

What makes an effective learning environment in a primary classroom



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Education is the most important shared experience of our lives...it is so important and so all pervasive that it is almost impossible to define (Aldrich, 1996)

The role of the teacher is an ever changing one; however the proposed goals of teaching have always been the same in relation to bringing about intended learning goals from pupils of all abilities. Berliner (1978) suggests that ' the effective teacher is one who is able to demonstrate the ability to bring about intended learning goals, the two critical dimensions of effective teaching being intent and achievement. Without intent, the pupil's achievements become random and accidental rather than controlled and predictable'.

The Oracle Study provided a framework for what its research concluded to be the traits of an effective teacher, a high number of interactions with pupils and higher level questioning required of pupils was just two of the behavioural patterns consistently displayed by effective teachers. Branching from the same study Rutter (1979) stated that for a teacher to be considered effective they should consistently give praise to pupils and hold them in high regards, which is especially important for younger pupils in terms of emotional development and self-efficacy. Rutter also pointed to the ability to provide stimulating educational programmes that would challenge pupils and which requires high expectations from them.

Requiring high expectations from pupils is a theme that is common in the Hay Mcker Report (2000) which gives an insight on setting the attainment target high for the increase of motivation in pupils who may find their current

level of work below their level. According to the report effective teachers set these high expectations of pupils and communicate them directly to the pupils in a clear and consistent manner so as to broaden their knowledge and interpretation of concepts. The teacher therefore must take into account the differentiation of a mixed ability group when setting such high standards so as to deal with the needs of the less able students, however the effective teacher must be relentless in their strive for high standards expected from all pupils regardless of differing and mixed ability. David Miliband MP during his role at the time as Minister for Schools stated that ‘ High expectation of every child, given practical form by high quality teaching based on a sound knowledge and understanding of each child’s needs. It is not individualised learning where pupils sit alone at a computer. Nor is it pupils left to their own devices – which too often reinforces low aspirations’. Setting such high expectations can also reverberate in a negative manner as it provides students with the need to compete with others in their class which will inevitably affect other pupils self esteem and create a competitive atmosphere in which some pupils will progress or fail under the pressure.

Requiring such high expectations provides a counter-argument in relation to what Jean Piagets’ child development theories detailed. The basis of his philosophy was that all children are only capable to learn new concepts at set stages in which they reach at certain ages and that there are limits on their capacity to learn, meaning that pupils cannot be expected to conceptualize new ideas until they reach a certain stage as postulated by the theory of intellectual development. Alexander et al (1992) suggested that Piagetian theories about developmental ages and stages led to

chronologically fixed notions of 'readiness which depressed expectations and discouraged teacher intervention'. Jerome Bruner stated that it was possible for children to learn new concepts at any age in a suitable and intellectual manner. Unlike Piaget, Bruner postulated that learning derives from a pupil's ability to actively engage with an interested adult through communication/speech and as such is renowned as a 'constructivist' theorist. This model of learning takes a firm assumption that by using connected schemas, knowledge is gained, and that the child is an agent of their own learning. In contrast the 'transmission' model oversees the teacher's role as 'instructor' in which the child is seen as a recipient of transmitted values from the teacher. The latter form of teaching is associated with more of a formal didactic model whilst the 'constructivist' theory applies to a more open and active model of teaching. Although the latter theory may still be in its infancy it has proven challenging to develop any form of sustainable pedagogy deriving from its structure in which primary school teachers can use on a large class of 20-25 pupils. In relation to the former, Vygotsky has also given several applicable theories in connection to how children learn. Vygotsky (1978) first showed how speech can be a direct expression of thought, otherwise meaning that children at this particular age (3-7) find it helpful to develop conversational speech with themselves, what Vygotsky labelled as 'speech for oneself'. Whilst Piaget's view of this stage would be to explain the withering away and the progression of the next stage, Vygotsky suggested that this speech becomes internalised which develops into inner speech and lastly into internal thought. As Britton (1989) says, if speech in childhood lays the foundations for a lifetime of thinking the implication for pedagogy is enormous, and <https://assignbuster.com/what-makes-an-effective-learning-environment-in-a-primary-classroom/>

verbal communication should have a major role in classroom life, particularly at infant level. Vygotsky also postulated the theory involving the 'zone of proximal development'. This refers to 'The gap that exists for children between what they can do alone and what they can do with help from someone more knowledgeable or skilled than themselves. Vygotsky emphasises the role of the social environment and how the role of the teacher is of vital importance, 'the effective teachers role to make the learning environment as interactive as possible and 'through language to lead children into new zones of proximal development (Edwards and Mercer 1989).

The learning environment can also refer to the emotional environment that the school provides in ensuring that pupils feel valued and accepted for themselves, without this children will not feel sufficiently secure to take risks and make mistakes which are crucial in the creative process of learning, Mckellar (1957) explains that the arrangement of the physical space can aid concentration, create a mood conducive to creativity and increase motivation. In support of this Jean Piaget explains how interaction with the environment impacts upon progression in learning and it is only through individual interaction that progression will take place; he showed how it is the adults role to provide a stimulating environment and to identify the stage of development individual children have reached so that appropriate materials can be presented, rather than to actively intervene in the learning process. It is therefore the teachers' responsibility to 'select a learning environment which will encourage curiosity...to focus the pupils attention on enquiries which will lead to useful discovery' (Learning styles and Inclusion p.

