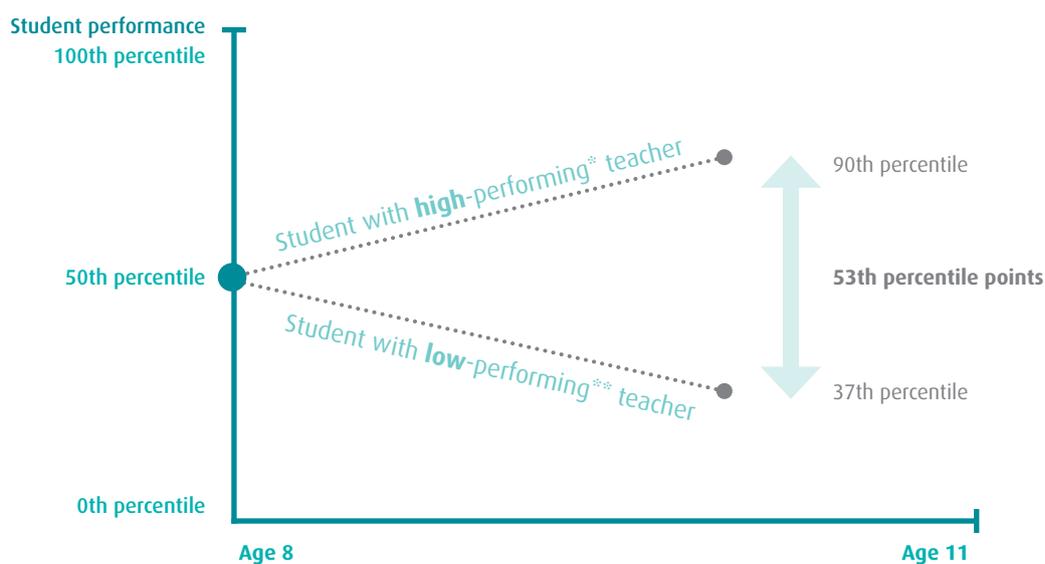
In US research, an eight year-old consistently given a teacher in the top fifth of performance was found to perform 50 percentile points better three years later than a similarly performing eight year-old consistently given a teacher in the bottom fifth of performance. Internal Department for Education analysis suggests that this translates into a difference of more than two years' progress.

Analysis of test data from Tennessee showed that teacher quality affected student performance more than any other variable; on average, two students with average performance (50th percentile) would diverge by more than 50 percentile points over a three year period depending on the teacher they were assigned.

Sanders & Rivers, *Cumulative and Residual Effects on Future Student Academic Achievement*, McKinsey in 'The Case for Change'

The impact of this variation on student achievement is made very clear in the diagram below which shows very clearly just how directly teacher quality impacts on progress and potential success.

