

**With reference to your experience in the classroom, discuss those factors that you consider to be most important in providing an effective learning environment informed by your knowledge of contrasting theories of learning.**

Classroom practise has come a long way since the traditional teaching strategies criticised in the Plowden Report (1967). We rarely see excessively formal classrooms and the general aim has been to move towards a more action-orientated and child-centred approach, as championed by the Plowden Report. The current intention is for the learning environment to be humane, focused, structured and stimulating; a place the child enjoys being. This essay will consider what is required for both teaching and learning to be effective and worthwhile.

The class teacher is by far the most important individual in the classroom; it is their behaviour and characteristics, which influence the general ethos of the whole class and the behaviour and attitudes displayed by the children. The effect of the teacher can be easily observed by the different behaviours the children display when another teacher is in charge. During my time in the classroom I had the opportunity to observe the class being taught by a supply teacher. From the onset the supply firmly laid down her expectations and boundaries and there was a noticeable difference in the behaviours the children displayed. Although I would not say that one teacher's style was better than another, it was clear that by emphasising different values and behaviours the children acted differently.

Through my own experience and observations, I believe that when a teacher meets a class for the first time, they must from the onset demonstrate that they are keen to communicate their knowledge. As stated in Robertson (1996) it is through organisation, presentation, communication and monitoring that the teacher can capture the interest of the children and gain their respect.

The child-centred approach to education highlights how important it is that the class teacher is sensitive to the children's individual needs, it is also vital that the teacher has a good understanding of each individual child's strengths and weaknesses, personality and individual learning styles. It is through assessment, that the teacher has the opportunity to gain a good understanding of each child's prior knowledge of a subject and their favoured learning style, observation of play, general classroom behaviour and social interactions can also help the teacher understand each child's personality.

During conversations with the class teacher I observed on my first teaching practice, she highlighted that it is mainly through observations during whole class, group and individual teaching, that she acquires her knowledge about the children. She emphasised the importance of getting to know each child on an individual basis and where possible, it is important to communicate with the children's past teacher.

The way in which the teacher teaches the class will have a significant affect on learning. Piaget suggested that children learn best through actions rather than passive observations (Smith, Cowie & Blades, 1999). Piaget saw the child as a young 'scientist' and believed it was more productive for the child to be free to explore, touch, manipulate and experiment, as this allowed the child to assimilate and accommodate their knowledge. Piaget highlighted the importance of the teacher assessing the children's prior knowledge of a subject and then building upon their knowledge, this relates to Piaget's theory of 'learning readiness.' Piaget's view was that an effective teacher must promote active learning; it is their role to create situations, which challenge the child and allow them to discover new concepts.

Whereas Piaget focused on a more discovery-orientated style of teaching, Vygotsky highlighted the importance of 'scaffolding' through demonstrative teaching, which was later developed further by Bruner (Smith *et al*, 1999). Through 'modelling' solutions, the aim is that the learner will eventually imitate the method modelled in a more elaborate form. As the child begins to understand a concept the 'scaffolding' can be removed.

During my observations, the teacher taught using elements of both Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories. During a science lesson on the properties of materials, the teacher provided the children with balloons filled with water and allowed them to feel and observe the object, rather than just telling them what the object would feel like. This allowed the children to use their own senses to explore the objects properties, a very Piagetian approach. The lesson also contained elements of Vygotsky's theory of scaffolding, as the teacher provided the materials she wanted the children to use and gave examples of the answers she was looking for, such as "the balloon feels 'squidgy' when filled with water". I believe it is important to take on a number of elements from each of the various teaching theories and be flexible when teaching, depending upon the responses of the children.

Classroom organisation is another key factor, which affects the quality of teaching and learning. The way the furniture in the classroom is organised can have a direct influence on the children's behaviour. Moyles & Robinson (2002) suggested that seating pupils at individual desks leads to a less-destructive classroom; however this does not lend itself to collaborative and social learning.

In order for learning to take place, I feel it is important for children to be able to interact with each other and share experiences; this idea follows Vygotsky's theory that learning is a very social process. Vygotsky believed that it is through social interactions between the child and their peers that the tools for thinking and learning are acquired (Wood, 1996). In all the classrooms I have spent time in, the tables have been arranged together to create small working environments where children can work collaboratively. Although I support the idea that learning is a social process and there is a lot of knowledge to be gained from peers, I feel it is important that the teacher should have the opportunity to decide the layout of the class, dependent upon the type of pupils he or she has. For example, if there are a number of children who prefer to work individually this must be taken into consideration when planning the seating area. Not all children find interactions with peers productive when it comes to learning and forcing all children to work together can have counter-productive affects. During my work experience I found a number of children when given the choice of where to sit, decided to sit on tables away from their peers. I feel that it is important that the seating area is a flexible environment, which can be altered depending upon the type of work being completed and the general ethos of the classroom.

If the tables are arranged in groups, there is then the decision of how the children should be grouped. Should the children be grouped by ability or mixed -ability?

