

Independent Study - M7X01474

What are teachers perceptions of the idea of pupil progression in History?

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Ethics

Revised ethics form submitted and approved by course tutor, 5.4.18

Literature Review

The world of education in Wales is currently undergoing some seismic changes. The gradually growing gap in education policy between Wales and England that has emerged since devolution is accelerating as the governments in the two countries pursue increasingly different policies. In Wales since 2015 new teaching standards have been published as part of the 'New Deal for the workforce (Welsh Government, 2015), an overhaul of Initial Teacher Education is underway (Furlong, 2015) and, perhaps the highest profile of the reforms, the development of a new national 'Curriculum for Wales', kick started by the publication of 'Successful Futures' (Donaldson, 2015).

The headlines on the publication of the plans for this new curriculum focussed on some of the more obvious structural changes - the adoption of 'Areas of Learning and Experience' as curriculum organisers, and the removal of Key Stages and the reporting of end of Key Stage levels (BBC, 2015), but two of the changes that attracted less attention are likely to be even more significant. The first is the principle of subsidiarity which underpins both the new curriculum model and the way that the new curriculum is being written. This idea, well known in the context of European education but largely unheard of in the UK, is that power in the education system rests as close to the classroom as is practical, and that this is the default position. Handy (1994) compares it with empowerment - 'where somebody on high has given something away'. He argues that traditional power structures based around rules and delegation imply an inherent mistrust and 'breed corruption'. Subsidiarity, by default, 'leaves power as close to the action as possible'. This will have huge implications for power structures in the education system. Welsh Government, as well as those who review and comment in the media, will need to demonstrate a much higher degree of trust in schools and teachers than has been the case, certainly since 2011 (Waldron, 2011). That trust will need to be met by a growth of self-confidence within the teaching profession and within schools. It will be vital therefore, for the success of any new curriculum that teachers and those 'close to the action' have a thorough understanding of the underpinnings of the new curriculum.

The second key change is the development of a 'Progression Framework' to replace the old system of National Curriculum Levels, Foundation Phase Outcomes and National Test scores. One of the criticisms of the current model highlighted by Donaldson (2015) was the disjointed nature of a system which had been tweaked and adjusted, and had new elements

bolted on, to the extent that it no longer felt like one system. In the course of a child's education in Wales they would be assessed and reported against Foundation Phase Outcomes, National Curriculum Level Descriptors, National Test standardised scores, Literacy and Numeracy Framework and GCSE grades. Each uses a different number or letter system, reports at different time and in a different way. This should be replaced, argued Professor Donaldson, by a system that provided a 'clear line of sight' (ibid) from new learner to a confident, capable learner moving on at age 16.

The feeling that old systems of assessment and accountability need to be replaced are not unique to Wales. In his introduction to 'Making Good Progress' (Christodoulou, 2016, p7), Dylan Wiliam provides a useful account of the development and eventual undoing of the National Curriculum levels system. He describes a system which was 'based on the best research we had on student progression' which was slowly undermined first by school's use of the levels to mark specific pieces of work ('displaying a staggering level of assessment illiteracy') and then compounded by OfSTED asking children to tell them which level they were working at. Wiliam was himself appointed as a member of the expert panel by Michael Gove in 2010 and recommended that levels should be abolished, with their benefits now being 'more than out-weighed' by the negative consequences. (Ibid)

Attempts to move away from these forms of standards based models of assessment (often intrinsically linked to models of school accountability) exist in a number of the post-2000 curriculum reforms internationally. In Scotland for example, Curriculum for Excellence set out to overcome some of the issues and tensions that existed in previous curriculum models. However, as Priestly and Humes (2010) point out this has been limited in its success. They identify two key factors in this. The first is mixed messages within the documentation itself. The second is where gaps which were left by government for schools and teachers to fill in, have been filled in in ways which reflect the assumptions and ideas from the existing (or pre CfE) culture, even if they didn't match the aims of the new curriculum. A similar situation seems to be taking place in England. The vacuum left by the abolition of levels and the expectation that 1000 flowers would bloom has actually led, according to the Commission on Assessment without Levels (2015), to many schools simply re-creating levels for the new national curriculum, or purchasing 'off the shelf' solutions.

