

Reading 5

Optional Reading

The children and their learning needs: Balancing individual and whole class teaching

Janet Moyles

An important part of a teacher's work is to establish a classroom climate that encourages and enables learning. In the first set of extracts below, Janet Moyles suggests ways in which primary teachers can establish a positive classroom climate, especially at the beginning of the school year with a new class. As you read the first section (5.1), think about which of her suggestions would not be suitable for more senior classes. Using Moyles's suggestions as a starting point, think about how you could go about establishing a positive classroom climate for older learners.

Section 5.3 of the reading gives some answers to the question 'What is learning?' and discusses a number of different learning styles and strategies. As you read, think about how to organise classroom time and space for different styles of learning.

Notes

The importance of the first few encounters for teachers and children in establishing a positive classroom climate should not be underestimated [...]. Consciously and unconsciously, all those who enter the classroom will absorb factors like orderliness, noise level, atmosphere (warmth, freshness), visual appeal and general quality and, from these first encounters, will generate notions of how welcome, secure and comfortable they feel and whether they want to stay. A bright, airy, clean and ordered class base, decorated with items of interest relevant to the particular age of the children, gives the right 'feel' from the outset. Adults bringing and collecting children will equally be influenced by what they see and feel

Reading

*This edited excerpt is from Moyles, J. 1992. **Organising Learning in the Primary Classroom**. London: Methuen.*

of the classroom and whether it has a sense of being geared to fostering and promoting children's learning.

The essential balance is between teachers being ...the prime instigators of decisions about ...many factors...and subsequently ensuring the children understand and can operate within the systems created. If children are to gain the most from the context, they must have some sense of ownership over the classroom and its contents. Teachers...tend to organise and manage their classrooms alone from their own perspectives, sharing them from the first day onwards with the children whose learning is ultimately of prime concern.[...]

5.1 The children: Who are they and what are their expectations?

Children's questions about their new classroom and its inhabitants will be many, if mostly unvoiced! Will they be able to sit by their friends? Will they have their own seat and a place for their possessions? What kind of work will be expected of them and will it be hard? Will there be opportunities to play? Will they have choice? Will they be listened to when they need to know something? What will happen if they make mistakes? Is the teacher nice? Are the other children friendly? All these and many more questions will be somewhere in the children's minds during their first encounter with a new teacher in a new classroom. Whatever the age of the children, a bright and orderly classroom, where their arrival has been anticipated and their names appear prominently on drawers or listed on a board or display notice, will arouse immediate confidence in and respect for the new teacher and the new surroundings. Talking to the children at any time of the year about these aspects can be very revealing.

Activity 1

(...) How do the children in your class feel about their learning environment?

Do they enjoy coming each day?

Do they find different things to look at and sustain interest?

Why do they think they come to school?

What do they understand by 'learning'?

What do they perceive as their roles in the classroom? Do boys' and girls' perceptions differ?

What responsibilities do they think they have?

What do they understand of the classroom rules?

Can they readily find all the materials and resources they need?

What is their perception of you as the teacher?

What do they tell their parents about the activities of the day/week ?

First encounters

Having a name badge ready for each child (or making one as the first event of the day) will quickly contribute to teacher and children having a contact point – the teacher should also wear a name badge, of course. The effort spent in this kind of personalised preparation will be doubly repaid in early relationship building between teacher and class as well as between members of the class. Activities which generate a cohesive feel to the class early on are equally worthwhile, for example, children can introduce themselves to the whole class in a variety of ways:

- Shaking hands with someone they would like to get to know, giving their names and other information.
- Drawing pictures of themselves, pinning them up on a notice-board and having a guessing game as to whom each represents[...].
- Using earlier school photographs of children with which to undertake a guessing game.
- Introducing themselves to another child and then having that child tell the rest of the class about their new 'friend'.
- The teacher may instigate a game of 'I can see someone with short dark hair, brown eyes, wearing a red sweater and blue trousers with a stripe ...', and children can try to remember the child's name. Once named, this child then describes some one else of their choice, and so on.
- Older children may like to interview a new friend and then write a biography of him or her for everyone else to read[...].
- A game where a child pretends to have something in their hand and tells another child their name and the name of their precious possession, e.g. 'I am Jane Smith and I have a little mouse.' As this goes round the class, there is much fun generated in trying to remember the names and possessions of, say, five other children and then getting together as a group to share what you remember.
- Older children may also like to do a collecting information game, where they write down on a prepared sheet information about a given number of other children. Those responding must give a different piece of information to each enquirer, so that at the end of the activity the teacher can ask 'Who knows something about Martin Jones?', and each child with information can read it out, building up a composite picture of Martin and what he said about himself.[...]

