

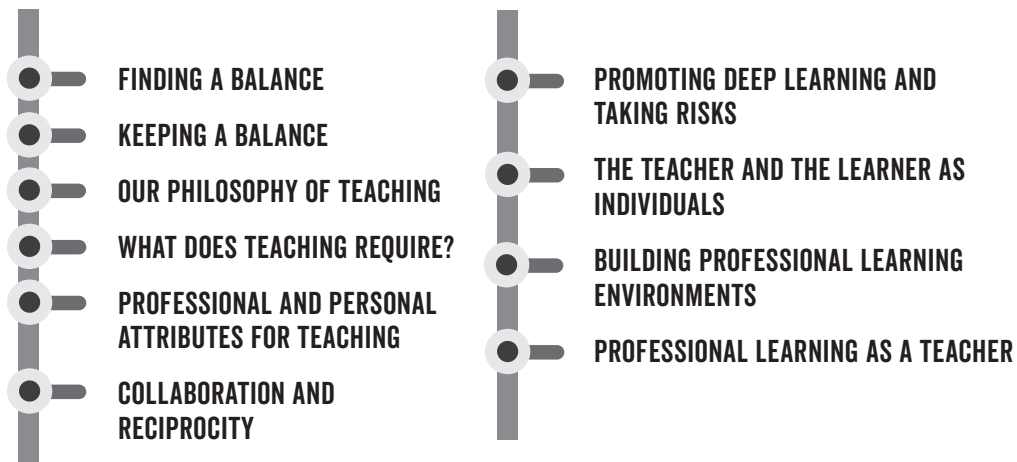
LEARNING WITH AND FROM CHILDREN

- ❑ INVOLVE PARENTS where possible
- ❑ FIND OUT what children do in their spare time and plan activities which include reference to these
- ❑ USE WRITING JOURNALS where children can record anything they wish
- ❑ START ALL NEW TOPICS by FINDING OUT what CHILDREN KNOW
- ❑ DESIGN HOME CORNERS ^{role play areas} book corners to relate to CHILDREN'S LIVES
- ❑ CREATE BILINGUAL RESOURCES ^{and} displays recognising and celebrating difference
- ❑ PLAN FOR PLENTY OF DISCUSSION and INTERACTION in EVERY LESSON.

WHAT IS TEACHING?

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KEY WORDS

- Brave
- Creative
- Collaboration
- Empower
- Innovative
- Learning
- Mindset
- Principles
- Risk
- Teaching

INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to answer the question ‘What is teaching?’, while at the same time addressing the opposing question, ‘What is teaching *not*?’. It is likely that, should you pose these questions to a group of children or parents, teachers or university tutors, you would get a whole range of different responses, dependent on personal experience, attitudes, beliefs and so forth. It is inevitable, therefore, that some of what is contained in this chapter you will challenge, question and contend, and this is welcomed. In order to enjoy a long and successful career in teaching, you *need* to challenge, question and contend, but this approach needs to build on principles and beliefs underpinned by knowledge and experience. These principles and beliefs will empower you to be creative, innovative and brave, and at the same time will prop you up when times are tough.

Picture an old-fashioned set of weighing scales. On one side are the exciting ideas, resources, plans and innovations you are determined to use to motivate and inspire the children in your class. On the other side are the nationally prescribed and school initiatives/policies with which you must comply. A successful balance between these demands leads to a more manageable teaching life, where compromises are made but enough of ‘yourself’ is able to emerge.



Figure 1.1 Finding a balance

If the balance gravitates more towards compliance, accountability and a lack of autonomy and trust, then you may feel your principles are being eroded; your foundations underpinning who you are as a teacher begin to crumble.



Figure 1.2 A lack of balance

Ball (2004: 147) describes how teachers might feel that they cannot be true to themselves – an ‘alienation of self’ leading to ‘inauthentic practice and relationships’. There is then the danger of teachers becoming technicians rather than professionals (Alexander, 2004).

