

SecEd: On Your Side

Consistency – it's a foolish obsession

BACK IN 1841, Emerson wrote that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds", yet the goal of "consistency" is one which is fiercely promoted today by many of the sharpest minds in education.

Colin Foster,
guest
editorial



Many schools' management devote much of their time to writing and implementing policies, which mostly seem to set out to define and then try to ensure maintenance of "consistency" across the various spheres of school life.

Rarely is the appropriateness of this goal challenged. "We have to be consistent about it" becomes an unanswerable argument. But is it?

It seems to me that consistency is frequently confused with equity. When someone says "we need a consistent policy regarding behaviour", for instance, what they are usually concerned about is fairness, and this is not the same thing. In fact, a rigid "consistency" that does not take different circumstances into account will inevitably lead to unfairness and discrimination. An obvious issue that will not go away is the banning of particular items of religious clothing, which is of no consequence to the majority while being a serious issue for a much misunderstood minority.

As the saying goes, "there is nothing so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals".

To take another example, deciding on a consistent response to pupils who swear in class may allow no room for acknowledging the difference between a "sotto voce" cry of frustration with a piece of work, say, and a threatening outburst towards a peer or teacher.

These actions are completely different in motivation and effect, yet a "consistent" policy may force them to be dealt with in the same way.

As soon as you become obsessed with consistency, you find that there are too many factors to try to allow for, including those (like home background) over which a school has little or no control. It is too much to demand that schools act consistently – and it is a distortion of what schools should be about to imply that they should even be striving to do so.

It is not just the complexity of a school environment – and the human beings that constitute it – which makes consistency hard, if not impossible, to achieve; it is that schools need to be places where difference is welcomed, encouraged and understood, rather than places of dull uniformity.

For example, just as pupils are often regarded as displaying a myriad of different "learning styles", which may change over time and be highly dependent on mood, the nature of the task, the surroundings, and so much more, so also do teachers present a wide variety of approaches to how they want to do their jobs. A school where colleagues are encouraged to teach in a "consistent" manner to one another, perhaps becoming clones of their heads of departments, will be a boring and uninspiring place in which to teach or learn.

Such an arrangement will fail to capitalise on the individual gifts and interests of the teachers who work there, or to play to the strengths of the pupils they teach. It will also be a much less human place.

What matters, surely, is quality of teaching and learning – a drive for consistency, rather than being a route to quality, is more likely to strangle creativity and dampen enthusiasm for new ideas. Consistency can lead to a levelling down for everyone, unless you are very careful, because you have to spell everything out in precise detail, and that necessarily constrains, constricts and simplifies.

The sad fact is that the more these differences are ironed out by an oppressive push for consistency, the more natural it becomes for everyone (pupils and teachers) to respond to circumstances in a stereotyped and predictable way.

True education needs surprise, innovation, spontaneity, thoughtfulness, and variety – consistency is not a wise course to follow.

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• This guest editorial has been written by Colin Foster, who teaches at a secondary school in Coventry. Do you have a view on any aspect of secondary education? Contact the editor of SecEd, Pete Henshaw, on 020 7501 6771, editor@sec-ed.co.uk or via www.sec-ed.co.uk



Support: Sir David Attenborough is hoping The Wellcome Trust's Darwin resources will ignite students' interest in science

Discovering Darwin

THEY SAY that everyone remembers their favourite teacher – someone who inspired them to pursue their chosen career, or who offered them guidance and support during their time at school.

Sir David Attenborough is no different, although it does take him a moment or two to recall the name of Mr Lacey, who – perhaps unsurprisingly – was his biology teacher back when he was a student at Wyggeston Grammar School for Boys in Leicester.

"It was some 70 years ago, so the memory's a little rusty, but I can see Mr Lacey as clear as day," he recalled.

"We were taught an awful lot of Latin in class and, although I can see the benefits of understanding language and its origins, I have to say it never really inspired me."

It was a few years later, when Sir David entered the 6th form, that he really began to enjoy life at school.

"I used to spend a lot of my spare time in my early secondary years studying things like fossils, or plants and birds, but there was no academic focus on these things at all, until I moved into the 6th form.



