



Anyone for consistency?

Dare to be different, it will open our minds, says **Colin Foster**

EVERY WEEK YOUR CHANCE TO SHOUT ABOUT WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY, SAD OR MAD...

“The drive for consistency seems to go unchallenged in school decision-making. More important than whether something is good or bad is whether we are being consistent about it. Instead of thinking, teachers are reduced to looking up policy statements or try to remember what was done last time this happened.

How do teachers mark pupils' work? The main thing is that we are consistent. What should happen when pupils misbehave? It doesn't matter so long as we treat them the same. Should we follow a three-part lesson, buy into brain gym or cater for multiple intelligences? Perhaps, but whatever we decide, we've got to do the same.

Consistency is a poor reason for doing anything. Its current prevalence is a symptom of the defensive stance that teachers feel pushed into. Consistency is easy to justify to parents, who can be silenced by the line: "We have a policy and we are following it."

When people say that children like consistency what they really mean is that they have a strong appreciation of fairness, which is quite different. As the saying goes: "There is nothing so unequal as the

equal treatment of unequals" – awarding a pupil a detention is a completely different experience for one as it is for another, depending on their out-of-school routine and their parents' attitudes, for instance. Fair treatment and honesty are far more important than consistency.

But worse than this, when applied to teaching, consistency nearly always has a dumbing-down effect. A colleague wants to try something innovative, but most people don't, so a consensus is reached not to, and then we are consistent.

No pupil can complain they are getting a worse deal than any other. But we throw away imaginative ways of working in pursuit of the lowest common denominator. Lessons become dull. Every pupil knows what to expect because it's the same as they always get.

Children need structure and boundaries, but appreciate variety and surprise and improvisation – those are often the memorable bits of learning. As William Emerson said: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds" ■

Ralph Waldo Emerson

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