Background information

Records passed on from the previous teachers and, unless the children are new to the school, earlier encounters will mean that not only will the teacher know something about the children, the children will also know about the teacher – if only by reputation! Both groups will, therefore, bring certain expectations to the situation and, for the teacher in particular, the more information he or she can glean about the children the

better, as this will help him or her to make appropriate provision for learning from the start. Suitable learning tasks within the child's capabilities will ensure children achieve success and, therefore, recognise their own worth[...]. Information which teachers will need at their fingertips, and likely to be worthwhile gathering in the days before the children start, includes:

- ages of children and age range of class;
- numbers of boys and girls[...];
- any existing friendship patterns among the children;
- any children with specific identified needs related to health, religion, development or learning which will require special consideration;
- any children for whom English is a second language and information about their mother tongues;
- familiarity with the contents of any pre-school assessment profile for children starting school for the first time, perhaps compiled by the parents[...]
- basic information about each child's current level and performance in core and foundation subjects – children already familiar to the school (or coming from another school) will have records or profiles from which to work;
- any topics or special interest work children have previously tackled; and
- any special talents or interests in relation to school activities.

A little later it will be necessary to consider:

- the year group to which children belong[...]
- finding out from the parents or carer any significant home factors, such as children's out-of-school interests or composition of the family[...]

Necessary balances

Particularly in the early days with a new class, this balancing act is crucial for the reasons stated above and will include:

1. Being friendly towards the children, but also keeping a little personal 'distance' so as to retain clarity and objectivity about needs.
2. Being kind but firm and yet, above all, being consistent in dealing with all children.
3. Respecting children's individuality while encouraging group cooperation, mutual trust and respect.
4. Establishing quickly the patterns and routines for the children's day which will provide the background to effective communication, yet remaining flexible and sensitive to necessary changes.
5. Negotiating classroom 'rules' with which everyone agrees yet ensuring both groups are prepared to re-negotiate these when circumstances change.

6. Encouraging early independence in the teacher-children relationship while fostering a sense of unified purpose.
7. Proffering equal opportunities for all children, yet employing positive discrimination where appropriate.
8. Encouraging friendships while not permitting exclusivity of certain groups.
9. Having knowledge of the children from records but accepting that different teachers have contrasting expectations of children and that children react differently with different teachers.
10. Recognising and acknowledging the range of backgrounds of the children and the family's role in the child's education yet avoiding unprofitable labelling.

As life with a new class develops, the balancing act will also include:

11. Acknowledging different learning styles, yet encouraging variety in learning strategies.
12. Ensuring activities are relevant and purposeful to the children while enabling children's entitlement to a broad and balanced curriculum.
13. Acknowledging achievement and progress, yet not making children reliant on extrinsic rewards.
14. Sustaining children's interest while working with them towards explicit learning intentions.
15. Promoting children's thinking while acknowledging that it is qualitatively different from adult thinking – but equally worthy.

There are many overlaps here, as one would anticipate, between the balances required in relation to the teacher and teaching and those relating to the children and learning. Similarities highlight areas of compatibility between teaching and learning, while differences evidence their sometimes conflicting parallels. As an example, while bestowing praise ostensibly supports children's learning and is a pleasant point of contact for teachers and children, it can actually be quite harmful in that some children become dependent on such constant feedback, making them both reliant on the teacher for the reward and reliant upon the reward itself for motivation[...]. What is clearly necessary is to look beyond the immediate and superficial effects of a particular teaching or learning strategy and try to establish the causes of certain behaviours – praise may appear to make children work harder, but what was the cause of any reluctance to do so in the first place? [...]

