

Long read: Can Doug Lemov's pedagogy fix coastal schools?

Tes joins the US education guru as he trains teachers in Folkestone for the launch of a new free school

By Will Hazell

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Doug Lemov paces around the auditorium at Folkestone Academy in Kent, impeccably dressed in a cream jacket, chinos and rimless glasses.

The author of *Teach Like a Champion* is one of the most influential writers on pedagogy in the world. Today he's delivering a training session to teachers at Turner Free School – a new school which is due to open its doors in Folkestone in September.

Lemov is in the port town at the invitation of Turner Schools – the academy trust which took over the troubled Folkestone Academy in December 2017 and which is setting up Turner Free School.

Like many coastal towns, Folkestone has a history of educational underperformance. In 2017 Folkestone Academy's Progress 8 score was -0.22, compared with a national average of -0.03. Just 18 per cent of pupils achieved a grade 5 or better in GCSE English and maths, compared with 42 per cent nationally.

Turner Schools' chief executive, Jo Saxton, invited Lemov to talk to her teachers because she wants to use his pedagogy to help transform standards.

In *Teach Like a Champion* and its sequel, *Teach Like a Champion 2.0*, Lemov taught teachers to use finely honed techniques to maintain order in the classroom and maximise learning outcomes.

For someone familiar with his work, those techniques are immediately apparent as he delivers his own training. Firstly, there's his pacing around the room. Rather than staying fixed at the front of the classroom, Lemov encourages teachers to "circulate" among their pupils, ensuring every corner of the classroom remains attentive.

Then there's the "cold-calling" – a technique whereby teachers select students to answer questions, rather than relying on the same people putting their hands up. After the Turner Free School teachers been shown a video on how to use non-verbal interventions, Lemov's fellow trainer, Colleen Driggs, "cold calls" one of them: "What did you find effective about those non-verbal interventions? Mike, would you mind starting us off, please?"

Speaking to Tes during a break in the training, Lemov explains why he accepted Saxton's invitation to come to Folkestone. "I like to go where the need is most, so the idea of coastal towns is really fascinating and exciting.

"It reminds me of where we were a few years ago. I don't want to exaggerate the degree to which we've solved problems in the inner city in the US – there's still a long way to go, and we've just begun the journey. But we've identified the problem and brought together a core of people who really want to be diligent and intentional about addressing that problem. "It feels like that that's happening now with [UK] coastal towns."

The challenge for coastal towns

Saxton says that coastal towns face a very particular set of challenges. "Nationally, we know there's a recruitment and retention issue in teaching – it is exacerbated out here.

“As one of my colleague jokes, half our pool for any recruitment process are literally fish.”

Getting a world-renowned pedagogy expert like Lemov to deliver training in Folkestone is part of a wider effort to change perceptions about the teaching opportunities available in such towns. “You don’t have to be in the big cities to get fantastic CPD,” Saxton says. Unfortunately, recruitment is not the only challenge which coastal schools face. Saxton says it’s just one facet of a wider issue around “isolation”. She points out that Kent has the highest exclusions from school for racist abuse – even though “you can see France on a clear day”.

Many coastal towns were badly hit by cheap air travel decimating demand for British seaside holidays, so poverty is another problem. Over a third of pupils at Folkestone Academy are classed as disadvantaged. “A large number of the families that we served were failed in education themselves,” says Saxton. “It will take time for the community to recognise and trust that we are a force for good in their lives and that having high expectations for young people is a good thing.”

Another feature of coastal towns is that they often have deprived, white British populations – “white working class” communities in today’s political parlance. [Educational underperformance in these areas](#) is currently high on the policy agenda. [Last week Amanda Spielman, the chief inspector of Ofsted, denied that her organisation discriminated against schools in such communities.](#) She instead claimed that families in these areas can “lack the aspiration and drive seen in many migrant communities”.

Saxton points out that Folkestone has a significant Nepalese community (the Royal Gurkha Rifles used to be based in the town) and the town’s schools also have a number of families who have arrived from the continent because of the proximity to Dover. Nevertheless, having previously been the CEO of an academy trust in South London, she thinks Spielman has a point. “The aspirational gap definitely exists. It is very different here from the community that I worked with before in Pimlico. We have to work very hard to make sure that families realise what the point of education is,” she says.

