Introduction

When COVID-19 first hit our world, the word that kept coming to my mind was “surreal.” For the first several weeks I would repeatedly ask myself, “Is this really happening?” “Is this a dream... or a nightmare?” Now, after months of disruptions and ongoing lockdowns, the sense of “surreality” has rubbed off.

It’s a good thing that we have become far more accustomed to our abnormal “new normal.” We understand that things clearly are not as they should be and that they will not remain like this indefinitely, but, in some ways, we have fallen into a rhythm with the disruptions. What we all thought would be over in weeks or months will soon approach the year mark, and with the benefit of time, our thoughts have shifted from questioning realities to determining how best to address them.

COVID-19 forced us all unwittingly into a grand, worldwide experiment around remote learning and ultimate flexibility in teaching. Many are predicting, and I concur, that schooling will be permanently changed by our recent experiences. When we get back to something more “normal,” we will take our recent experiences with us. We will be better equipped and more adept at shifting some learning from inside our buildings to any manner of setting, and future disruptions to our ability to be inside a schoolhouse (e.g. weather, a burst pipe) will be more easily addressed.

I read, with great interest, a recent report from the Confederation of School Trusts titled Remote Education: Expectations, evidence, and experience. I commend them for this excellent overview of the regulations and research on remote learning, and for their accompanying guidance. I’d like to briefly extend on one of their ideas and discuss how Renaissance Learning has provided support for all schools as they endeavor to provide the highest quality of instruction possible under the current conditions.

Focus on What Matters Most

In their report, CST cite the Department for Education’s Remote Education Expectations. They note that “the first bullet point in the DfE’s list of expectations is about the curriculum. This is not an accident” (CST, 2020 – emphasis added).

Many authors point to the critical but sometimes overlooked role of a well-constructed curriculum. According to Schmoker (2018), “the case for curriculum cannot be overstated” (pg. 20). Darling-Hammond (2010) feels that “a quality curriculum alters a student’s academic trajectory; it is a more powerful determinant of eventual achievement than their academic readiness when they enter school (as cited in Schmoker, 2018, pg. 20) and Wiener and Pimentel (2017) assert that “the effect of curriculum is almost 40? times as cost effective as class-size reductions” (as cited in Schmoker, 2018. pg. 20).

In regards to curriculum, DfE advances that schools must “teach a planned and well-sequenced curriculum so that knowledge and skills are built incrementally, with a good level of clarity about what is intended to be taught and practised in each subject so that pupils can progress through the school’s curriculum” (DfE as cited in CST, 2020, pg. 5). Yet, there is a major challenge that must be addressed. The National Curriculum is written at a very broad level and therefore does not provide the level of guidance suggested here.

As NFER have noted, “Although the National Curriculum programmes of study define what is to be taught, they do not always specify all the steps in learning that a pupil must master in order to progress” (NFER, 2014, pg. 2 - emphasis added). In essence, there is a significant gap between the level of guidance provided by the National Curriculum documents and the level of detail needed to plan daily instruction.
While DfE provides schools with a substantial degree of latitude on how they fill this gap allowing them the potential to make the curriculum their own and adapt it any number of programmes, far too many schools lack the capacity to optimally do this. Furthermore, ultimate success requires that teachers not only "have a good sense of how knowledge is built over time," but also involves, this year more than any other, "knowing which aspects are essential, which are prerequisites for subsequent learning, and which might be 'nice to have' but not essential" (CST, 2020, pg. 10).

If we are to have any chance of sufficiently addressing the academic needs of our pupils within the current conditions, "It is important that teachers have this clarity" (CST, 2020, pg. 10). They must know the necessary skills, the order in which to teach them, and which ones are absolutely essential and non-negotiable.

Fortunately, Renaissance and NFER have addressed this need in the crafting of "learning progressions based on the National Curriculum" for reading and mathematics that "break down the steps in learning that will lead to the achievement of key curricular targets, including the identification of the key ‘building blocks’ or focus skills that need to be mastered en route" (NFER, 2014, pg. 2). NFER asserts that "understanding and being familiar with learning progressions... will enable teachers to construct teaching plans that provide pupils with opportunities and experiences to acquire the knowledge and develop the skills or sub-skills that will lead to the achievement of the next curricular target" (NFER, 2014, pg. 2).