It seems clear then that any attempt to create a new system in Wales needs to not simply remove the old one, but actively create something that supports a new culture and set of

behaviours around about assessment and progression. Failure to do this is likely to lead to any new curriculum to be read by those within the system as simply being the same thing as before, dressed up in new language.

While Wiliam may claim that levels were based on the best evidence available in 1987 (Christodoulou, 2016, p7), others have called into question the quality of the research base behind the idea of levels as described in the original National Curriculum and its subsequent revisions. (1994) called into question the research behind many of the underpinning principles of the National Curriculum, including the idea of levels as the basis of assessment and the conflict between the use of the levels for summative and formative purposes. In the context of History the work of Lee and Shemilt (2003) has been important in calling into question both the descriptions provided by National Curriculum level descriptors, and the way they have been employed. In particular they criticise the way in which 'best fit' descriptions of student learning had been atomised and used to describe the steps that pupils went through in making progression. They argue that the levels didn't accurately describe the key changes in thinking that young people undertook in their development of thinking and understanding in history (although to be fair, this was never their intended purpose). In addition, they criticised the habit of schools in allocating an arbitrary label to a pupil at a specific point (4c or 6+ for example). This, they felt, failed to recognise that within a domain such as history it would be perfectly normal to have made progress in one area (for example in their understanding of the use of sources), while their understanding of another area (causation, or interpretation for example) remained in a less developed state. As such it would be possible for pupils to appear to be going backwards when comparing levels from one piece of work to the next if they had a different focus, although most schools and history departments ensured that their schemes of work and assessment regime ensured this didn't happen. It is worthwhile noting that while their criticisms were based on the English National Curriculum of the time, while subtle difference existed in Wales, the two were so similar that the comments are equally valid in the content of Wales.

Despite these criticisms, which were warmly welcomed and widely agreed with by many history teachers, these habits continued, often driven by schools' desire to track and monitor progress in pupils, and to intervene as necessary to ensure that sufficient progress would be made by the end of a key stage.

The extent to which specific subjects have specific underpinnings to their progression is another issue with the levels approach, or at least the way it ended up being used in many schools. In the context of a humanities subject such as History, there may well be some fundamental differences in the way pupils' understanding develops when compared with something like maths. Brant, Chapman and Isaac make the following observation (2016, p.72):

'Unlike mathematics or science where the subject content intrinsically gets more complex, in the social studies it is possible to ask students to address the same question – for example, "What were the causes of the First World War?" or "What are our responsibilities as citizens?" – at ages 10 and 18 and expect qualitatively different answers.'

This makes the identification of pupil progression harder. While it is possible to show how a pupil's thinking develops over time, the assumption that there is an universal set of observable changes that allows you to compare pupils is less assured. Similarly by assessing second order concepts such as causation or use of sources of evidence, the idea that that attainment and progression can be compared as pupils move between topics. However, in reality, the level of detail given to pupils, or the extent of their existing knowledge can have a significant impact on the quality of the work produced.

The only real research evidence that exists into the fundamental changes that take place in the development of children's thinking about, and understanding of History is that from Project CHATA (Lee, Dickenson and Ashby, 1996). This project attempted to learn from discussions with pupils, and an analysis of their work, how their thinking about specific historical second order concepts (causal explanation and use of evidence) changed over time. They found that there were specific changes in thinking that took place, although these often went through transition phases where previous sets of beliefs and understandings were perceived to be lacking by the student, before a new set took their place. Crucially for the context of this study, and for the successful implementation of the new curriculum, they found that the explicit teaching of these ideas had a positive impact on pupils' understanding.

The lack of a deep understanding of these key changes in pupils' understanding among many of the teaching profession is a key concern. Heritage (2008) argues that:

'Teachers need to understand the pathways along which students are expected to progress... Yet, despite a plethora of standards and curricular, many teachers are unclear about how learning progresses in specific domains.'

This presents a real challenge both in terms of the implementation of the new curriculum and for the professional learning that will be required of teachers across Wales. This study sets out to examine the degree of understanding of a very small sample of History teachers to see what the perception is among some who should be some of the most informed about these ideas, and generate possible avenues for future larger scale investigation.