Vygotsky suggested that it is through engaging in mutual activities with more expert peers that the child becomes more knowledgeable (Smith *et al*, 1999). Vygotsky's work focused upon 'The Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD), which provides an explanation as to how children learn with the help of more knowledgeable peers. Vygotsky stated that the ZPD was the distance between the child's actual developmental level and their potential developmental level under the guidance of more knowledgeable peers. The main belief of Vygotsky's theory was that with 'expert intervention' the child can be challenged, and with support from such 'expert' peers achieve a higher developmental level. Vygotsky emphasised that by working with another person who is more knowledgeable, the child not only gains new information but also confirms what they already know and understand (Wood, 1988, cited in Smith *et al* 1999).

I am of the opinion that the idea children should work in mixed ability groups is not always a viable option. I feel it is important to take into account the personalities of the children, as learning may be inhibited if one child is particularly domineering or intimidating. It is also necessary to look at the subject being taught and be flexible in the grouping of children.

I personally feel that for subjects such as Literacy and Numeracy, where there is pressure for academic success the children should be split into ability groups. I feel by working in ability groups, the children are still able to support each other and there is still a hint of Vygotsky's ZPD theory being practised, as there is still a range of abilities within an ability group and the more able of one particular ability group, can support the others in the group. It is important to remember that no one child is the same as another, even if they are classified as being of similar ability. Although I support ability groups for certain subjects I still feel that it is important for the children to work in mixed-ability groups for non-core subjects, as I feel that it improves social skills, as the children are encouraged to listen to other people's views and opinions. It also gives children the opportunity to work along side children they may rarely get to interact with, if all sessions were divided into ability groups.

Moving on from the organisation of the classroom and how the children are grouped for subjects, I feel it is important that there are well-known routines and rules in place. I believe that it is important to encourage the children to be involved in the production of class rules and routines as it not only gives the children a sense of inclusion, but it also helps them understand what is required of them. A regular and methodical structure for routines can reduce the possibilities of children exhibiting inappropriate and disruptive behaviours. Routines allow for the children to know what they should be doing at a particular time of the day. For instance, at 11am all the children know that it is time for assembly. By emphasising routines less time is wasted figuring out what needs to be done. During my experience all the children knew that they were to wait outside in their line to be collected from the playground when entering the classroom, they then quickly and quietly hang their coats away and sat on the carpet. Although this routine was well known it did not always run smoothly, depending on the mood of the children. With such rules and routines in place they lend themselves to the children being disciplined or rewarded.

With regards to praise, rewards and sanctions it is important to remember that different rewards and sanctions work for different children, and the effective teacher must be flexible and know the children they are working with.

The concept of rewarding behaviour follows a very behaviourist approach. Skinner believed that the most effective teaching involves the occasional reinforcement of a desired response or behaviour (Wood, 1996). Skinner put forth the idea that it is possible to shape behaviour by forming a relationship between response and reinforcement (Wood, 1996). The most effective type of reward for all children is the social reward, which can be easily administered through verbal communication. It is important for the teacher to be explicit when giving social rewards, highlighting why the child is being rewarded so that their peers can also recognise what behaviour has led to such positive reinforcement. For example, "Well done for coming into the room quietly", by saying this all the children recognise why the child was rewarded and what they need to do to be rewarded in the future. When giving rewards the teacher should be aware of their non-verbal communication; for example, it would not be advisable to give a reward while frowning.

When it comes to sanctions, all sanctions should be given immediately wherever possible, they should be consistent and fair and, as with the reward, there should be an explanation as to why the child is being sanctioned. It is important to highlight that breaking rules will not be tolerated and by verbally reprimanding one child may stop others misbehaving, although for serious problems it is not always best to discuss the problems publicly. Many schools follow a very whole-school approach with different levels of sanctions, ranging from names on the board to letters home and spending time with the head teacher, all of which the children are fully aware of. The school I spent time in, had a sanction where the child in question spent time on the 'thinking chair', allowing them to decide whether their behaviour was appropriate and what they needed to do to rectify the situation. I feel that this type of sanction took the child away from the situation without causing extreme 'fuss' and disruption to the rest of the class and allowed the child in question to calm down. When thinking about sanctions it is important to remember that many believe, such as Skinner, that children learn more about appropriate behaviours when behaviour is rewarded rather than reprimanded or sanctioned (Wood, 1996). Unnecessary sanctioning can cause more harm than good especially if there is not a suitable explanation.

In conclusion I feel that to be an effective teacher and to create an effective learning environment it is important to encompass a number of factors, all of which are equally important. As I have mentioned

previously the teacher has a strong influence over their pupils, if they are enthusiastic and encouraging, the children are more likely to be motivated to learn and it is their role to ensure lessons run smoothly and with a well maintained momentum. The effective teacher should also be able to take on board a range of ideas from the different learning theories and adapt them to best suit the class they are teaching, it is important for the teacher to be flexible at all times when teaching and understand, different children have different needs and requirements. With regards to the learning environment it should have a positive effective on all who enter it. Colourful displays will not only improve the general feel of the classroom but they will also aid learning, especially if there is some interactive aspect to the display. As mentioned previously the seating of children is dependent upon the class itself and the lessons being taught, it should not be a rigid format. If the teacher takes on board what has been mentioned in the main body of this essay and the conclusion, I feel he / she should become an effective teacher with the ability to create an effective learning environment.

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