

A Learning Framework:

Securing consistently high-quality learning for every student in every school

Abstract

A commitment to professional capital has the express aim of ensuring that every student has the best possible learning experience in every lesson. Case study research in England suggests that the potential for exceptional learning exists in all schools, including those targeted for transformation. The standard of learning, however, is, in many schools, variable and in some schools innovations in approaches to learning rarely become fully internalised within the institution.

The application of a simple Learning Framework has enabled a cultural shift to take place in schools and systems so that a dynamic approach to improving learning becomes embedded and sustainable. The Learning Framework contains five integral elements which will promote a holistic approach to the leadership of learning across the school and across the system and which will secure continuous improvement in the learning experiences of every individual student.

Comments:

This article to the Quest Journal covers the practical implementation of the five aspects of the Learning Framework, including the necessary professional development and action research. Research findings show that even a school deemed to have serious weaknesses can within one year through the application of the Learning Framework achieve aspirational outcomes.

Tony Glover

Key Words: Innovation, Professional Culture, Sustainable Improvement, Equity and Engagement

A Learning Framework:

Securing consistently high-quality learning for every student in every school

Introduction

The underlying aim of investment in “Professional Capital”¹ is that every student will experience high quality learning in every lesson, yet even in high performing schools there will be some variation in terms of the fulfilment of this aim. My own case study research in supporting underperforming schools and in brokering collaboration² suggests a number of significant factors in bringing about improvements in learning:

- Every school has some high quality learning taking place. In schools which are seriously underperforming, examples of this are isolated, with no mechanism in place for making the best practice the norm.
- Self-review needs to be open, holistic and thorough, integrating classroom practice with progress and attainment data.
- All schools have some in-school variation; a key aim of planning is to identify and address this.
- In underperforming schools in which there is some high-quality learning the issue is normally sustainability, with no effective structured approach in place to improving learning. It is clear that for improvements in learning to be sustainable, a structured and holistic approach to improvement is necessary.
- The most successful schools constantly look outwards within and beyond the system to identify learning opportunities and approaches.
- There is a correlation between the consistency of high-quality learning and the confidence to involve students in the structuring, assessment and evaluation of their learning.
- Fundamental to improvement in learning is action research, grounded in classroom practice.
- It is vital that all staff are involved in this approach, in addressing the core purpose; otherwise, in-school variation in standards will be promoted rather than be systematically reduced.³

The “Learning Framework” reflects a structure that can be adapted by any school, wherever it stands on the spectrum of consistent standards of learning, and it addresses in a practical way the principles of successful change which have been grounded in research (for example, the Six Secrets of Change identified and discussed by Michael Fullan). The Framework must not be seen as reflecting a mechanistic approach to learning; rather, it is essential that it serves as a vehicle for

¹ “Professional Capital”; Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012)

² The main role of a National Leader of Education in England is to support improvement in underperforming schools. An initial task is that of “due diligence”, to identify strengths and areas for development, followed by the preparation and implementation of solutions which will enable improvement to be sustained. This “due diligence” process across schools has served as action research. The key guiding questions are: “What will improve standards of learning?” and “What leadership structures and approaches will make these improvements consistent and sustainable?”.

³ I have reached these conclusions through detailed analysis of six underperforming schools, of which two were situated in inner-cities, three were in suburban semi-rural locations and one was in a suburban area of high social deprivation (U.K. National Statistics).

encouraging innovation and enabling innovative approaches to learning to become embedded in the way in which the school works. A key to sustainable improvement is a cultural shift to enable a dynamic approach to improving learning to become embedded and sustainable; the Learning Framework, with its five constituent elements, provides a practical means to achieving such a change.

The Learning Framework

In all of the schools considered there were found to be inadequacies in learning, with inconsistencies in planning. Lessons were frequently not grounded in the knowledge and understanding of the individual student and data was not consistently used to plan learning. Professional development opportunities were largely ad hoc, and there was no effective process in place to enable even a sharing of best practice from within the school. The five elements of the Learning Framework have been devised to address these issues in a systematic and structured way.

1. Planning for Learning

An essential role for school and system leadership is to identify practice within the school and across the system. Where is the most effective learning taking place? Ideally, this should form the basis of whole school professional development, with subsequent plans for each curriculum area demonstrating the steps that will adapt the practice to specific learning context.

The plan should include action points arising from an open and thorough process of evaluation. It should also include whole school priorities, which, in successful schools, are known and understood throughout the school. For example, in a school where the priority is literacy for learning, the plan for each curriculum area will include precise steps in which literacy for learning will be enhanced, the timescale and the expected outcomes of any measures taken.