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5.2 A self-fulfilling prophecy? – Teachers' expectations of children

Most classes reflect a great deal about the style and expectations of the teacher; a collaborative, good-humoured teacher generally has collaborative, good-humoured children. It is also true to say that quiet teachers tend to have quiet classes, and vice versa. (If you doubt this, think about the staff in your own school.) This 'chemistry' also occurs between individuals and it is very difficult for all teachers to like all the children in their class: we are only human after all. However, we are responsible for teaching them all to the best of our and their ability, so we need to concentrate attention on finding one or more particularly positive aspects of each child from which we can form a satisfactory personal picture and build relationships. Some teachers particularly like the 'characters' in their classes, other teachers prefer children who are perhaps less creative in their approach to learning and conform more to the norms expected of a particular age group.[...]

The likelihood is that teachers and children may well come from very different social and cultural backgrounds, with different value systems and child-rearing practices. Recognising one's own preferences and biases is the first step to preventing unwitting or unnecessary stereotyping or criticism[...].

In the original version of this chapter, Moyles provides a summary of different studies of teachers' expectations of learners and how these affect the learners' performance.

5.3 What is learning? Some theories and ideas

[...]Teachers' values relate to being competent in what they do, clear about aims and needs, consistent in approaches and responses and generally having a cool, calm and collected approach to the job of teaching. But learning and being a learner is not like that [...]. It is uncertain, often incompetent and clumsy in the early stages, certainly inconsistent (happening in spurts and rushes depending on how we feel and what we are approaching), and unclear some of the time about where we are going until we get there.[...]

In relation to contemplating children's learning, a simple model evolves around the three propositions how, what and why:

- How do children learn and what are the variations in learning styles and strategies which can be expected?
- What should children learn in terms of content and skills and in what format?

- Why is this learning important for children; why should children participate in the learning process and what will be their perceptions of the purpose and their role in it?

[...]Each of the three propositions will now be discussed in relation to the effects of classroom organisation and management upon them.

How do children learn?

Many theories have been postulated over the last three or four decades in relation to children’s learning which have significantly influenced current thinking[...]

Because of the complexity and, as yet, incomplete understanding of how people learn, factors which provide the *circumstances* in which learning takes place offer a more practical approach to considering learning. In the classroom context, a combination of interactionist/constructivist theories, which effectively synthesise a range of other theories, appear to encapsulate the most useful notions relating directly to children learning. Interactionist beliefs are based on the pivotal notion that each of us learns, at a higher mental order level, from others, through interacting with them in a variety of ways and in a variety of contexts[...] – in this case, the school and classroom. This is really at the heart of primary education; that it is both a social and an educational process. Collaborative grouping of children, managed in such a way that children are motivated and able to learn from such interaction, is a clear example of one element of this in practice.[...] However controversial it may sound, it is undoubtedly impossible for a teacher to understand the learning needs and styles of every single pupil in the class: as yet learning is too poorly understood. Therefore, any such knowledge is based mainly upon insights gained from glimpses into children’s understandings: this is where the interactionist perspective links with constructivist views.

The constructivist view is most clearly expressed by Claxton (1990: 57), who explains:

... learning is a personal and an active process. It is personal because we can understand or retain new things only in terms of the pre-existing knowledge that we bring to the learning situation. And learning is active because it is only through the purposeful mobilisation of this store of knowledge that new knowledge or skill can come about. We have no other place...to stand, in order to comprehend the world, than on the platform of our own current knowledge.

Such a view encompasses the basic premise that what children bring to learning is of equal importance to what they take away from it.[...]

In terms of what has already been said about the classroom as a learning environment, the two notions together form the core in relation to organising and managing children’s learning: children will learn from the

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teacher and each other given certain structures and systems obtaining and construct and use new knowledge from existing understandings and skills, many of which will be common among the children. The crux is that children must be 'actively' engaged in the process in a way that matches their learning style. It must be remembered that 'activity' in this context as much relates to mental action as physical action. A feature of such mental activity is in ensuring that children, like teachers, are proactive in their approach (not simply reacting to teachers' demands) and that they are encouraged to be reflective about their own thinking[...]. The teacher will only get to know about the children if the children can express their own learning needs.