The economic and educational decline of coastal towns feels like a particularly British phenomenon, but Lemov sees parallels in the US “rust belt” – a region in the American Midwest which has been scarred by deindustrialisation. Uncommon Schools – the chain of US charter schools which Lemov works with – has schools in two rust belt cities in New York State, Troy and Rochester. Like UK coastal towns, these cities often experience “net migration out”, Lemov says. “Most people who are economically viable are moving to places like NYC,” he says.

In the US, Lemov thinks “the first tier of the education reform movement went to the big cities – that’s where it felt like the biggest problems were”. And just like London – which is now routinely celebrated for its educational performance – places like New York City have outstripped the smaller, more provincial US cities. “The success rate of students in school in New York City is five times what it is in Rochester and Troy,” Lemov says.

As with the UK coastal towns, Lemov believes that isolation and cultural factors hold young people back in these cities. “When you go to a school in New York City or Boston and you say, ‘Academic achievement matters, we want your students to achieve so they can aspire to go to college,’ the idea of choosing a school based on that resonates with parents because it’s been part of the discussion for a half a generation now.”

Creating a culture of academic results

Lemov contrasts this with a family he encountered in Troy. “In the first year, we had this child arrive in fifth grade [Year 6] who couldn’t read. He knew most of his letters but not much more

than that. "In the course of the first year with us he gained three grade levels in his reading comprehension. He made tremendous progress.

"At the end of the year, his parents pulled him out of the school because we wouldn't let him wear his trainers to school. They said, 'But he really loves to wear his trainers, and we're tired of saying no to that.' "So they put him back in the school system that had resulted in [his lack of progress] because there just wasn't a culture yet in that city of academic results matter."

The good news for both Troy and Folkestone is that Lemov believes that there's greater potential for change in these locations. "One of the opportunities of working in smaller cities – and why they are my favourite places where we work – is because I think there's the potential for a few great schools to shift an entire community.

"It takes a lot of schools to do that in New York City. It takes two in Troy, two great schools could fundamentally shift a town like Folkestone."

Generally speaking, Lemov is upbeat about Britain's educational prospects. "I'm very optimistic for education in the UK," he says. He thinks British teachers are more clued up to the latest research on cognitive science and education, and that as a country we have greater "seriousness" when it comes to the curriculum. While we might find that education debate in our country is fractious, Lemov believes it is "more rational here than I feel like it often is in the US".

"In the US the biggest question I get is, 'Why do you need to have order in schools?' Here I feel like the challenge is, 'How do we get schools to be orderly so that pupils can learn?' There's such a backlash in the US right now about the idea of order in schools."

Many of Lemov's techniques revolve around maintaining behaviour in the class. While there may not have been a backlash against order in the UK, some people think there is a darker side to the focus around discipline which authors like Lemov have helped popularise. So-called "zero-tolerance" behaviour approaches have been blamed for pupil exclusions – [an issue which the Department for Education is investigating](#).

'The best antidote to exclusions'

However, Lemov vociferously denies that his methods are linked to exclusions. "Teacher capacity and skill is the best antidote there is to exclusion of students," he says. "The people who don't work in high need communities often misunderstand that and think that order leads to suspensions and exclusions, but it's the opposite.

"Behaviours that lead to exclusions happen when students perceive there to be no limits and no expectations and no rules."

In fact, Lemov distances himself from the idea of "zero-tolerance" altogether. "There aren't many zero-tolerance schools that I'm aware of left in the US." He says critics "exaggerate and distort" what he says on behaviour, and use the term "zero tolerance" as a "red herring". Saxton agrees with Lemov that a structured approach to behaviour is a way of reducing exclusions. She says that prior to joining Turner Schools, Folkestone Academy was the highest excluding school in Kent, but it is now reintegrating pupils into mainstream education.

But the row over behaviour shows that Lemov's ideas remain controversial in some quarters. Asked what his plans are for Teach Like a Champion 3.0, Lemov says it will be "more intentional about bringing knowledge into the classroom".

"I think the cognitive science is pretty overwhelmingly clear that background knowledge is a critical driver of student understanding and there are teaching moves that you can make that reinforce knowledge in the classroom."

And if Doug Lemov is going to weigh into the skills versus knowledge debate, it looks unlikely that the controversy will go away.