

WE Position Paper:

The application and misapplication
of cognitive science in the classroom



Report created with Whole Education trust leaders participating in the Leading a Whole Education in Trusts series

The application and misapplication of cognitive science in the classroom

In recent years and increasingly in the past 12 months, we have seen a significant and concerted focus on a particular pedagogical approach be promoted, explicitly and implicitly, to our profession. On the 22nd October 2021, Whole Education network trust leaders came together to discuss:

1. [Recent evidence](#) that reviews the application of cognitive science focused practice in the classroom
2. The extent to which applied cognitive science is being promoted across our education system through education training programmes (NPQs, ECF, ITT...)
3. The relevance of such approaches to your schools/trusts and if/how this aligns with your whole education view and your CPDL approaches.

After an initial presentation of the research by Philippa Cordingley, the Trust leaders debated the emerging conclusions and their perception of the impact of cognitive science at a national, regional and trust-wide level. As ever, their views were balanced and nuanced:

1. There is a danger that we reduce the pedagogy of teaching to a science, in isolation and separate from the the craft of teaching. When in reality it is important, through CPDL, to develop both in all teachers
2. Due to the system wide pressure to do so, it would be easy to privilege the cognitive science over all else, but that in reality it is probably better to develop the craft of teaching in each individual practitioner (with agency) and interweave the cognitive science practice where it is appropriate
3. Applied cognitive science should not be used to dictate what teachers should be doing in the classroom, but would be useful in providing principles that teachers need to interpret (and be supported to do so)
4. Learning is complex because young people are complex - to reduce learning to formulaic methodology is to reduce the complexity of each child
5. It is inherent therefore on school and trust leaders to support staff to navigate the pedagogical complexity through CPDL structures which provide autonomy with a framework of principles.

The Network Trust leaders were clear in their view that applied cognitive science as evidenced by the presented emerging research into the evidence of its impact in the classroom continues to be an area of interest (as it has been for a large number of years). However, it is not and should not be treated as a system-wide panacea. Nor should it, through system CPDL (ITT, NPQs) be presented as such to teachers and leaders.



Background:

Whole Education is a national network of schools and trusts collaborating to providing a high-quality whole education for all their young people.

Leading a Whole Education in Trusts supports leaders across trusts to share and learn from each others practice and explore what leading a whole education across a group of schools looks like.

Leaders in the LAWET group support and inspire each other to take a sustainable, long-term approach to leadership that challenges the short-termism we see in the English education system.

The WE Trust Influence Forums are roundtable events that provide trust leaders with the space and time to collectively influence each other and the system and become a powerful, positive voice for the change they want to see in education.

Further info:

Are you curious to find out more?

If have any thoughts or comments, we would love to hear from you.

Get in touch trust@wholeeducation.org