Learning styles

[...] Jones and Jones (1986: 70) proffer a complementary notion of children's learning styles, suggesting four (not necessarily discrete) categories:

1. Innovative learners, who need personal involvement in all learning situations, who seek meaning, want reason, are innovative, and imaginative. It is suggested that these children need the teacher mainly as motivator and discussor.
2. Analytic learners, who want to know facts, perceive abstraction and reflect thoughtfully and who create concepts, build mental and practical models. Such learners need the teacher as informer and direct instructor.
3. Common-sense learners, who need to know how things work to solve problems through hands-on experience and enjoy practical application of knowledge and skills. These learners need the teacher as coach who will give feedback in an ongoing way.
4. Dynamic learners, who are self-discoverers, take chances, are flexible and enjoy change, seek action and follow plans. The teacher is needed as a resource, as an evaluator and facilitator.

These four learning types implicitly include the notions of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles. Put simply many people learn mainly by actually doing things for themselves (kinaesthetic learners), whereas others absorb information and skill adequately from listening (auditory learners). A majority of learners, particularly children, require visual activities and these have the greatest impact memory. In each case, storage and retrieval of knowledge will require the employment of different strategies, with visual learners having an immediate photographic system, auditory learners operating in sequential fashion and requiring verbal precision and kinaesthetic learners operating at a physical level on both counts[...]. It goes without saying that, for example, auditory learners will need classroom conditions which permit them to hear clearly what is said, visual learners will need plenty of visual stimuli,

and kinaesthetic learners greater opportunities than other children for practical activity and movement.[...]

It is clear that the children in any class will be distributed across these learning style categories and it is vital, if teachers are to group effectively, that information is gained about children's learning preferences. Gathering such information will in itself need time and commitment, but these features are far more viable and require far less emotional energy than attempting to deal with factors which are beyond the teacher's control, such as socio-economic background or various potentially ill-defined notions of ability. The danger is that these four learning types may themselves become 'labels' and teachers should constantly remind themselves that different curricular experiences, peer influences and availability of resources may well influence and modify children's individual learning styles.

Consider also that most children (and adults) need intermittent periods of time 'off-task' in order that subconscious learning processes are given the chance to operate effectively [...] – the notion of 'sleeping on a problem' is one well known for its success! In the classroom, this time could constitute 'practice' activities, which make few new learning demands on children. Children, given choice, will often choose to do those activities which constitute a rehearsal or revision of previous learning.

These different styles can also be incorporated into whole class teaching plans so as to include various elements within the session. The 'doers' among the children can be called upon to provide demonstrational points and the teacher can ensure that verbal information is accompanied by visual prompts. [...] Children who need interaction with the teacher can be prompted through offers from the teacher to make a contribution through questions or statements and those who need more in the way of discussion can be encouraged, by suggestion from the teacher early in the session, to think about formulating discussion points for follow-up activities. With younger children in particular, the teacher needs to stop at approximately 5- minute intervals to allow children to talk about, and therefore reflect upon and consolidate their thoughts on the matter.

Teachers frequently isolate a particular child to answer a question. Unless the child's and the teacher's style facilitates the child's learning in this way, many children will suffer enormous embarrassment from not being able to respond, through perhaps, not yet having internalised the information sufficiently in their own inimitable way. Understanding the child's learning style will help the teacher to be more sympathetic to different children. Just think, this may be a way of legitimising the actions of the child who just cannot help making a verbal contribution when the teacher actually feels others should contribute! It may be that some children will not readily respond in that situation because their learning style is more reflective and analytic.