Figure 1: Teacher effectiveness and student progress



*Among the top 20% of teachers

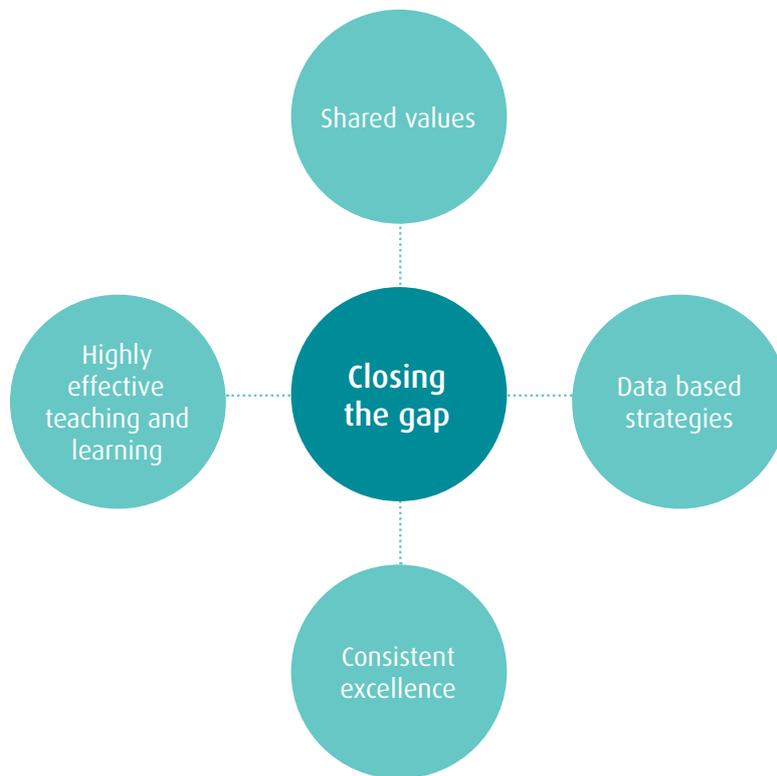
**Among the bottom 20% of teachers

Source: Department for Education 2010 *The Case for Change* p6

This perspective is further reinforced by the Sutton Trust study which argues that bringing the bottom 10 per cent of teachers up to the English national average would have a significant impact on England's relative international performance, other things being equal: 'in 5 years the UK's rank amongst OECD countries would improve from 21st in Reading to as high as 7th, and from 22nd in Maths to as high as 12th' (Sutton Trust, 2011: 7).

These various insights provide the evidence base for the greatest challenge facing school leaders, irrespective of their role – how to secure effective teaching for every pupil? In many ways team leaders are absolutely pivotal to this process as it is their responsibility to ensure effective teaching, pupil progress and raising achievement on a daily basis on every classroom for every pupil consistently over time. The rest of this module focuses on four interrelated factors that seem to be fundamental to closing the gap:

Figure 2: Strategies to close the gap



Shared values and moral purpose

There is a general consensus that irrespective of role or status we need to see leadership in education as being an essentially moral activity. From this perspective a central challenge for school leaders is to translate principle into practice, to make the abstract concrete and to turn aspiration into experience. The challenge in this module is to apply those principles of effective leading and managing to the quality of teaching and pupil progress and achievement within your team.

It has to be stressed that in many schools for most of the time there is a very high correlation between aspiration and actual achievement; in essence these schools are keeping their promises. However, the higher the aspiration the more difficult it is to translate it into consistent concrete experience. This is particularly true with regard to teaching and learning. Although there are many individual examples of outstanding practice they are not always translated into consistent practice across the whole school. School leaders therefore need to use a range of strategies to increase the possibility of high levels of congruence between aspiration and the actual experience of learners in a way that is consistent across the school and over time. The issue is one of equity – while everybody may be in principle equal, not everybody experiences equity. Everybody has a right to go to school, not everybody goes to a good school.

In many ways school leadership is all about the relationship between principle and practice and team leaders are uniquely placed to form the bridge between school policies, classroom practice and the concrete experience of pupils. It might well be helpful to see school leaders as the lynch pins of school improvement. The role of team leaders is as much about interpretation and application as it is about articulation; it is not enough to publish the policy, it also has to be embedded in practice. This is very much a moral issue centred on securing every learner's right to effective education. The moral dimension of the role of leaders in any capacity in a school is thus to make values and promises real in the life of every learner. At the very least this might involve:

- the explicit articulation of school values and moral principles at team level;
- the interpretation and application of those principles in team situations;
- ensuring that every individual in the school understands the principles and is able to make them personally meaningful;
- working to create a consensus around the principles and to ensure their consistent application across the team;
- monitoring the life of the team or department to ensure that aspirations are being translated into actual experience eg carrying out an ethical 'audit' of the work of the team;
- affirming appropriate and successful teaching and challenging inappropriate and ineffective strategies;
- investing time in monitoring, reviewing and renewing the personal and team value systems.

There does seem to be a very high correlation between high performing teams and agreement around core principles and values. Middle leaders are often at their most effective when they are helping to build a consensus in their team around the basic values that influence how team members approach their work.

Review and reflection

1. What evidence is there that a consistent focus on the quality of teaching and learning is at the heart of leadership in your school?
2. What do your school's aims or mission statement say about effective teaching and learning?
3. How are those values translated into policies and strategies across the school? What is your role in this process?
4. What evidence is there of the school's values in your team documentation?
5. How does your job or role description define your responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning?

References

Department for Education (2010), *The Importance of Teaching*, London, DfE

Department for Education (2010), *The Case for Change*, London, DfE

NCSL (2006), *Making a Difference*, Nottingham, NCSL

Sutton Trust (2011), *Improving the impact of teachers on pupil achievement in the UK – interim findings*

The National College exists to develop and support great leaders of schools and children's centres – whatever their context or phase.

- Enabling leaders to work together to lead improvement
- Helping to identify and develop the next generation of leaders
- Improving the quality of leadership so that every child has the best opportunity to succeed

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