

Classroom Organisation and Learning: A New Pragmatism?

Mark Brundrett Emeritus Professor of Education at Liverpool John Moores University.

When I was asked to write this article I decided that I would like to offer something about classroom organisation, which focuses on the physical environment or 'landscape' of the classroom, and its links to learning, since that has been an interest for some time and relates to some very practical issues for both school leaders and classroom teachers.

I argue that the layout of classrooms is closely linked with prevailing attitudes to education and that school leaders face the challenge of ensuring that schools and the classrooms in them enable the use of a wide range of approaches to learning that take into account the topic being taught and the needs of learners.



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Changing attitudes to learning and classroom organisation

Children will read a great deal about what teachers value from the way a classroom is set out and the layout of classrooms gradually changed during the 20th century as part of a movement towards a more child-centred approach to education (Kelly, 2014: 168). In the UK this reimagining of schooling was based on the growth of developmental psychology, the work of Dewey, and the arrival of the 'welfare state'

(Blyth, 1965:40-1) as well as the theories of progressive educators like Froebel, Montessori and Isaacs (Gillard, 2014), who powerfully condemned 'arid drill methods' (Galton, Simon and Croll, 1980:34).

During the middle of the 20th century a series of reports, such as those by Hadow (1931, 1933) and, perhaps most importantly, by Plowden (1967), shifted attitudes to learning, and, correlatively, to classroom layout in order to facilitate group based and individualised learning. Several decades of research have now reinforced these attitudinal changes

by showing that group based approaches to learning have many advantages since learning itself can be defined as participation in a set of collective practices (Lave and Wenger, 1991) through adoption of a community's way of speaking, acting and interacting (Esmonde, 2011). These ideas underpin some of the most influential work on learning theory of recent decades, such as those of Erickson (2004). Put simply, when children cooperate they learn to listen to others, to give and receive help, and to share ideas and in so doing they construct new understandings



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(Gillies, 2008) and there is evidence that even in more traditional settings children benefit from such collaborative work (Hargreaves, Elhawary and Mahgoub, 2019).

It is important to note, however, that neither the teacher-centred nor the child-centred approach is wrong per se and, over twenty-five years ago, the DES report by Alexander, Rose and Woodhead (DES, 1992) pointed out that children could be taught as individuals, in groups, or as part of whole class methods. Crucially, although this view was the subject of contestation for some time it is now an expectation of both the DfE Teachers Standards and Ofsted that classrooms will be organised in such a way as to use whatever approach enables children to learn successfully (Bearn and Kennedy, 2018)

Important empirical and theoretical work in this area also confirms that if classrooms are to be effective pupils may need to operate individually, in dyadic pairs, or as groups (Slavin, 2014). This means that classroom organisation needs to reflect the needs of the children and must also be flexible enough to allow for different approaches within and between different lessons. Above all, classroom teachers need to exercise judgement since pupil learning is dependent on the existence of such professional expertise (Pollard et al: 2014).

Policy borrowing

Some jurisdictions provide guidance for schools on the issue



of classroom organisation. For instance, the General Teaching Council (GTC) for Scotland offers simple and sensible guidance (GTC Scotland, 2019), as does the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST, 2019). Such guidelines are helpful to teachers at the start of their careers and focus on matters like seating arrangements that allow different learning approaches, organising and labeling resources, the use of ICT, and the quality of displays.

The recent trend towards ‘policy borrowing’ and the increased devolution of power to schools has, however, meant that school leaders have increasingly sought to create more ambitious and innovative learning environments and this, in part, explains the recent fascination with the forest schools movement which began in Scandinavian

nations such as Sweden where the classroom is just one of many places for learning (Billmeyer, 2019). At the same time school leaders have been encouraged to draw on the experiences of other high performing jurisdictions such as Singapore where classroom environments are often, but not exclusively, more traditional in layout and classroom talk remains teacher dominated (Hogan, 2014). In this sense school leaders are being encouraged to draw on what are, at least at first sight, contradictory approaches to classroom organisation, which may add to the reasons why school innovation remains so challenging (Greany, 2018). With this in mind it remains essential that school policies need to be developed by negotiation and discussion and linked to strategies for resources and curriculum planning (Brundrett and Humphries, 2016).



Conclusion

Approaches to both classroom organisation and teaching and learning styles are culturally defined, both historically and geographically, and school leaders at all levels have become increasingly pragmatic in choosing the right strategy for their pupils. This determination to

commit to approaches that will lead to the best outcomes for children is to be applauded but there are, nonetheless, tensions in this eclecticism and only time will tell whether such contradictions will be sustained or whether this period of relativism will, yet again, be replaced by a further new orthodoxy.

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Pen Portrait

Mark Brundrett was a teacher and headteacher. He is currently Emeritus Professor of Education at Liverpool John Moores University.

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