



# PROGRESS

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Crown House Publishing Limited

[www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk)

First published by

Crown House Publishing Ltd  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
www.crownhouse.co.uk

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC  
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495  
www.crownhousepublishing.com

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First published 2017

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-1-78583-160-7  
Mobi ISBN 978-1-78583-194-2  
ePub ISBN 978-1-78583-195-9  
ePDF ISBN 978-1-78583-196-6

LCCN 2016959888

Printed and bound in the UK by  
Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion

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# INTRODUCTION

What characterises effective teaching?

It's an age-old question which elicits a school filing cabinet full of responses. 'Assessment for learning?' some might cry. 'Differentiation?' 'Enthusiasm?' 'Innovation?' 'Subject knowledge?' The ingredients for great teaching are arguably countless. But the one thing that they all have in common, the one fundamental outcome that they are all intended to achieve, is *pupil progress*.

It stands to reason: we could be as passionate, as innovative or as knowledgeable as we like, but if our pupils aren't making good progress then these qualities become redundant. Let's not forget, either, that pupil progress can relate to more than simply academic progress. Good teaching promotes progress in attitude, behaviour, self-belief and self-reliance as well as skill and understanding.

So the issue of pupil progress is at the crux of all effective teaching and learning. As educators, we need to think about how we define it, how we measure it and, above all, how we ensure that it becomes a possibility for every learner. The expert contributors in this book each approach the topic of progress in their own individual way, from the philosophical and ethical to the pragmatic and purely practical. Their insights provide

us accumulatively with a 360 degree exploration of a concept which is of central concern to our practice as professional educators.

Many of the contributors, including Mick Waters, Will Ord and David Didau, urge us to interrogate exactly what it is that we mean by 'progress'. They point out the implicit value judgements we may be making when applying the term uncritically and unthinkingly – just one more amid the hundreds of words we're required to use as part of our professional lexicon. Among the questions these experts encourage us to ask are: what does progress really mean? Who decides what constitutes progress? Who should set targets, and why? How do we measure progress? And how do we ensure that the structures and processes we put in place in our schools and classrooms do not leave any learner excluded?

Postmodernist philosophers have questioned the concept of progress in a historical context – the idea that humankind and its civilisation inevitably improves over time, moving towards some kind of ideal or perfect state. In philosophical terms, this belief in continual, linear improvement is referred to as one of the 'grand narratives' which humans have used since the Enlightenment to explain themselves and their history. David Didau questions this same idea in microcosm, echoing the postmodernists in his argument that progress in the classroom should not be thought of as linear, as a steadily advancing route of improvement aimed at some distant goal of perfection. Rather,

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he argues that progress is something achieved in fits and starts, and sometimes by circuitous and unlikely routes. This means, among other things, that progress can be more usefully viewed in terms of our learners' individual journeys rather than as a collective route. This is reminiscent of the work of the French philosopher, Lyotard, who makes the same general point when he tells us that the small stories (*les petits récits*) of individual achievement are of more value than mythical 'grand narratives' about collective progress.

Several of our contributors, including James Nottingham, Mick Waters and Mark Burns, make a similar point when they argue that progress is a personal measure, not a fixed absolute. Martin Robinson, too, questions what he refers to as 'the progress myth', while Pam Hook suggests that progress is most usefully expressed not as a forward-moving line but as a spiral where learning experiences are returned to and repeated, perhaps several times, at increasingly higher levels or at greater depth.

These contributors are all saying something about the *shape* of progress. Together, they are asserting that it is indeed not linear. The idea of linear progress is one that has served to encourage the concept of progress in education as a race towards a fixed finishing line, and this is a construct which is directly challenged by a number of contributors, not least by Pam Hook's image of a spiral, but also by those who argue that we should find a way of defining and measuring progress that does not involve the concept of competition between the learners themselves. James

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Nottingham, Mick Waters and Claire Gadsby all suggest that progress should be learner centred rather than criterion based, and that – to paraphrase Claire Gadsby – it is only the pupil, not the teacher, who can demonstrate progress.

This assertion has significant implications for the way that many schools talk about progress. Too often discussions of progress are coupled with the notion of how it is being demonstrated. Sadly, the primary concern for many in this demonstration is a bureaucratic one, leaving the two most important stakeholders of progress in the classroom – the learner and the teacher – engaging in practices that are not oriented towards genuine progress. Many of the contributions in this book implore us to consider the real reasons that pupil progress needs to be visible, and that those reasons are not founded in school inspection or national benchmarks. To this end, Claire Gadsby suggests that pupils should be encouraged to develop the skills of metacognition – the ability to think about their own learning and intellectual processes in order to be able to recognise the progress they are making themselves, or would like to make. Mick Waters refers to the practice of assessing progress against externally fixed markers as an ‘obsession’ which should be challenged. James Nottingham makes the same important point: the measurement of progress should not be made by teachers against externally set markers, but by learners against their own personal best.

So, what are the arguments behind the resistance to externally set markers? The concern which is expressed most forcibly by



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these expert educationalists relates to the impact of externally imposed targets and labels and the self-limiting impact these may have on the learners themselves. As James Nottingham and Mark Burns point out, labels and 'scores' can limit learning, as can the assumptions made by teachers – assumptions that may be evident through their target-setting. Indeed, Robert Bjork warns us against making a supposition not only about what pupils can do but also about what they may need from us in order to do it.