The most effective plans will include any resource implications, including investment in professional development, so that whole school resources will be best targeted at identified priorities. At curriculum area level, therefore, the plan should include specific steps relating to improvements based on the best practice within and beyond the school, actions relating to whole school priorities and actions arising from a thorough and open process of self-review.

Some schools have very thorough plans which are fully documented, but the most effective have clear, concise and manageable steps. In a spirit of devolved leadership the person leading on each development should be identified, along with a timescale, resource implications and milestones for evaluation, as well as what the overall outcome will look like. It is essential that the planning process includes all people involved; the most confident institutions give the students a real voice in evaluating and shaping their learning in a systematic way. This will be a recurrent theme in other sections of the Learning Framework as well.

2. Data for Learning

Schools now can be data rich but this can only serve a real purpose if it supports improvement in learning. The data must support the aim of providing, in every lesson, the best possible learning

experience for each individual student. Schools using data at the level of the group can still fall into a “one size fits all” approach to lesson delivery whereas the most successful schools also use data at the level of the individual student to identify the starting point of the student, the attainment goals expected over time and the “milestones” which would indicate progress towards those goals.

The data needs to be standardised to be valid. Consistently high-performing schools show a strong correlation between internally generated data and externally assessed outcomes; collaborative models of planning and teaching allow this to be achieved.

Data informs planning and intervention. Yet data is just an indicative tool; confident schools maintain a holistic view of the learning process. Innovative approaches such as “switched plenaries”, in which teachers change classes for part of a lesson and the students then have to explain to the incoming teacher what their learning has been during the lesson, can help to identify gaps in progress and the actions needed.

Data needs to be authentic; it also needs to be shared with the right people, including students. Some key questions include: is the data just summative or is it active within a dynamic process? Does the data enable reasonable expectations to be made of each student with regard to progress? Does the data identify “milestones” and appropriate individualised steps to enable each student to achieve?

3. Learning Styles and Approaches

In all schools there is major scope for creativity and innovation within a structure which brings integration and sustainability; this is the essential rationale of the Learning Framework. A confident institution will engage students in the design and evaluation of their learning. A simple illustration of this can involve putting questions to the students such as, “This is what we are seeking to achieve; how best might we cover this for you?” “How might we know if you are getting there?”

A challenge for school and system leaders is to know what practice is taking place and what works. Professional development through subject partnerships and school to school partnerships can work in a highly practical way. McKinsey and Company's research into ‘How the world's most improved school systems keep getting better’ (published in November 2010) found that one of the key factors is teachers' involvement in collaborative development of teaching practice through action research and collaborative coaching models.

The investment in professional capital has to focus on the teacher addressing the core purpose of enabling the highest standards of learning to take place. Continuous evolution in terms of learning styles is part of this, with the focus on the learning of the student rather than the work of the teacher. In underperforming schools or schools in which confidence is lacking the approaches to learning can be restricted by too much didactic presentation or too rigid adherence to a pre-determined structure. Yet my own research, from due diligence undertaken in six different secondary schools, has found that even in underperforming schools there is some exceptional learning taking place; what is lacking is the sharing of this practice to make it the norm.

In a vibrant learning community there are structured opportunities for teachers to engage in regular dialogue about learning, for ongoing professional development and for development and review of innovation. In less successful schools, such occurrences are haphazard.

Does the school facilitate team teaching, flexible grouping, student-led learning? In confident institutions there is an openness of practice, with teachers collaborating and learning from one another; there will be encouragement of innovation and support for this. A simple illustration comes from a school in which all teachers agreed, after some professional development, to devise and trial an inductive lesson. These were evaluated through the observations of the teacher and the perceptions of the students, and the findings were used to inform future planning. External review confirmed that the climate for learning and the quality of learning in that school had improved substantially as a result.

New technologies, with continuing developments in media, will present new opportunities; a key question, however is, "How will this technology serve to take learning forward?"

4. Behaviour for Learning

Successful schools have a climate of high expectation, with positive discipline and positive attitudes. The quality of relationships is key, in an atmosphere of respect for each person's individuality.

Lessons should be planned to engage all students. The "one size fits all" approach mentioned above will inevitably exclude a number of students. When students feel that their identity is respected, when the learning is grounded in their experience and when they can gain a real sense of achievement, their motivation is much more likely to be positive.

Where learning approaches bring a collective ethos and responsibility in, for example, "jigsaw" learning, in which each student contributes to the overall learning of a group, motivation is more likely to be positive.