Rationale

This study comes at a time when the ideas of progression, and their link with assessment and accountability are becoming politically significant in Wales. The ongoing Camau project is a joint venture between the University of Wales Trinity St David and the University of Glasgow designed to provide a research base into the development of the progression framework in the new curriculum, and to help support practitioners in bringing together evidence from research, from policy, and from their own practice (Hayward et al, 2018). It is underpinned by the integrity model of change (Hayward and Spencer, 2010) which places specific value the experience of the teachers involved in the process as co constructors of the curriculum.

Through the development of the curriculum, those teachers have been involved have been repeatedly asked both to engage in research around the ideas of curriculum development and progression, and to reflect on, use and discuss their own professional experience. What there hasn't been, as part of that process, is any research interviews with individual teachers that may highlight both the degree of understanding of the complexities and challenges outlined in the previous section. Nor has there been an opportunity to compare the views of teachers who are at various distances from the group of 20 or so teachers from Pioneer Schools who have been tasked with creating the new curriculum. These teachers have been the subject of a significant investment in terms of time allowed to read and engage in some of the issues that are pertinent to the development of a progression framework. However this degree of immersion will be impossible to replicate across the teaching profession, and so effective means will need to be found to ensure that all teachers buy in to the new culture and ethos being proposed by successful futures, in order to avoid them simply applying current culture and thinking to a new curriculum.

This study aims to consider those questions on a small scale, appropriate to the requirements of the particular assessment. While it will not be able to provide answers, it is hoped that will allow future research to proceed from a more informed position.

Research design and methods

The focus of this small study is to start to explore the views and understandings around progression of a small number of those teaching history in the secondary sector in Wales. This study represents a small and early exploration of some of the issues raised both by the literature and by my observation of practitioners engaged in sense-making activities around the ideas discussed in previous sections. Walford (2001) points out that there can be value in a study which sets out to raise questions, rather than get those questions answered, and this falls firmly within that camp. Given this focus, and the necessary small scale of the study, a qualitative, ethnographic approach is most suitable.

The progression models being developed will be for multiple subjects within the 'Humanities' Area of Learning and Experience (Donaldson, 2015), namely History, Geography, Religious Studies and Business Studies. However this study will focus specifically on History. Again, this is partly a reflection of the scale of the study. By maintaining the interviews within one subject area it is hoped that responses will be more comparable and there will be more of a common language and understanding shared by those teachers. Within the research review undertaken for the Camau interim report (Hayward et al, 2018) it became clear that there was a stronger existing research base around ideas in progression that seemed lacking from some of the other areas of the humanities. There was no equivalent to project CHATA for Geography or RE, and there has been little work on progression models in Business Studies as this has traditionally been seen as a subjects which students pick up at age 14, if at all. A final reason for the focus on history is, as a former history teacher, this is where my own expertise is the greatest.

This study aims to conduct semi-structured interviews with three teachers who are connected, to varying degrees, with the Pioneer School programme. This is to increase the likelihood that the interviewees will already be familiar with some of the discussions around progression and the new curriculum model, and will hopefully already have spent some time considering the areas that will be discussed. This will hopefully provide a richer and more

useful set of responses. This approach fits within the 'Purposive Sampling' model described by Cohen et al (2007). It was vital, especially given the scale of the study, that those interviewed has the requisite knowledge and experience to reflect in a meaningful way on the questions being asked of them. In this way the study was designed to make use of 'knowledgeable people' (Ball, 1990)

The choice not to just use those involved in the group of teachers engaged in writing the curriculum is twofold. One is practical. Within the group the number of secondary history teachers is quite small. The second is that it will hopefully allow some initial findings to be drawn on the extent to which engagement with the curriculum writing process has an influence on the views of the individual teachers. These practitioners will be identified using non-probability sampling. At this stage insight into how teachers understand progression and some of the issues and inconsistencies they raise are the key drivers of this study. As such issues of representativeness of the sample are less important, especially as there is no requirement or expectation that the findings will be generalised.

The sample contained three teachers, all of whom work in 11-18 schools which have been identified by the Welsh Government as 'Curriculum Pioneers'. For the purposes of the study they will be referred to as 'Teacher A', 'Teacher B' and 'Teacher C'.

Two (A and C) are directly involved in the creation of the new national Humanities curriculum. The third (B) works in a school which has already started experimenting with new curriculum models, but isn't personally involved in the writing of the curriculum at the national level. One (A) works in a Welsh medium school and two (B and C) work in the English medium setting. They all have over ten years experience of teaching History in Wales at Key Stage 3, 4 and 5. All identifying remarks have been removed from the analysis.

