

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.

SecEd

• 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