All schools will have a behaviour code. In some schools, the focus will be on negativity and confrontation rather than upon accentuating the positive. It has also been found that in unsuccessful schools there is normally a mismatch between the expectations of school leaders and the practice of a number of staff in terms of the application of the behaviour code.

Some schools have developed very successful practices of engaging with parents and carers to develop a consistent set of expectations and of ensuring positive and consistent approaches in the school. School to school collaboration has proved to be highly successful in establishing these standards in schools which have not had to that point an appropriate climate of behaviour for learning.

5. Assessment of Learning

Summative data gives a useful part of the picture. Successful assessment practice, however, should mean that in each lesson the teacher will know what learning has taken place, and so will

each student. Data should relate to the intended learning, but evaluation of actual classroom practice must be part of a holistic approach to assessment.

Assessment against planned “milestones” is essential for progress in learning to be sustained. At identified stages, comparison across and beyond the school can serve to validate assessments. Schools which do not have a means of comparison often have significant in-school variation in standards.

Learning outcomes are not just numerically measured attainments. Some key questions to be answered in the development of assessment practices include: “What is the assessment intended to achieve?”; “Can it lead to successful interventions?”; “Can it lead to effective and holistic evaluation of the learning process?”

Schools have been found to have differing interpretations of concepts such as “Assessment for Learning”; it has, however, become clear that in the best practice assessment is itself part of the ongoing cycle of learning, irrespective of the terminology used.

Conclusion

The Learning Framework is not “rocket science” but it does provide a useful checklist and it can offer a means of promoting and sustain innovative practices. There is inevitable overlap between the constituent elements but if all aspects are covered, learning will be a continuous, systematic and structured process grounded in the actual world of each student, with coherent scope for innovation and creativity.

This study was devised through action research within a school which was deemed to be providing an inadequate education, with “Serious Weaknesses”⁴. Key actions have included:

- The provision of leadership support, to develop the capacity and understanding of all leaders at all levels, with some modelling of practice from other schools. All subject leaders have followed a bespoke CPD programme, with the expectation that all curriculum review and development will follow the structure of the Learning Framework.
- Improvement of the learning environment, to enhance the sense of wellbeing of students and staff.
- The strengthening of self-review within the school, with external validation; targeted leadership presence has supported learning; improvements have been made in the collection and dissemination of data and there is now a consistently applied scheme of

⁴ The school in question is a secondary, for up to 500 students aged 11-16, situated in a suburban area with high social deprivation and high levels of unemployment. The student roll had fallen to levels at which the school was facing closure. Achievement levels were low to the extent that an inspection by OfSTED had placed the school in the category of requiring “Special Measures”; one of these was that the school was to become a sponsored Academy, out of local government control and directly accountable to the central Department for Education. I was commissioned to produce a detailed Education Brief for the school and to work with a dynamic and visionary new Principal to bring about radical and sustainable improvement.

assessment. It is now known what every student in the school needs to achieve in every year group in every subject in order to enable that student and the school overall to achieve aspirational learning outcomes.

- The provision of coaching for staff within the classroom setting in positive behaviour management and in approaches to learning.
- The establishment of a CPD Group consisting of staff from a range of subject backgrounds to lead the implementation of learning styles across the school.
- The devising, sharing and implementation of an effective Behaviour Code which sets high expectations and promotes positive student attitudes.
- The establishment of partnerships with successful schools, with collaboration at all levels.

The cultural impact of such actions has had an observable impact upon the nature of the school as a professional learning community. Learning is now student-focused and developments take place in a spirit of openness and collaboration. From interviews with staff and students it has become clear that there has been a marked change in attitudes and expectations. The leadership approaches are reflective of the findings of “Uplifting Leadership” and “Distributed Leadership matters”, which is why they have been included in the bibliography as suggested further reading.

Within a year, that school had reached the top quartile nationally in terms of student achievement. The change in learning culture has been significant with sustainable improvements in the learning of every student; that is the very intention behind the Learning Framework.

About the author: Until 31st August 2012 Tony Glover was the Head Teacher of The Becket School, Nottingham, England, a secondary school rated as “Outstanding”. He was also one of the first Head Teachers to be appointed to the role of National Leader of Education, with the remit of working with underperforming schools to raise standards. He is now a researcher, presenter and adviser on school leadership.

Bibliography

“Professional Capital”: Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (2012)

“The Six Secrets of Change”: Michael Fullan (2008)

“How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better”: McKinsey and Company (2010)

“Uplifting Leadership: How Organizations, Teams, and Communities Raise Performance”: Andy Hargreaves, Alan Boyle and Alma Harris (2014)

“Distributed Leadership Matters: Perspectives, Practicalities, and Potential”: Alma Harris (2014)