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Learning processes and outcomes

As the National Curriculum has made clear, curriculum learning has four central tenets – knowledge, skills, understandings and attitudes. These will be acquired via a number of learning processes adopted through a variety of learning styles. There are, of course, many arguments as to what constitutes knowledge, let alone how it should be assessed. Knowledge based on the concepts of ‘to know’ clearly has several facets, one of which might be called straightforward, *factual* knowing – knowing ‘that’ and knowing ‘what’ (essentially product based) – whereas another knowledge form might be deemed to be more potential based and related to knowing ‘why’. Once again, these are not polarizations; rather they constitute an amalgam of usable knowledge. Similarly, we all need to acquire and practise certain skills to undertake day-to-day living and to develop understanding of the world about us and ourselves within it. Interpreted in this broad, balanced and relevant framework, there can be few arguments against this conception of school learning.

Note: To consolidate their learning some children may need to live with an idea or insight for a while before they can make it their own. Unless they do this, the idea will remain a form of parrot learning, and they will never really be able use it.

The notion of a sequence of learning processes [...] is a useful one to review, for it is at the heart of the learning process. Particularly in school, it stresses teaching and learning intentions and it has outcomes which can be assessed. [...] There is research evidence [...] to suggest [M]any primary children, irrespective of learning need or style, spend undue amounts of time on practice tasks at a low intellectual level and that a balance of tasks needs to be achieved. Equally, much memorising in school tasks is for its own sake rather than for what it will actually contribute to deeper level knowledge. The model is useful when considering the management of learning tasks for, inevitably, in any class there will be children who are at different stages in the model in relation to learning. At any time in the ongoing programme, there will be children who objectively fall into roughly three groups requiring:

1. New learning of some kind or extension of previous learning.
2. Practice, rehearsal, revision or reflection opportunities.
3. Consolidation and application processes.

There may also be one or two children who, for various individual reasons, require a specific or different activity though, on the whole, this three-way system is workable and manageable in terms of the teacher’s available time and optimum learning time for children. [...]

Activity 2

How might all three learning groups operate in the classroom?

Scenario: The children have been working on a topic about fish. So far they have:

- had a story about fish;
- had the chance to examine a real (but dead) trout;

- identified the habitats of different kinds of fish;
- drafted a poem about fish;
- produced a class database on the computer about fish; and
- begun an individual topic book on their favourite fish.

What will they do next? How much of it will be 'teacher-intensive'?

How can children's previous learning be built upon?

Plan some activities for tomorrow which are appropriate for the children and teacher.

[...] (How far are you able to take account of different learning styles in the activities provided? What information do you need to gather to help with this planning?) [...]

What should children learn?

The wider connotations of curriculum

Activity 2 focused attention towards what children should be learning in one particular situation. What children should learn in schooling carries its own weighty legislation, yet much is still expressed in relation to primary education regarding 'basic skills'. Nearly always this appears, particularly in the media, to be construed as reading, writing and calculation, with some science occasionally thrown in for good measure. But... basic skills in primary schooling are far more wide-ranging and cover:

- the capacity to memorise, organise and write;
- the capacity to apply knowledge (across the curriculum), do practical problem-solving tasks and investigate;
- a range of personal/social skills, e.g. the ability to relate, to cooperate, offer leadership and work alone without close supervision;
- motivation, commitment and an ability to accept failure and be self-reliant and self-confident.

[...] In managing children's learning, teachers will find, of necessity, core and foundation (mainly cognitive) curriculum aspects dominating but it is relatively simple to add a column or two to typical planning sheets as an *aide-memoire* in relation to both wider basic skills and potential learning styles. There seems to be no discrepancy in principle with those curriculum aspects determined within the National Curriculum: primary education certainly cannot afford, for the sake of the children, a narrow definition of 'basic skills' or of learning. It needs to be remembered that basic skills are just those skills which we must learn in order to deal relatively automatically with various aspects of our lives. Therefore, in child and curriculum terms, many of the basic skills will need to be applied across many aspects of the curriculum and may not need to be extensively dealt with in isolation unless particular features require a teaching point.[...].