Protecting learners from developing self-limiting beliefs is essential if we are to effectively support learning. Martin Robinson makes a very strong case here for the importance of encouraging pupils' hopes and beliefs and the need to use these as a starting point, rather than the imposition of what he calls 'mechanistic' targets. If either hope of success or belief in their own potential is at rock bottom, the pupil's ability to progress will be seriously impeded. Mark Burns makes a similar point, arguing that pupils' own expectations and beliefs are the key to making positive progress. Building confidence and self-belief, therefore, should be seen as central to the teacher's role and not simply as an optional 'soft skill'. Interestingly, Andy Hargreaves, in his contribution, extends this same concept to the need for mutual support between colleagues, which he refers to as giving 'uplift'. This idea of cheering colleagues on is underpinned by the same principles: the positive impact on performance and the progressive improvement to be derived from building confidence and self-belief.

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Building confidence does not mean making learning easy, however, as several of the contributors point out. Robert Bjork, for example, argues that much is to be gained by challenging learners; that the effort necessary to overcome and work through difficulties and challenges in the learning process can result in a more secure grasp of what is learned as well as a longer lasting retention of it. John West-Burnham, too, suggests that practice is essential to effective progress in learning, and that the effort we demand of our learners can be directly proportionate to the success they achieve in reaching their goals.

Underlying these arguments is a wider point about allowing learners their voice, listening to them as experts on their own progress and recognising their individuality rather than resorting to time-saving, but opportunity-limiting, typecasting. We know that progress is sometimes best achieved by supporting pupils in moving out of their comfort zone and encouraging them to reach ever higher as they wrestle with difficult concepts and skills. However, Guy Claxton cautions that this should not be taken too far, since there is a fine line between challenging learners into making positive progress and 'over-stretching' them. Over-stretching, he explains, may result in learners becoming disheartened and losing their motivation for learning altogether.

This fine line, Claxton suggests, can best be recognised by the pupils themselves. It is they, he argues, who are ideally placed to identify when they have achieved mastery and are ready for

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a further challenge. He refers to this tipping point as the 'sweet spot' – the point at which the pupil is secure and confident in what they have learned and now needs to progress to the next step. Again, this raises another crucial question for us as teachers: who needs to identify the progress? Seeing tangible gains resulting from effort made is an important motivating factor; ensuring that our learners can see how far they have come from their relative starting points illustrates that their hard work has been fruitful. But to be able to identify progress, learners need to know what they should be aiming for. To this end, Mike Gershon urges the wider use by teachers of exemplar materials – examples of work which illustrate the content and standard which the pupils should be aspiring to as a next step in their learning.

On the other hand, those who place the teacher role as being just as central in identifying progression raise some interesting practical issues. Pam Hook reminds us that if we are to monitor our learners' progress, then we must have a clear idea of what we are looking for. What does progression look like in any one specific context? It can, of course, look quite different in a swimming lesson than in the learning of a foreign language! To answer this question we must have a system, or taxonomy, for making progress visible.

A wider theme emerging from these contributions – and an important one – is the question of progress and equity. The question here is about how we can best ensure that every

pupil has the opportunity to progress as far as their potential will take them, unhindered by inequalities of family income, class, gender, culture or any other factor that might constitute a barrier to achievement. John Hattie makes a powerful argument, supported by practical examples, of how funding can be used effectively and equitably to enhance progress in learning for every pupil. This link between progress and the improvement of life chances resonates with the work of Sugata Mitra and the role that technology can play in this respect; while Sir John Jones, writing similarly about life chances, reminds us of the enormous influence that the quality of teaching can have on pupil motivation and progress.

This brings us finally to that other underlying theme: the fundamental impact on pupil progress of the methods we use to teach and to support their learning. Here, Geoff Petty points us to the invaluable resources provided by meta-research, which identify for us which are the most effective, progress-yielding teaching methods. Through meta-analyses, such as those conducted by John Hattie and the Education Endowment Foundation, we can discover what has been proven to work, based on accumulated evidence, over time, from a range of sources. The meta-research enables us to select our teaching methods in an informed and logical way, based on what has been proven to work best. As the Teacher Development Trust's guidance at the end of this book makes abundantly clear, this constantly growing bank of evidence-based approaches constitutes an important resource for teachers' continuing professional development.

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Every expert in this book describes their thinking in their own distinctive voice. In addition, for each of their important insights, you will find a number of ways to practically implement the experts' ideas in your own classroom or even across your whole school. Some experts have provided their own strategies. Everything that is from the experts' own voices appears in white text on a black background.

Stuck for ways to flag up progress to the learners themselves without morphing into some kind of irksome cheerleader? Looking for ways to develop a classroom ethos which is conducive to progress? Interested in exploring the concept of progress over time or finding some effective 'progress producers'? Searching for ways to ensure that every pupil knows exactly what they need to do in order to make progress? Then read on to see what some of the greatest names in education today have to say about progress, and arm yourself with a plethora of practical strategies that will have you exploring pupil progress through a lens with the most important focal point of all: the best outcome for every student.

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Wallace and Kirkman have tapped the thinking of the most relevant experts and confined them to an accessible summary of what matters.

*Shirley Clarke, author of Outstanding Formative Assessment*

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ISBN 978-178583160-7



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