One of the biggest potential weakness of this study is the extent to which researcher bias may affect the outcome. This could creep in through the framing of the questions, or my reaction to answers offered. To limit this a guided interview approach was adopted (Bell 2005). It was important that this study explored teachers perceptions and thoughts around progression, including those areas which caused them to pause, and reflect in a deeper way that may be the case if a structured interview approach were used. The risk of using a structured interview was that my expectations of their responses would be echoed in the options provided or the precoding arrangements developed. Wiseman and Aron (cited in

Bell, 2008) describe interviewing to a fishing expedition, and that matches the intention of the study.

Five key questions have been developed before the interviews, and will be posed to each of the interviewees, but the conversational nature of the guided interview approach will allow interviewees to reflect in their experience and their context, and also to get further clarification on questions is required. While this will give interviewees the freedom and flexibility to discuss their responses in their specific contexts, and share their understanding of some of the key terms and issues, in some cases it may reduce the extent to which responses can be compared.

Groups interviews were considered, but rejected as a method. There were two main reasons for this rejection. The first was the practical requirement of needing to get the participants in a room together. The second was the concern that while participants may be able to build on, and respond to, each other's responses their views may be swayed or influenced by that of other participants.

Two of the interviews took place over the phone, with the third being conducted face to face. By offering participants the offer of a phone interview I was able to reduce the amount of time taken to conduct each interview. Although the benefit of non-verbal cues were lost, it could be argued that participants may have been more willing to be interviewed on the phone rather than face to face as it may have felt less formal, and it was easier to find the time. Each interview took around 20 minutes to discuss the questions.

All the interviews were audio recorded. This allowed the researcher full involvement in the conversation, rather than focussing on note taking. It also ensured access to the full interview, rather than a limited set of notes. This meant that interviews could be interrogated in light of the responses from other participants, and comments which may have been lost in the initial note taking took on a new light in this context. That said, key words and phrases were noted down as the interviews progressed. This allowed points raised previously to be linked to questions later in the interview. It also helped provide a framework for the analysis of the interviews themselves.

Once interviews have been audio recorded, the standard next step is to transcribe the interviews, and often to perform some element of coding or analysis on the resulting text. By

contrast Walford (2001) argues that listening back to the interviews multiple times, and transcribing or note taking only key elements has a number of benefits in the context of a small scale ethnographic and naturalistic study such as this. Firstly it provides a more effective use of the researchers limited time. Secondly, by focussing the analysis on the spoken word, rather than the transcription pauses, intonations and other cues that may be lost take a more prominent place in the analysis. For these reasons, this method was employed as a method of analysing the results of the interviews.

In each case the participants were already known to me. This brings advantages and disadvantages. Hopefully by building on existing relationships interviewees are more quickly put at ease, and more willing to open up. In two cases it may have contributed to the interviewees stopping to clarify their understanding of a questions before answering. This may well not have been the case otherwise as the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee may have led them to answer without clarifying first, and the results would have been less useful as a result. However Skikes (2000) cautions that interviewees who are already known to the interviewers may be inclined to lie. The nature of our existing relationship, and a clear explanation of the purposes of the study hopefully worked to mitigate any such risk.

Overall the chosen methodology of three guided interviews provided the best balance of practical considerations and the relative strengths and weaknesses of methods for the purposes of the study. The key strengths are the choice of participants for their degree of existing knowledge, and the use guided, semi-structured interviews which allow a degree of commonality and focus in responses, but don't place a limit on the extent and context of the answers provided by the respondent. The greatest weaknesses are related to sample size, and the quality of conclusions that be drawn from such a small sample, the skill of the interviewer and the lack of triangulation, although this may be followed up in future investigations.

The proposed questions attempt to provide sufficient guidance and clarity to ensure a considered response from the three interviewees which can be compared. In the context of the research methodology it won't matter if respondents choose to explore different areas in their responses, in fact, differences in responses will be one area of potential analysis. There is a risk that the questions are too open and responses either don't align at all, or provide an

overwhelming amount of data. The chosen method of analysis will help to mitigate this. A pilot was considered, but rejected on the practical grounds of scale and time.

