

How and why classroom(s) are organised in particular way?

The classroom is a place of learning; a place of enlightenment and development, but also synonymous with both support and encouragement. The organisation of the classroom is immensely important, reflecting the need to educate and supplement the ongoing learning of the young. Factors influencing the manner in which a classroom and its contents are organised are numerous, including the type and positioning of furniture, equipment, resources and the allocation of time and space within this learning environment. Furthermore it extends to placement of learning centres, establishment of related classroom rule systems and organisation of student time. Effective classroom organisation simplifies classroom management and creates an environment that can help minimize behaviour problems. Given that there are many factors involved in organising a classroom, clearly an important question to ask is why are majority of the primary classroom organised the way they are?. To answer this part of the question, I will look at the theories of learning and their influence on the way classrooms are organised; essentially focusing on the relationship between classroom arrangement and teaching activities. In addressing the How are they arranged I will briefly discuss how the classroom arrangements can be flexible and its implication on learning. I chose to address this essay title because I feel it is an important issue and was interested to see if certain arrangements did affect learning. I think it should be the ultimate aim of every educator to try and establish the optimum seating arrangement in their classroom, which will facilitate the attainment and assimilation of knowledge.

To begin with let's look at the theories of learning. What relevance do theories of learning have for understanding optimum classroom arrangements? Learning theories have had an immense impact on how classrooms are organised. For example in the early century classrooms were typically organised in rows. Children sat in pairs facing front ways towards the blackboard. This assignment of seating was appropriate for teaching approaches geared towards treating children as an empty vessel and a passive learner. The teachers' role was to transmit information through instruction and the children listened. This approach to teaching was influenced by the behaviourist theory which advocates that children learn through practice and drill particularly in the areas of spelling, writing and mathematic (Pollard, 2002). Thus in this instance the organisation of the

classroom was driven by and underlying assumption of how learning occurs. Seating in rows was effective in the early part of the century as much emphasis was placed toward teaching whole class and individual. If classroom were arranged in groups, this would have distracted children from learning. Today much has changed not just the organisation of tables and chairs but the whole teaching style, which now places greater emphasis on collaborative and group teaching.

In today's primary classes, classrooms are predominately organised in a manner that promotes group or collaborative teaching (see appendix 1). Indeed this was evident in the classrooms visited during the observation week, where all of the classrooms, from year 1 to year 6, displayed these types of seating arrangement. (Appendix 2, 3 & 4) The group paradigm was initiated after the Plowden report, which emphasised the importance of one to one teaching but recognised the problem of sharing the teachers' time equally amongst the pupils. Only 7 or 8 minutes a day would be available for each child if all teaching were individual (Bennett 2002). The report recommended primary education should focus on collaborative teaching and small group teaching with the view that these form of teaching style would encourage group discussion and interaction with others. Although there was no explicit mention of seating arrangement it seemed sensible for schools to arrange their classrooms to support collaborative teaching. These teaching styles are consistence with social constructivist approach, stemming from the belief that children learn from others through social interaction. Therefore the social constructivist classroom is organised by seating of 4 or 6 children together. Furthermore grouping allows the teacher to form ability groups. These groupings also serve practical functions in that arranging tables together facilitate access to resources (such as sharpeners, glues, crayon etc) which can be placed in the middle of the table and encourage sharing. So does seating arrangements actually make any difference to teaching and learning.

There has been much research suggesting that the seating arrangement in classrooms makes a difference to teaching and learning. Alexrod et al (1979, in Hasting 2002) in an American study examined the on-task and disruptive behaviour rate of a class of 7 and 8 years old. They found that when the children sat in rows they were high on task and substantially low in disruptive behaviour. However when the classroom was re-arranged to group seating the on task was low and disruptive

behaviour was high. They concluded that the children behaved differently in the two different contexts. These findings were replicated by Wheldall et al (1989) with slightly older children (10 and 11 years old). Does this mean that classrooms should revert back to organising the seating in rows. Not necessarily, it is simply not just the sitting arrangement of children in groups that yielded these results but rather a mismatch between collaborative sitting of the group and the individual learning task which are given to pupils (Alexander 1992). The result is that the sitting in groups may distract pupils from their work if the task involves working alone. The case for children sitting around tables in order to be taught together or to work together as a group only makes sense if group teaching and group work are commonly used as teaching method.

Unfortunately this is not the case, the classroom is arranged to meet individual teaching as opposed to small group. This was evident during both the observation week and autumn term school experience. Of all the lessons observed there were two lessons in year 4 which involved group work. One of which was music, their task was to complete an ostinato. A group of 4 or 5 children had to work together to produce a repeated tune. Ultimately each child had one note to play on the xylophone. Children found it difficult to collaborate and one group had produced nothing after 10 minutes, they had spent the whole time arguing who was going to play what note. The second lesson was in science in which children worked in pairs or in a group of 4 to 5 to find the conductors and the insulator of electricity. Group work in this lesson was effective as there was only one full circuit on each table which encouraged the group to work together. For the rest of the time, even during individual teaching and whole class teaching, the sitting arrangement remained the same although children moved around for maths ability group and English ability group. This was true for the entire year group, although in year 1-3 during whole class teaching children often sat on the carpet and then moved on to their ability tables for middle part of the lesson. Teachers adhering to these established practices need to look towards flexible approaches to classroom organisation. However, teachers are often afraid or cautious about changing established practice and may hold back from making changes (Hasting 2002).

Whilst all teaching strategies (whole class, group, individual or collaborative) are very useful tools in introducing new concepts and skills, they need to accommodate the organisation of the classroom. Mcnamara (2002) suggests that teachers should be flexible in their teaching approaches and classroom organisation. When the teaching is aimed at whole class the classroom should be organised in either square or an exaggerated E (See appendix 4) or horseshoe figuration. This enables the teacher to see every child and the children can see the teacher. Research has shown that during whole class teaching children facing the teacher make a greater contribution than those sitting sideways (Moyle 1997). When group work is involved then the tables and chairs should be reorganised accordingly. This flexibility will reduce the mismatch problem mentioned earlier and increase on task level in the classroom and reduce disruptive behaviour. So how should the classroom be organised?

Teachers need to experiment to discover which seating and organisational arrangement offer children the most opportunity to focus on the teacher. In an example taken from a case study of 16 different classrooms Hastings (2002) found teachers organised their classroom to match teaching strategies. Taking into consideration the various limitations of classroom space one teacher organised her class in an E shaped (appendix 4). This allowed group, individual and paired work. During this configuration children who sat at the end of the E were the monitors for books and any other resources. When group was desired the class had a system in which just four tables move and eight children shift themselves and their chairs to create three working areas of four and two of six. This change is carried out normally at lunch time or at the end of the day without fuss and children have established rules of who does what. Clearly this teacher has found a solution to the problems facing the need to match the organisation of the classroom to her personal teaching method. Qualified teachers should be demonstrating that they can organise and manage the physical teaching space, tools, materials, text and other resources safely and effectively (TTA, 2002 p13) as part of their daily routine. There are many examples similar to the above mentioned in Hastings book which allow teachers to match the learning context and activities to classroom organisation. Teachers need to know a range of strategies to promote good behaviour and establish a purposeful learning environment (TTA, 2002, p9).

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