Leadership of teaching and learning: closing the gap

John West-Burnham, September 2010
4. Teaching, managing and leading to close the gap

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4.1 Self-managing learners

A central feature of any model of effective learning is the focus on building the confidence and capacity of the individual learner – in a sense empowering the learner. This is a fundamental outcome of effective education as it is central to their employability and success in further and higher education. It is all about developing personal responsibility in the learner. This is usually interpreted as:

- giving the learner a sense of their own efficacy and value as a learner
- assisting learners in developing personal skills and strategies to enable self-management and direction
- supporting the development of deep learning approaches
- building a repertoire of learning strategies in order to offer a range of learning options
- developing student skills for further study and employability

There are numerous formulations of the possible components of a learning-to-learn strategy. A generic model would include the following elements:

- self-management, organising time, workload and projects
- developing a sense of personal effectiveness as a learner, using learning styles, developing effective learning behaviours, developing resilience and concentration
- building confidence in literacy, oracy and numeracy
- learning how to research, organise and present data
- developing skills in analysing, explaining, justifying, demonstrating causality and developing a logical argument
- developing confidence in working with others, notably on a one-to-one basis and in small groups
- becoming metacognitive, learning to review and reflect and becoming reflexive as a learner
4.2 Teaching and learning strategies

One way of understanding the key factors in securing effective teaching and learning is to see the work of teachers and leaders in terms of the continuum shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3:**

In this model, the first position represents the teacher as sole arbiter, determining what, when and how something is taught. The seventh position would be totally controlled by the learner. Effective learning probably takes place between points two and six, ranging from the highly effective whole-class teaching approach to the classic one-to-one tutorial working on a bespoke learning strategy within a common curriculum and shared educational context. The movement across this spectrum is the art and science of differentiation, responsiveness and professional judgement. What is vital is that the full spectrum is available. Every experienced teacher knows that a particular pedagogic technique will work well with some topics but not others. Equally, some groups of students will be more responsive to some strategies than others. One of the perceived differences between different sectors of the school system is the extent to which students have access to personal support and, with their parents, are active participants in their learning.

There are multiple models available to identify the components of effective teaching and learning. In many respects, the Ofsted criteria provide the most significant models, as set out below, in respect of teaching and learning:

*Teaching is at least good and much is outstanding, with the result that the pupils are making exceptional progress. It is highly effective in inspiring pupils and ensuring that they learn extremely well. Excellent subject knowledge is applied consistently to challenge and inspire pupils. Resources, including new technology, make a marked contribution to the quality of learning, as does the precisely targeted support provided by other adults. Teachers and other adults are acutely aware of their pupils’ capabilities and of their prior learning and understanding, and plan very effectively to build on these. Marking and dialogue between teachers, other adults and pupils are consistently of a very high quality. Pupils understand in detail how to improve their work and are consistently supported in doing so. Teachers systematically and effectively check pupils’ understanding throughout lessons, anticipating where they may need to intervene and doing so with striking impact on the quality of learning.*
This section explores the management systems and structures that are necessary to ensure the successful implementation of a strategy to secure effective teaching and learning. It has to be recognised that vision and values are not enough of themselves to secure successful implementation – leadership has to be balanced with effective management to translate principle into practice. The four elements of this section are defined as management and infrastructure topics because they are essentially supportive of the broader leadership and strategic issues of securing equity and excellence. Managing in-school variation and student voice are components of a strategy, not leadership activities in their own right. For example, in most matters student voice does not make policy – it contributes as part of the consultation process. Managing data in its own right would be the ultimate in bureaucracy – it is a leadership tool. Minimising in-school variation is a crucial component of closing the gap – but it will not create excellence and equity of itself. Each of the elements in the management category will vary in significance according to context. This is demonstrated in Figure 4:

**Figure 4:**
The shaded, diagonal rectangle in Figure 4 is the area of optimum effectiveness where there is recognition of the relationship between management and leadership as essential elements in the same process. The relative balance between them will be determined by the context of the school, so sometimes it may be necessary to focus on the management infrastructure, while in other situations the leadership element may be more significant. The elements in this section are all essentially to do with systems, how the school actually works. They will vary in significance according to the particular approach adopted by the school, i.e., they will not all be required to work to the same level of significance at the same time.

5.1 Minimising within-school variation

One of the strongest arguments for closing the gap through effective teaching and learning is that it offers one of the most powerful strategies to reduce within-school variation.

The most recent significant studies highlight the following strategies as being the most effective in reducing within-school variation:

- changing school ethos and culture to focus on individual and collective responsibility and accountability for pupil achievement
- developing data-informed school policies and teaching strategies so as to enable evidence-based interventions in classrooms and for individual students. This implies sophisticated data collection and management systems and data-literate staff
- increasing openness and transparency about teaching practices through peer observation and support, middle leaders’ active engagement with classroom practice and increased professional dialogue about effective teaching and learning
- ensuring a more appropriate fit between individual students and their curriculum experience
- developing standard operating procedures, common protocols and shared criteria to ensure the availability of models of best practice, develop a common language and facilitate monitoring and review
- school-based professional development, used to consolidate and embed all the above points, to create a culture of enquiry into professional practice (using action-research models) and support peer mentoring and coaching

Pupil voice is particularly important in this context. Possible applications might include:

- perceptions of effective learning and teaching
- feedback on learning experiences
- lesson observations by students
- involving students in continuing professional development
- surveys focusing on the learning experience