

Andrew Hammond

Shedding Light On Hidden Learning

We are often told that school is fundamentally about helping students to make progress. But the word has never sat comfortably with me.

The tomato plants in my greenhouse grow and develop, but in order to comment on their progress, I need to know the height and yield they are expected to reach so that I can measure their progress against expectations – not only my own expectations, but the national standards for tomato growing. What is the floor standard for tomato plants, below which I can identify the failures? For plants that grow high and produce many tomatoes, what was their height when they were 4 weeks old, or 8 weeks? Are mine on track to meet national expectations? How do I identify the key-marginals? And if I keep measuring them, will they grow faster? Oh, it's so worrying. Progress is a capricious term; I prefer the word growth.

The language of assessment that we use in schools is designed to comment on the measurable progress that children make towards national expectations for academic attainment. We show that they have made progress (and that we have done our job) through academic qualification; and we incentivise children to work hard through rewards if they do and sanctions if they don't.

The language used in school reports and parents evenings is also geared around this concept of making progress towards acceptable standards for academic attainment. As a consequence, what a child has learned and retained is held to be an accurate measure of how successful a learner he is. This is false.

At a parents evening for one of my own children, I remember asking the question, 'How has Nell performed this term?'

Her teacher reached for his exam score sheet and said, 'Nell performed very well in English, she got an A. She performed well in Maths, she got another A. In Science, she performed quite well, she got a B.'

I said, 'Forgive me, I think you have misunderstood my question. I asked how Nell has been performing, and what you have given me is the results of her performance. That is not the same thing.' (Note: I do not blame Nell's teacher one bit; I blame the system within which he, and I, are working).

Trying to elucidate, I said, 'If we were F1 engineers, we'd know that our car's performance cannot be encapsulated by its position on the leaderboard at the end of a race. That is the result of its performance, which is bound up with its aerodynamic design, engine, brakes, fuel system, tyres, steering, not to mention the driver, his or her ability, attitude, concentration, and so on. These variables cannot – and should not – be summed up by the word 'sixth' or even better, 'first'. As engineers we need detailed diagnostics on how everything is working together to produce a result at the end. We need performance indicators.'

The same is true for learners. If we conflate the word results with performance, we risk hiding all the learning habits that combine to produce a measurable outcome. Worse than this, if we focus solely on the statistical output, we will negatively influence a student's input. Children are more than the sum of their grades at the end of term. They are more than the handwritten work in their books, more than the ticks and crosses they receive, or the standardised scores they achieve in a verbal reasoning test. There is more to them than meets the eye.

Every day, in every school, there are two curricula being delivered: a visible one, shaped by the curriculum, delivered through a timetable of teaching and learning and measured via academic qualifications; and an invisible one, shaped by the learning environment, delivered through attitudes, behaviours and skills, and modelled by teachers in daily conversations and social interactions.

Both curricula are of fundamental importance and both influence a child's development. Both will determine the future life chances of every student who passes through school: they are inextricably linked. One is seen; the other is hidden, by which I mean, the language of learning and assessment used in schools falls short when it comes to describing meaningfully the deep-down-things that matter.

Trying to describe the attitudes, behaviours and skills for effective learning using the language of academic assessment is like trying to illuminate a stadium with a torch, or attempting to describe quantum mechanics using

the language of classical science. The hidden curriculum is only hidden because the language we use in school was never designed to articulate it.

A quantum revolution is needed in schools today. A new lens is required to enable us to view what is happening behind the grades. A new discourse is needed so that we may describe the indescribable.

The terms progress, assessment, or results are misleading, because they fool us into believing that they encapsulate a student's potential, but they don't.

All children have incalculable potential, but such potential is fragile, impressionable; it is influenced positively by a focus on learning performance (where a growth mindset lies), but it can be influenced negatively by a sole focus on assessing and testing for academic output (where a fixed mindset dominates). Ironically, the more we test for outcomes, the more we may influence what they will be. Predicted grades are themselves deterministic.

The hidden curriculum of attitudes, behaviours and skills requires a language that enables us to comment on it in meaningful ways that inform, scaffold and facilitate future growth, without determining it. Whilst we may not favour sending our students home with a B- in curiosity, or a score of 73% in resilience, we do need a script with which we can track, monitor and report on their character traits and attitudes as they develop. The hidden curriculum delivers attitudes and skills that remain when academic knowledge is forgotten, and it can be commented on if we lay out key observable behaviours.

But it is a polarising debate. Mention that you value the deep-down-things and you are branded a soft progressive, a romantic; say that you believe knowledge is important and you are deemed a traditionalist.

Like so many things in life, it is not either/or, it is and. You raise academic standards when you recognise and develop the hidden learning that happens along the way.

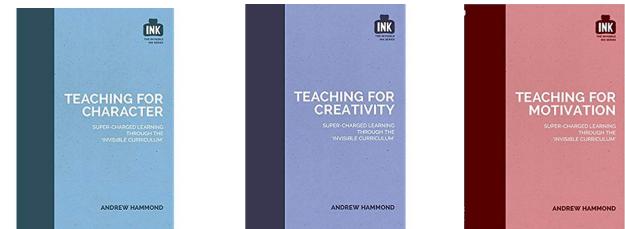
We could continue to talk exclusively about academic attainment and progress while we pacify, or anesthetise, rising numbers of anxious children with fidget spinners, stress balls and tins of putty. But for real change, we need to recognise that school is actually about becoming an effective learner. It is not just what you learn, it is how you learn, how you think, how you perceive yourself and how you work with others. Articulating and modelling these hidden aptitudes is the greatest challenge for us as educators. It will be worth it. In a rapidly changing world, the obsolescence-proof skills are those which until now have been hidden behind academic grades, secondary to knowledge retention, it seems.

Such attitudes, behaviours and skills are difficult to 'teach', but they can be modelled, and we can build a new learning environment in which they can flourish. It's what EYFS teachers have been doing for years. We just need to continue their legacy.

As a parent, give me the important stuff! Unveil for me the observable indicators of effective learning performance and find words to talk about them in non-judgemental ways – because that is where the growth mindset and capacity for improvement lie. You can call them soft skills if

you have to, but to me they are every bit as hard and as real as the letter grades and numbers pupils are currently measured by.

Andrew Hammond is a teacher and Director of Research, Innovation & Outreach at Holmewood House School in Kent. He is an author, CPD leader and keynote speaker. www.andrewhammond.org / www.hiddenlearning.co.uk. @andrewjhammond



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