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Carly-Jane Boreland

Carly-Jane Boreland delves into some of the most recent fashions in education and wonders if...

Have we got a deal for you!

Early in their career and perhaps for every year thereafter, teachers will be presented with fads, miracle cures and the latest trends in educational fashion. As workers of the intellect, teachers can find this bewildering and occasionally professionally insulting. So how can we distinguish between the substantial and the cosmetic?

A good starting point is the NSWDEC Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation's document 'Great Teaching Inspired Learning: What does the evidence tell us about effective teaching?'(2013). This article suggests a way that might free educators from some of the seemingly immovable and competing demands upon their time. Through an approach placing current, valid and relevant bodies of research at the centre of professional learning, it aims to assist teachers to better identify fads and educational fashion and consider contemporary key findings about planning and programming for effective teaching. Some practical suggestions for what this might look like in a classroom are also included.

Pedagogy is both the art and science of teaching

We do know, now more than ever before, what makes a good school, what effective teaching looks like and what many effective teachers do. However, the discipline of education research is not without challenge due to the complexity of factors at play in the course of any child's education. Further, randomised trials and controls are difficult, as educators do not withhold promising interventions from groups of students. The consequences of these difficulties, described by the DEC (2013), is that 'often, descriptive or anecdotal accounts of practice have been accorded the same status as more rigorous methodologies, meaning that the important distinction between correlation and cause is lost.' In NSW, an unsophisticated understanding of the science and evidence base, coupled with a propensity towards craft based ideas, and tendentious ideological intervention into teaching, has meant that

"…even research that appears to be rigorous, data-based, and comprehensive, can be subject to criticism and contention, not always in ways that clarify the topic. As a result, the base that does exist has not always made a significant impact on classroom context. Conversely, spurious theories have sometimes attained faddish status with the result that the research literature includes 'recurrent findings of inadvertent harm' – evidence that 'it is possible for teachers – well-intentioned, caring and experienced – to unknowingly have impacts on students that are the direct reverse of what they intended (DEC, 2013)."

What follows are a few suggestions as to how to analyse ideas placed before you throughout your career as teacher:

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Questions to ask about research

1. Is evidence presented in a transparent way to inform teachers' decision making, or, has it been appropriated for political, organisational, or other purposes?
2. Are the researcher/publication/organisation's qualifications known and trusted and relevant to the field of public education?
3. Is there adequate information to inform decisions about the evidence base, methods, validity, currency and relevance of the research base and the researcher's conclusions?
4. Is a single study set against other overwhelming evidence being presented?
5. Is the size and nature of sample(s) comparable? For example, what is the school type, location, age of students, number and nature of students/teachers?

Some Terminology

1. Empirical (based on observation and experiment);
2. Meta-analysis (combination of many trial results eg. 800 empirical studies);
3. Qualitative (descriptive, holistic, anecdotal);
4. Quantitative (numerical and statistical analysis);
5. Coding methods (categories for data gathering and analysis).

The current evidence base

The research base for practices and other attributes of effective teachers is strongest. The research base for measures of teacher quality is weakest. There is overwhelming agreement about which practices are effective. In the early stages of a teacher's career (and beyond) it is wisest to plan and program for:

- Monitoring and Feedback;
- Strong Subject Knowledge;
- Explicit Teaching Techniques.

Planning and Programming for Manageable Monitoring and Feedback

Timperley (2009) points out that many teachers have been trained to use data to label and categorise students, and that a shift is required in order for teachers to use data to guide and direct students, and to reflect upon the effectiveness of their teaching. Such practices might include:

- Establish a method to record qualitative and quantitative data about students;
- Read and comment on student work during engaging independent tasks or oral presentations, focus on a small number of students each lesson if necessary;
- Check, initial and discuss completed work 5 minutes before the end of a lesson;

- Plan a lesson on peer, self and teacher feedback following each assessment task;
- Make time to formally grade assessment and work samples with colleagues and share these with students.

Planning and Programming for Strong Subject Knowledge

Alton-Lee's synthesis of 72 studies, which analyses the link between professional development and its impact on student outcomes, found that the greatest benefits to student learning were from professional development programs 'that deepen teachers' foundation of curricular-specific pedagogical content and assessment knowledge' because they 'provided teachers with new theoretical understanding that helped them make informed decisions about their practice'.

- Program to include your passions, interests and expertise;
- Subscribe to subject specific publications such as subject associations, newspapers, journals, e-newsletters;
- Apply for 3-4 subject specific professional learning courses at the beginning of the year;
- Set realistic annual goals for expanding your subject knowledge for each topic you teach, for instance, read one book/chapter/article (not school textbooks), watch a documentary, visit a gallery/site/exhibition/performance.

Planning and Programming for Explicit Teaching Techniques

When dealing with novel information, learners should be explicitly shown what to do and how to do it… [Hattie's meta-analysis of 800 studies describes explicit teaching techniques:] The teacher decides the learning intentions and success criteria, makes them transparent to the students, demonstrates them by modeling, evaluates if they understand what they have been told by checking for understanding, and retelling them what they have told by tying it all together with closure.

- Plan for finished products the student is proud of each week;
- Skill development, high-order questioning and conceptual understanding in lessons and drill and practise at home;
- Teach the specific skills required for success in a task;
- Modify examples of student work in front of the class;
- Work with colleagues to find and share work samples;
- Save samples to show students what is possible early in a task or assessment;
- Value sharing and perfecting impressive sentences in class and talk about what makes the sentence impressive.

The Big Picture

If you teach in a NSW Public School you are one of over 60,000 educators. We do know, now more than ever before, what makes a good school, what effective teaching often looks like and what many

effective teachers do. You also have the opportunity in our system to look beyond your school to find other good practitioners and advice around planning, programming and research.

Carly-Jane Boreland has been a classroom teacher and Head Teacher in NSW government schools. Carly sits on the Quality Teaching Council and the Initial Teacher Education Committee of the BOSTES.

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