CRITICAL QUESTION

How can the balance be maintained and who can control this?

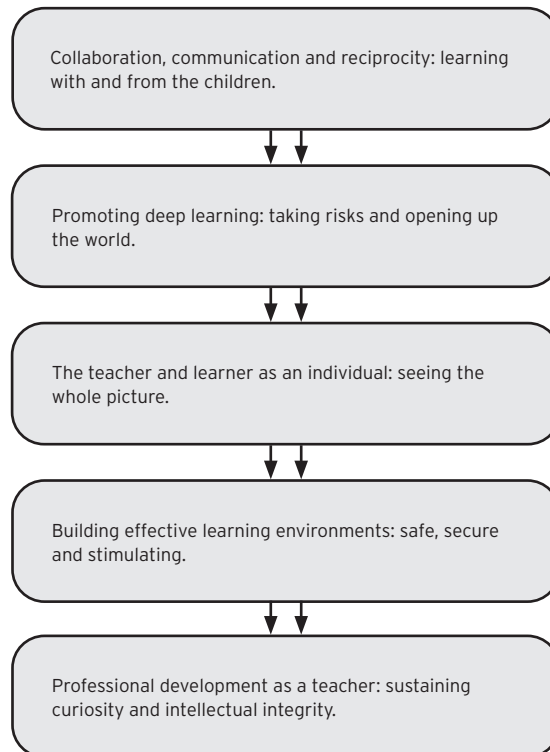
The ideas presented in this chapter, and throughout the book, will set you thinking about the type of teacher you want to be and how you will find a balance to achieve this. What should also emerge is a vision of the *learning* that emanates from excellent teaching – children learning with and alongside other children and adults, within a culture and environment that celebrates diversity, promotes innovation and recognises that, through collaboration, communication and cooperation, learning will flourish. Within this, we need to ask the question why some children ‘struggle’ and ‘fail’ at school while others ‘flourish’ and ‘succeed’. Consider your own interpretation of the terms ‘succeed’ and ‘fail’, while focusing on how you can ensure that there are opportunities for all to ‘flourish and succeed’.

CRITICAL QUESTION

Can, and should, all children ‘flourish and succeed’ at school?

1 What is teaching?

This chapter begins with an examination of the philosophy underpinning our own ideas about teaching and learning, followed by a section entitled ‘What does teaching require?’ which suggests some traits which, if developed, should support you throughout your teaching career. The chapter then goes on to explore the following areas, which have been chosen because of what we perceive as their importance to successful teaching and learning:



WHAT IS TEACHING? OUR PHILOSOPHY

Our approach to teaching is underpinned by a socio-cultural perspective, wherein learning and teaching are viewed as collaborative and reciprocal, non-hierarchical, dynamic and social (Johnson, 2006), ‘rooted in society and culture’ (Vygotsky, 1978: 7). Within this approach, thinking, communicating, interacting, re-evaluating and reflecting lead to more complex thinking and deep learning, promoted through ‘meaningful activities and self-directed learning’ (Lueg *et al.*, 2016: 1674). This is a long way from the traditional image of a teacher standing at the front of the classroom delivering information to waiting ears and adopting the all-knowing persona. Instead, this approach views effective, sustainable and successful teaching and learning as dependent on underpinning foundations built on respect, rapport and relationships. This reciprocal model of teaching and learning is described most aptly by Freire:

to teach is not to transfer knowledge but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge

(Freire, 2001: 30)

To create these ‘possibilities’, the focus needs to be on the children actively involved in, if not leading, the learning, carefully orchestrated by our planning, resourcing and facilitation. Analogously, this might be described as the teacher writing the music and then conducting the performance, with the children as the ‘stars of the show’.

KEY THEORY

In his seminal text, *The Culture of Education*, Bruner (1999: 53) presents what he describes as ‘models of mind and models of pedagogy’: a synthesis of ideas that have emerged from educationalists, researchers, teachers and learners over time, relating to how teachers teach and learners learn. These models may help you to develop your own thinking in terms of how we perceive children’s minds and how this affects our approach to teaching. Have a look at Table 1.1 below which summarises these ideas.