It is 200 years since the birth of Charles Darwin, and new school resources, backed by Sir David Attenborough, have been released to mark the occasion. **Chris Parr** explains

"Then, when I was about 16, learning really became exciting. Mr Lacey was a huge part of that – he was a fantastic biology teacher, a model railway enthusiast too, I believe, and he was one of the main reasons I went on to study natural sciences at Cambridge."

I met Sir David in London, where he was promoting *Survival Rivals* lesson packs – a set of resources designed by UK charity The Wellcome Trust, which are aimed at secondary science teachers.

The packs include experiments that are designed to show youngsters the ideas behind Darwin's theory of evolution, and they are available to every school in the UK as part of the famous scientist's 200th birthday celebrations.

Sir David feels that the use of lively experiments could be the key to ensuring that more students study the sciences into the 6th form and beyond. He told me: "All people have the potential, and the desire, to develop their minds. However, our brains are not just empty milk bottles into which you can pour facts and information.

"The key to retaining information, and to finding it interesting, is to carry out experiments – to find things out for yourself. The experiments available as part of the *Survival Rivals* packs really enable students to do this."

In one of the natural selection experiments – the imaginatively titled *I'm a Worm, Get Me Out of Here!* – pupils are encouraged to

use different strands and colours of worm-sized spaghetti to find out which colour and size of worm is the most attractive to birds.

Sir David continued: "Darwin, throughout his life, never stopped trying to find out new things. Answering questions is what he was all about. We need to find ways to instil this passion in our young people, and carrying out active and practical experiments in secondary schools is one way of doing this."

He added: "Darwin's 200th birthday year is a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the life and science of one of the world's most famous and influential scientists.

"I hope having such opportunities to engage with Darwin's story at school will inspire children to follow in his footsteps and let their curiosity lead them on their own journeys to new discoveries."

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Further information

To receive *Survival Rivals*, visit www.survivalrivals.org

For more information on Darwin's 200th birthday events, see www.darwin200.org

IN RESPONSE...

Dear sir,

I write after reading your article about teachers topping the list of those working unpaid hours (*Teachers do most unpaid hours*, SecEd 205, March 5, 2009).

My colleagues and I routinely work extra hours. This is partly because the job is never finished: there is always something more to be done.

It is also because teachers do not have a clear idea of what their hours should be. We know our day isn't just 9am to 3.30pm, but how early should we come in and how late should we stay? Teachers probably need someone (senior management?) to tell us how many hours to work per day.

The trouble is, senior managers often seem to be the worst "culprits" for coming in early, staying late and taking work home.

There is a culture in school of doing a lot, above and beyond the call of duty, and individuals are scared to appear lazy compared to "everyone else" who seem to be working so hard. It's a form of self-perpetuating peer-pressure.

Also, highly dedicated senior leaders (whose lives seem often to be devoted to school) think nothing of scheduling meetings, briefings, parents' evenings, open evenings, and so on, while simultaneously requesting written reports, statistical analyses, progress data, schemes of work or lesson plans.

A conscientious teacher needs to spend hours to properly meet all these demands. I would like to be told how many hours I "should" be working, and then I could "legitimately" reach a cut-off point without feeling so guilty.

Rachel Pattison, Northumberland

Dear sir,

I read with interest your article on the appeal for second-hand computers for Africa (*African computer appeal*, SecEd 201, January 29, 2009).

I have recently returned from a study visit to The Gambia, where I am setting up an international link with my school and St Edward's Upper Basic School in Bwiam.

I think the aims of the e-Learning Foundation, and its collaboration with Digital Links, is very worthy and we should all be aware of the lack of facilities in the Third World.

A couple of the schools I visited in Banjul, the capital of Gambia, had computers which had been donated by schools in Europe, but they were stacked in cupboards and had not been used.

Why? They have no electricity! These schools are desperate to have computers, but without electricity or solar panels it is impossible. Even if they had electricity or solar panels to run computers, very few people are trained in computer maintenance or know how to set them up.

It is an aspect which is overlooked when these appeals are made and causes such frustration in parts of Africa. They are grateful for the kind donations, but can you imagine what it must be like to have the equipment, but not the means to operate it?

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Send your letters to: The editor, SecEd, St Jude's Church, Dulwich Road, Heme Hill, London, SE24 0PB or email editor@sec-ed.co.uk