**Essential vs. Nice to Have**

In developing the learning progressions, the broad "statements within the National Curriculum were scrutinised and broken down into several shorter fragments, each of which could form the teaching basis of a lesson plan" (NFER, 2014, pg. 7). These skills were then placed in an ideally teachable order, and the most essential skills were called out with a designation as "Focus Skills".

"Focus skills are defined as skills that are essential to progression, that support the development of other skills in the same or future years and/or are central to the emphases of the National Curriculum" (NFER, 2014, pg. 7). They ideally address the need established above of "knowing which aspects are essential, which are prerequisites for subsequent learning, and which might be ‘nice to have’ but not essential" (CST, 2020, pg. 10). If we are to have any success in academically shepherding pupils through the ongoing disruptions, such insights are critical. We do not have time to expend on "nice to have extras," but we cannot allow pupils to go without "absolute essentials and prerequisites for future learning."

Consider an example from Year 4 where the ability to "recognise the place value of each digit in a four-digit positive integer" is a Focus Skill while being able to "Read Roman numerals 1 to 100" is not. The rationale for this is that understanding place value is foundational to mastering arithmetic and becoming numerically competent. Using Roman numerals is useful in certain contexts, but not absolutely essential for progressing in mathematics.

During the first round of school closures, Renaissance chose to provide access to Focus Skills to all schools at no cost. Additional information about their development and reading and maths workbooks listing the Focus Skills across the years of school are available for download [here](#).

Consider the powerful guidance for prioritisation that Focus Skills provide. NFER reports that "out of nearly 1000 learning progression skill statements for mathematics, about 30% were identified as Focus Skills. These Focus Skills were not equally distributed across domains. Number – Number and Place value reflects the highest proportion of focus skills (42%)." Using Year 4 Maths as an example, a teacher could use the Focus Skills resources to identify the most essential year level skills that must be taught (place value), those skills that he/she can be more flexible in addressing (Roman numerals),
and the essential prerequisite skills from the previous year level which might need to be reviewed in addressing any learning loss or unfinished learning.

Within the Reading learning progression, “29 per cent of skill statements were designated as Focus Skills” and “the Word Reading domain has a disproportionately high number of Focus Skills (61%) as it is essential that pupils master most of the skills within these areas in order to be successful readers. Conversely, the skill area Critique of Information Texts has no associated Focus Skills as it is felt that, although these skills strengthen reading ability, they are not essential to becoming a successful reader” (NFER, 2020b, pg. 9-10).

**Planning instruction**

Precisely how, then, does one plan instruction in light of recent disruptions – when learning loss and unfinished learning are more likely than ever? Based on the recommendations of many thought leaders and adapted from an infographic done by Education Week for US schools, I think it goes something like this:

**STEP 1**
First focus on the content (curriculum) of the year level that you are teaching. What are the most essential skills? Be clear about what is essential and what is a “nice to have extra” because we are under pressure and we will not have time to cover everything.

**STEP 2**
Follow your general plan for your year level topics/units. If your plan has a unit on Geometry as the first one of the year, then begin with that unit. The focus should be on continuing, as much as possible, with **year level content** as opposed to doing “just in case” review of topics and skills from previous years making sure to focus on the most essential skills within each major unit.

**STEP 3**
As you plan each year level unit, think about the most essential pre-requisite skills for your unit and create a short quiz or activity to check and see if your pupils have those skills. If they do, move along with your content. If not, go to step 4.