[...]In thinking about setting tasks for children, there is no better

aide-memoire: an aid to the memory, especially a book or a document

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In thinking about setting tasks for children, there is no better gauge of acceptability criteria than oneself. The big question is: 'Would I want to do this myself?'
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gauge of acceptability criteria than oneself. The big question is: 'Would I want to do this task myself?' If teachers think about this and give a negative response, is it likely that children will be motivated? Would you really want to sit and write your news or diary every Monday morning (especially if you had a rather boring weekend)? Faced with a page of numbers, would you really want to have to complete them all, especially if you are not really fond of numbers or paper and pencil learning and do not like the pressure of working on your own? Would you equally not wish to know when enough was enough? A diet of working through exercises gives little sense of satisfaction at completion because the task is only fully completed when the workbook is finally finished – and then another one usually follows. Many teachers will suggest that children actually like these tasks – and many appear to do so – but this may be as much related to the values teachers and parents apparently attach to such activities rubbing off on the children as to the children actually enjoying the tasks. Children, like adults, will also resist having too much demanded of them, and the constant challenge of everything being new learning may well take its own toll. Much teaching and learning could occur more effectively if teachers really identified with the tasks they present to children rather than just 'delivering' the curriculum! This also clearly relates to teachers ensuring children are appropriately challenged by some of the activities, whatever the format, and understand the learning intentions, which in turn is linked to children learning how to learn and be learners.

Challenges in learning, intentions and learning about learning

Any models of learning which suggest a straightforward linear pattern or an equally straightforward relationship between teaching and learning, deny the fundamental complexity and affective nature of the learning process. Learning is essentially about taking risks and many primary teachers, particularly those teaching younger children, have created dilemmas for themselves in trying to protect children from so-called 'failure' situations and being 'upset' [...]. Paradoxically, most primary teachers have been equally ready to put ticks and crosses against children's written efforts – clear indications of being 'right' or being 'wrong' without evidence for the children, or the teacher, of how and why such errors have occurred (another example of unhelpful polarizations). Yet the most effective learning incidents include making mistakes, acknowledging the difficulties and gaining understanding of both consequences and how things could achieve a level of success. Because of perceived pressures of time, teachers are often unwilling themselves to take risks, preferring to work within the known and, therefore, are models of a no-risk-taking attitude for children. Most exciting learning, however, is about risk-taking and being wrong; in fact, children and adults do this all the time in the world outside school, anything remotely inventive having gone through

several error processes, analytical discussions and evaluative sequences before acceptance. [...] How far do schools really educate children for this kind of thinking and learning? Is it possible to do so within whole class teaching or is this a highly individualized way of learning? How do you deal with 'error' or risk-taking in your classroom? [...]

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5.4 General thoughts on organising and managing children’s learning

However poorly and inadequately we can at present define or understand learning, this must not be an excuse for doing nothing other than following blindly what is set before us or what has gone on before. Common sense and observation of children will tell us that learning goes on all the time and that we are privileged to share *some* of this with the children in school *some* of the time. Knowing the learners’ needs intimately is a vital step, but getting inside children’s heads is notoriously difficult: adult values and experiences mean that we interpret events very differently from children. Ausubel et al. (1978: 163) believe that ‘the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly.’ In principle, most teachers would readily concur: in practice, 30 children or more make this virtually impossible. An alternative has been intimated earlier: if teachers can be persuaded to make their thinking about learning intentions more overt to children within teaching activities then the learners will have more opportunity of relating this to knowledge and skills they have already acquired. A further positive consequence would be that in opening up their teaching in this way, it is likely that children will be prompted to generate more questions about teaching intentions and subsequently their own learning. The relative rarity of children asking learning-generating questions is evidenced in many classrooms.

As a final activity, think about a typical session in your class, your learning intentions and how they are conveyed to children ...

Activity 3

How many children in your class will know (really know!)

- What they are going to do.
- How they are to set about the task.
- For what learning outcomes are they are doing the task.
- What learning strategies they can best utilize.
- What is the most appropriate way to begin the learning.
- How they will access necessary materials.
- What usefulness the learning has to them in the present and/or

future.

- When they have finished.
 - Whether they have been successful.
 - An appropriate way of practising any new skills.
 - The potential for transferring this learning to another situation.
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In other words, what is it like being a learner in your classroom? Teaching which builds in these aspects is more likely to be successful with all children for the variety of reasons already outlined in this chapter.[...].

References

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