The proposed questions are:

1. What do you think it means to 'get better' at History as a young person in secondary school?
2. In order to track progression, schools have developed various systems to track pupil progress including sub-levels and systems based on GCSE grades. What do you perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the systems you know about? Do you have a preference?
3. How well do you think the models of progression that currently exist at different key stages align?
4. Traditionally National Curriculum Levels in History have focussed on development in second order concepts, although there is a revival in interest measuring how much pupils knowledge. Do you think you can measure progression in knowledge and understanding, and if so, how?
5. Teacher marked assessment is also used for reporting on pupils at the end of KS3. There appears to be a tension between assessment for learning and assessment of learning in so far as the amount of support pupil's receive in developing work which is then leveled. What's your view on this?

Data analyse and implications

What do you think it means to 'get better' at History as a young person in secondary school?

All three respondents quickly made reference to developing the 'skills of history'. All mentioned using sources of evidence. Two made reference to interpretations. However, when they went on to discuss progression, their examples focussed more on the qualities you might expect to see in a more generalised written response. The shift from 'describe' to 'explain' to 'justify' was explicitly used by one respondent, while another made similar comments, although less explicitly. This is important as these kinds of development you would expect to see in a number of other subjects, both within the humanities (such as RE and Geography) and beyond (such as English). This supports the suggestion made by Heritage (2008) that teachers remain unclear about progression in specific domain, and implies a mismatch between the theoretical models of progression and their application in the classroom.

One teacher commented on the need for pupils to see they're making progress. Traditionally enquiries (units of work) have often focussed on one specific second order concept (an assignment that looks at use of sources of evidence may be followed by another that looks to test a pupil's understanding of causation) and this can lead to a fractured sense of progression where it is hard to compare one piece of work to the next. It may be that all three spent longer describing generic ideas around progression in writing as these are things that allow easier comparison from one piece of work to the next, although this idea will require further testing before it can be stated with any degree of certainty.

One teacher commented on the need for pupils to be able to both discuss ideas, and also rethink new ideas in light of new knowledge. This comment, along with those above, suggests that teachers think of progression within the space of a unit of work, rather than between units. This indicates one area of existing culture and behaviour that stands in contrast to the stated aims of assessment and progression in Successful Futures (Donaldson, 2015) which talk about the need for teachers to consider how learning develops over a longer time period and a requirement for teachers to plan for this. There are echoes here of how the national curriculum levels were originally designed with change and development being planned and measured over three years rather than a scale of a few

weeks. This implies an earlier set of cultural norms and behaviours which it may be possible to call on to help replace those which currently exist, but don't match with the aims of the new curriculum.

In order to track progression, schools have developed various systems to track pupil progress including sub-levels and systems based on GCSE grades. What do you perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of the systems you know about? Do you have a preference?

None of the respondents had a preference for the use of GCSE grades. One teacher expressed a strong view that they were not appropriate both because they were designed to assess a set of outcomes, rather than describe progression, and because they felt that there was a real risk of labelling pupils early in their secondary school career which could have a very demotivating effect.

Two of the teachers felt that levels remained the best system. One of these felt that the common use and understanding of the terms helped teachers. Another felt they provided a 'solid architecture' for pupils to understand how they were getting better, and what they needed to do to improve. Both expressed concerns about the use of sublevels and the use of them for data led tracking of pupils but both felt that, in their schools, this was being reduced.

One teacher discussed how pupils wanted to know their level, and while levels were now held back, in line with the school AfL policy, when they were revealed pupils used them both for reassurance and for an element of competition.

The third teacher felt that the extensive use of non-specialist teachers at Key Stage 3 had reduced the extent to which history specific marking was possible. While support had been offered, they felt that teachers brought with them their understanding of what made a good piece of work from their subject area, and this did not always align with the history department. This had led to a degree of generalisation in the marking, and a focus on content delivery rather than subject specific skill development.

This teacher went on to describe the use of national test data, and the use of history examples, in the style of national tests. They expressed the view that this provided a useful additional source of information, and was especially useful in conversations with parents, who may not understand the specific nature of what was being assessed in History. It also allowed pupils to see how their work in History was related to their work in other subjects.

How well do you think the models of progression that currently exist at different key stages align?