98). The learning environment takes into account the people and the space in which pupils will progress and be nurtured, a purposeful learning environment is one in which children feel safe, cared for and relaxed. These similarities are summed up by the DFES who explained that an ' appropriate physical environment offers access to an outdoor as well as an indoor space and should provide a place where children have opportunities to explore, learn and develop with the support of sensitive and knowledgeable adults. Self-esteem can be a critical factor in determining how a child perceives themselves and others, high self-esteem can give a child a sense of security and competence and because esteem is all about perception it can change on a regular basis. The environment of the school and learning environment plays a pivotal role in harbouring self-esteem, the learning environment is a seriously underrated concept in the way it shapes pupils learning, for many pupils the learning environment is what is situated inside the classroom, however it can also refer to outside agents such as the library and the pupil home.

In terms of behaviour in the classroom and the classroom environment, children cannot feel safe and secure if adults caring for them do not provide boundaries. Learning is thus considered to be significantly determined by an individual's self-esteem, self-belief, expectations and the quality of school-based relationships with adults and peers. These models support a transactional theory of learning as proposed by Vygotsky (1962) and implies that pupils and teachers need to develop appropriate affective, cognitive and social behaviours for effective learning to take place in school contexts.

These boundaries that are to be provided take the shape of class rules which

are to be enforced by the teacher and act as an important reminder to keep social contexts in order, however rules could hold a negative connotation as it creates a constricted feeling of powerlessness and conformity. The idea behind rules is to make the environment safe and consistent which is important in learning environments. The teacher controls the flow of the classroom and will often use non-verbal language, even when not intentionally meaning to convey a message through non-verbal ways a smile to an individual pupil could increase their self-esteem more than that teacher will know, in contrast a fixed stare could have the desired effect on a misbehaving pupil and evoke a sense of shame. In contrast, the giving of rewards and punishments in a more physical manner can create a more conscious feeling within the pupils as it more obvious of how the teacher is reacting to their behaviour. Furthermore it is important to acknowledge that when discussing the behaviour that it does not simply apply to a pupil who is rated as good or bad but that it materializes into other concepts of a pupil who demonstrates being of a shy nature or who withdraws themselves from activities due to confidence issues. Teachers can sometimes contribute to the causes of bad behaviour. Unfairness, impatience and poor lesson preparation can create the conditions for resentment and discontent to occur. The end result is deterioration of the atmosphere, control problems and a negative impact on learning. When difficulties arise trainee and some experienced teachers tend to blame the children (Jacques 2007).

Florian (2005) suggested that ' inclusive education is not a denial of individual difference, but it is an accommodation of it within the structures and processes that are available to all learners. Inclusion is an ever changing

process rather than a sudden change and a process that will take time to achieve, all too often the term inclusion is often associated and linked with the term ' Special Educational Needs', however inclusion is a broad concept and takes into account not only pupils with special educational needs but those students with additional educational needs also, which may take into account pupils with social and economic issues and also pupils who exceed their set targets e. g. Gifted and Talented pupils. Great emphasis is placed on tailoring education to reflect children's individual needs, interests and aptitudes. In order for children to thrive and to reach their full potential it is essential that they feel secure, valued and settled. Learning opportunities need to be planned that reflect the diverse learning needs of the pupils in the class. The national curriculum inclusion statement outlines how school will be able to alter the National Curriculum programme for the purpose of providing all students with substantial and suitably challenging work at each stage of learning. This statement acknowledges that schools have an accountability to ensure a broad and balanced curriculum is provided for all students. Although the National curriculum initially sets out a structure for teachers to enable them to know what pupils should know at each stage, all pupils need to experience success and achieve their individual potential. Pupils with learning difficulties are no exception, even though their individual potential may be different from others of the same age. Expecting all pupils always to do the same work means that some will find the task too easy, whereas for some the challenge will be about right. There will still be a significant group in any class that will not understand the task, and which will fail. If failure occurs regularly pupils stop caring and begin to lack motivation, become disillusioned and are more likely to be disruptive. It is a

<https://assignbuster.com/what-makes-an-effective-learning-environment-in-a-primary-classroom/>

teacher's responsibility to ensure that all pupils succeed, and a test of their professional skills is to modify activities and resources to that end. A child's sense of belonging in the school community is a vital element of inclusion; belonging is fostered by attitudes of staff and other pupils to individual difference and additional learning needs (Gray 2002). According to the DFES website a 'Pupils' social development involves pupils acquiring an understanding of the responsibilities and rights of being members of families and communities... and to work with others for the common good... to display a sense of belonging and willingness to participate. They develop the knowledge, skills, understanding, qualities and attitudes they need to make an active contribution to the democratic process in each of their communities. <http://curriculum.qcda.gov.uk/key-stages-1-and-2/learning-across-the-curriculum/spiritual-moral-social-and-cultural-development/index.aspx>. Published in 2005 the Every Child Matters paper documented 5 outcomes as being important to a child's well being in school and later in life. Two of the proposed headings were to 'Be Healthy' and 'Enjoy and Achieve'. These sums up of the true meaning of education, a child cannot learn to their potential unless they feel safe on an emotional and physical level and the effective teacher should ensure that every child reaches their full potential regardless of their ability in class.