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Relentless Consistency: Finding a Common Teaching Language Without Scripts

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We recently heard Michael Fullan speak about the impact of common language and consistent practices on the speed of change within school systems. Consistency in core practices and key language is essential to the change process he outlines in his book, *The Six Secrets of Change* (2008). When we first began to think about what Fullan was saying, we feared the worst - scripted lessons. As Richard Allington writes, "Enhanced reading proficiency rests largely on the capacity of classroom teachers to provide expert, exemplary reading instruction. Study of these exemplary teachers suggests that such teaching cannot be packaged. Exemplary teaching is responsive to children's needs, not regurgitation of a common script." We began pondering the dilemma - how do we create schools that have consistent practices and common language, yet still preserve teacher voice?

When we read Fullan's book, it all made perfect sense in theory. Fullan is not advocating for teaching scripts; in fact, we believe he is an advocate for preserving teacher leadership and voice. His book pushed us to think about students and the impact that consistent practices in our schools could have for them. We asked ourselves and our colleagues a few questions. What is teacher voice? What do we need to have control over in order to feel innovative? Fullan argues that "organizations need to address their core goals and practices with relentless consistency, while at the same time learning continuously how to get better and better at what they are doing." (*The Six Secrets of Change*) How do schools decide which goals and practices are worthy of "relentless consistency," and at the same time create a culture that empowers teachers?

Since December we have been talking with scores of teachers about this issue. Does the terminology we use matter? For example, do you care if we all use the words "upper case letters" to teach that concept? Do you feel as if you lose your voice if we all agree to call the time when kids read, independent reading? Most teachers said "no" in response to both questions. Teachers in the districts with the highest population of English language learners students believe it is essential that we use consistent academic language and practices to teach concepts and content to students. Teachers understood the purpose of "relentless consistency" is to standardize terminology for the benefit of students and teachers. They were confident terminology can be standardized, while still allowing teachers to express their creativity and professional expertise. In the last 3-5 years, we have seen teachers scripted to the point of being told not to think. Our fear isn't that teachers will resist consistency, as much as the goal of consistency will result in top-down mandates for scripted instruction.

We are now viewing the language used in classrooms across districts through this lens of consistency that empowers, rather than constricts. We notice the lack of consistency in practices and language in many districts. These discrepancies may seem minor, but from a student's point of view they are confusing and can impact the speed of change. If districts identify core goals and practices and seek "relentless consistency" from kindergarten through sixth grade, then both teachers and students could spend more time for the "new learning required for continuous improvement."

In the name of "teacher voice or creativity" some students have to learn a new academic language each year in order to navigate the waters of new classrooms. This new academic language is in addition to the content language they need to learn, as well as a second or third language for English language learners. We need to think about how we can make our instruction more accessible to students. If we continually change the language of core practices, it is difficult for them to achieve quick and lasting academic growth.

Here are some areas that often lack consistency in schools:

1. Phonetic Cueing System

Many districts and schools do not use a common phonetic cueing system between classrooms. The cueing system should be used by students to decode and encode unfamiliar words. The cues are used to help kids retrieve letter sounds and remember the rules used in certain phonetic situations. At times, we see students learning three to four different cueing systems in one year. These students are often being seen for intervention and special education services. Each teacher providing services to this student is using his or her favorite terminology for cueing systems, and thereby exposing a student to multiple terms for the same concepts. If all teachers used one cueing system, then these students could focus on how to use the system to help them decode and encode unfamiliar words, rather than trying to memorize the cues themselves.

2. Sustained Silent Reading Time

Most classrooms we visit have a time in their literacy block for students to read independently. We have seen hundreds of

names for this time of the day. Most teachers have a clear vision of what the structure and expectations are for this activity. Yet many students do not have this same clarity because the name of the activity varies, and they are unaware of how the current year connects with the previous year's structure. Katie Wood Ray reminds us that our reading and writing workshop structures and routines need to be as predictable as "the lunch routine." Kids know they will have lunch every day, and they know the routine will be the same. This consistency allows them to know the expectations for this time of day. The key language and core practices of lunch are consistent in grades K-5. Why can't we have similar consistency in the language and routines for silent reading periods?

3. Strategy Language

The proficient reader research has given teachers language to use with students in teaching the deep and surface structures of reading. Many teachers have their own "creative" ways to teach the strategies to their students. While these ideas may be fun and effective, we see many students struggling to understand what is being asked of them due to a lack of clarity in the academic language. Simple examples of variations in language for common practices include:

- "when I don't know a word I can skip it and read on" vs. the "leap frog" strategy
- making connections vs. schema
- inferring vs. "read between the lines"
- parts of a word vs. a chunk
- line in the text vs. evidence in the text

Although each of these examples is asking the students to use similar strategies, they are labeled differently. These simple variations in language confuse some learners for weeks or months - and they do not have this time to waste. If students are expected to use these strategies flexibly and effectively, then maybe we need to be more consistent in the language we are using to teach them. Once students have successfully learned a new concept, we can then expose them to other terms to describe this concept. We want our students to be flexible in their use of language, but we want them first to understand what it is they are learning. As Fullan explains, "If you nail down the consistent practices, you are freeing up energy for working on innovative practices." (The Six Secrets of Change) If students can "nail down" the strategies or concepts we are teaching them, then they can focus more on how to use them flexibly and effectively. If they spend all their time trying to understand what it is we are trying to teach them, they never get to the deeper thinking and use of the strategies. When we use common language around key concepts and strategies over a period of years, across an entire school or district, it helps our students activate their background knowledge and move more quickly into learning how to use what we are teaching them in increasingly sophisticated ways.

We will continue to think about this theory and how it impacts teaching, learning, and the culture of our profession. We always want to create cultures that empower teachers, but we also want to enhance the clarity of instruction. When there is a lack of consistency in our core structures and routines each year, it makes it difficult for students to attend to the content of the instruction. It will be interesting in the future to see how schools structure the conversations necessary to bring "relentless consistency" to their core practices and language.

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