All respondents expressed the strong view that the three systems did not align well, and two of them, unprompted, expressed the view that this was one of their hopes for the new curriculum.

One teacher felt the biggest leap was between Key Stage 3 and GCSE, a second felt it was between GCSE and A Level. The third didn't comment on this particular aspect. All commented on the amount of content that was required by the exam specifications, and that this narrowed what and how was taught. In the words of one interviewee 'they need to learn to play the game'.

Two commented on how what was expected of students in their understanding of historical interpretations seemed to change between the key stages, even between GCSE and A Level. One commented that this led to a feeling that you were 'starting afresh' when they moved key stage.

Traditionally National Curriculum Levels in History have focussed on development in second order concepts, although there is a revival in interest measuring how much pupils knowledge. Do you think you can measure progression in knowledge and understanding, and if so, how?

None of the respondents felt that knowledge alone was a sufficient mechanism to assess students, rather it was the use and deployment of that knowledge in a specific context that was crucial. One interviewee stated they they felt the amount that a student knew about the period being studied came through in a piece of work that assessed a particular skill, so

source work or causation was 'stronger' when it was based on a solid rather than a weak knowledge based. A second focussed more on the move from simply describing something they knew, to offering an explanation and then on to judgement. They felt that the movement along this line, which they linked to Bloom's Taxonomy, was how students showed progression.

The difference in these two responses is interesting. While both agree the quantity of knowledge is an insufficient measure of student performance, one teacher directed that towards historical skills, while a second looked to apply it in a more generic way. It is worth noting that the second of these was the teacher who earlier had commented on the need to develop more generic approach to assessment due to the large number of non-specialist colleagues. This raises two interesting questions for potential further study. The first is comparing the impact on pupil's historical understanding of these two approaches. The second is the extent to which understanding of domain specific curriculum is shared across and between schools, and where there are differences, the extent to which they can be linked to school culture and practice.

One of the three interviewees talked in some depth about the curriculum reform process they were involved in forcing them to look again at the role of knowledge, stating 'if you asked me a year ago, I'd have given you a different answer'. It was clear from their response that while they were still in the process of developing their new view they were moving from a view that specific knowledge wasn't especially important, to one where it took a greater significance. This interplay between knowledge and skills is a live debate at the current time (although this is nothing new). What struck me more was how unusual it was to hear a teacher talk about the process of changing their mind, and about a degree of uncertainty. This is another area which would merit further investigation.

In KS3 we've used teacher assessment rather than examinations. But if that data is used for comparison there remains a question about independence - how much support should pupils have in developing their work?

The tension between different purposes for assessment is one of the main themes of Christodoulou's review of the state of assessment and Assessment for Learning in England (2016). However this importance wasn't reflected in the answers from any of the interviewees.

One talked about how their marking has moved to more of a dialogue with pupils, with an expectation that work would be redrafted at least once, although this was more of a reflection of a change of focus from reporting outcomes to AfL within the context of that particular school. Similarly a second teacher reflected on a change in marking policy at their school which was driven by a whole school approach to AfL. Notably, in both schools, the requirement to report pupil progress on a regular basis in the form of a letter or a number has either been removed or reduced in both of these schools. This may be an example of a barrier to effective AfL practice being placed inadvertently by a school system trying to achieve a different aim.

The third took a different approach to the question, talking instead about the comparisons between schools and the removal of opportunities for Heads of Department to come together to share examples of work as part of a moderation process. This teacher felt that while there may not have been much value in the moderation itself, the reduction in opportunity to discuss teaching and learning in the specific subject areas between school was detrimental to subject development across the board.

Implications for practice and research

This study was established to begin to explore some the ideas around progression as understood by a small, unrepresentative sample of secondary history teachers. A number of areas of commonality have emerged. There is an apparent disconnect between ideas of progression in History in research and policy, and the practice and understanding of classroom teachers who, if this sample is typical, tend to take a more general and generic view of pupil progression. There also appears to be an acceptance of the move away from an old, data led culture to something new, although there was no common understanding what that new thing was. This may be a reflection of the fact that these teachers all work in Pioneer schools. While we may not know the shape of the final curriculum, there has been a clear steer from Welsh Government that some things will be changing, and there is a reflection in here in the interview responses. An interesting area of potential follow up study would be the extent to which those changes were also be found in non-pionner schools.

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