**STEP 4**
If you find that pre-requisites are lacking, provide some “**just in time** review of those skills.

**STEP 5**
After your review, create another short quiz or activity to check and see if your pupils now have those skills in place. If they have, move along with content. If not, repeat steps 4 and 5.
With a better understanding of the most critical skills and the overall curriculum, teachers can successfully "move from an activity-focused way of viewing their teaching to a knowledge-focused approach; starting from the question ‘what do I want pupils to learn?’, rather than ‘what activities can I give them to do?’" (CST, 2021, pg. 10). Furthermore, "schools and teachers which have developed strong curriculum practice may find it easier to move to a remote pedagogy. They will better understand which curricular components need to be mastered, in which order, and how these build over time" (CST, 2021, pg. 11).

In many ways, the factors that make for high quality remote teaching are the same as those that support high quality in-person instruction. As we have noted, the role of curriculum is paramount. Furthermore, it’s not just about understanding all of the skills associated with a given year, it’s also about knowing which of those are essential and which are nice to have extras. This knowledge guides the rest of our work as we craft instructional experiences to impart these skills and seek assessment tools aligned to them.

As just a final note, I thought I’d share a timely message that I saw on social media. Speaking to educators, the unknown author stated the following:

- In case you need to hear it: Students are not falling behind.
- They are surviving a pandemic.
- Educators: You are not behind.
- You are also surviving a pandemic! And thank you for every ounce you give.

Reminding ourselves about this landscape – that we are "surviving a pandemic"—is sometimes warranted. Given the gravity of the work we do, we sometimes seeking perfect answers even in imperfect times. In another recent blog, I discussed the fact that we are living in a footnote. What I mean by that is that ten, twenty, fifty years from now when people look back at longitudinal data from this period, there will always be an asterisk or footnote that reminds them that any data or results from this time period must be considered through the lens of the disruptions wrought by COVID-19.

All of this is to say that, although we might want to make things perfect or at least more "normal," there are some factors out of our control. That's what it means to be "living in a footnote."

So, here we sit in a surreal new land trying to find our way. Things are less than perfect. And though we long for the older "normal" times, even then our conditions were never perfect. There were never enough team members, never enough time to cover every skill, and never enough resources to allow us to address every need. But we could sleep at night if we knew that we worked to do the greatest good possible for the greatest number possible.

Knowledge of the skills that matter the most at each year level ensures that we are well positioned to do our work, this year or any year.

Further reading:
- Blog post: What kind of analytics does a school or MAT leader need? by Joshua Perry
- 8-part Assessment Plan blog series by Dr Gene Kerns
- Blog post: In response to: Cancelling interim testing this year by Dr Gene Kerns
- More information on Renaissance solutions: www.renlearn.co.uk/solution
References

About the author
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As Vice President and Chief Academic Officer, Dr. Kerns advises educators in both the US and the UK about academic trends and opportunities. Dr. Kerns is a leading authority on education standards in the US and England, learning progressions, formative assessment, personalised learning, and the application of insights from the “science of expertise” within K–12. He delivers highly sought-after presentations each year—often to standing-room-only crowds of educators and administrators.
Prior to joining Renaissance: Dr. Kerns served as the Supervisor of Academic Services for the Milford School District in Delaware, was an adjunct faculty member at the University of Delaware, and held various other teaching and administrative positions in Delaware and Virginia. He received Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees from Longwood University in Virginia, and holds a Doctor of Education degree from the University of Delaware. He is co-author of two books, inFormative Assessment: When It’s Not About a Grade and Unlocking Student Talent: The New Science of Developing Expertise (in press).

About Renaissance
Renaissance is proud to be a Platinum Parter of the Confederation of School Trusts. For over 30 years, we have been a leading provider of cloud-based assessment and practice solutions that are now used by more 50,000 schools worldwide and almost 15 million students. Perhaps still best-known for Accelerated Reader, our suite of Star Assessments for reading, maths and early literacy were administered over 1.6 million times in the UK alone last year, whilst students read for hundreds of hours using myON, our enhanced digital book platform. Last year we published Focus Skills Teacher Workbook for Literacy and Maths based on Learning Progressions built by experts at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). Working closely with organisations such as CST, and through collaborative partnerships with school trusts, we develop frameworks for success; leveraging technology and insights to enhance teaching and learning.
If you would like to arrange a call to discuss how we can support your school or trust, please email: answers@renlearn.co.uk