Table 1.1 Bruner’s models

Learning through imitation	Learning through didactic exposure	Learning through collaboration and discussion	Learning through building on existing knowledge and understanding
Children perceived as not knowing but wanting to know	Children perceived as empty vessels, waiting to be filled	Children perceived as having ideas to be shared and, through sharing, come to understand the views of others	Children perceived as ready to recognise their existing knowledge, and relate and compare this to new findings
Adults as models who encourage the development of talents and skills through practice	Adults present pupils with ‘facts, principles and rules of action’ (p. 55)	Adults collaborate and mediate in an attempt to ‘build an exchange of understanding’ (p. 57)	Adults help the child ‘reach beyond his own impressions to join a past world that would otherwise be remote and beyond him as knower’ (p. 63)
Knowledge grows in an habitual way	Knowledge is obtained by listening and absorbing	The child is the centre of the learning	The child is empowered
Apprenticeship model	Poor performance is the fault of the child	Question: ‘How are beliefs turned into hypotheses that hold not because of the faith we place in them but because they stand up in the public marketplace of evidence, interpretation, and agreement with extant knowledge?’ (p. 60)	Question: How will you enable a child to ‘reach beyond his own impressions’?
Question: Is ‘simply demonstrating “how to” and providing practice at doing so’ enough? (p. 54)	Question: Are children ‘blank slates’ or ‘empty vessels’?		

Hopefully, the table above, referencing some of Bruner's ideas, has started you thinking about the sort of teacher you want to be. Developing a personal philosophy and set of beliefs for teaching is essential, and ideas for this will be further developed later in the chapter. As important, however, is a realisation of what it means to be a teacher and the qualities you might need to develop. The next section explores these.

WHAT DOES TEACHING REQUIRE? AN EXAMINATION OF PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES

Richards (2014: 10) writes that teaching requires 'intellect, emotional intelligence, imagination and sensitivity'. We would add to this: flexibility, energy, enthusiasm, integrity and resilience. Alongside this, there is a need for high levels of personal and professional organisation, to enable your working life to be manageable and sustainable. This section will examine each of these attributes.

INTELLECT

We sometimes have students saying to us that they are 'not clever enough to teach older children' or they refer to themselves as 'not as intelligent as others'. Teaching is not about being clever or having a high IQ. Instead, focus needs to be on the willingness to read, research, investigate and see yourself as a learner among other learners and enjoy the process.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Vital attributes are empathy and understanding in relation to the children and adults we work alongside. A recognition is needed that colleagues and pupils will come from diverse backgrounds, and this should both be celebrated and explicitly recognised in our approaches to teaching, learning and developing relationships.

IMAGINATION

The ability to imagine what might be, not what is. This enables you to work with what cannot be changed, while developing strategies and pedagogies that go beyond the prescribed requirements.

SENSITIVITY

This should be shown towards the lives of others and with attention to your own well-being. Schools can be highly pressurised workplaces, and developing support networks for children, parents, colleagues and yourself can ensure sensitivity towards the needs of others.

FLEXIBILITY

This refers to so many aspects of becoming a teacher. Schools are dynamic, ever-changing environments where even the best-laid plans change. The day's timetable might suddenly alter because a member of staff is ill; or

because of the weather; or an expected visitor does not turn up. The ability groups you have spent so long organising are suddenly no longer appropriate because the mathematics topic has changed promoting unexpected clarity for some and confusion for others. New children arrive in your class mid-term, perhaps from traumatic backgrounds speaking a language other than English. Developing a flexible and responsive learning environment will enable you to manage this unpredictability. After all,

The reality is that classroom life is complex. Learning is not a linear process that can be tracked neatly on a graph, no matter how much we try to make it appear so.

(Kidd, 2014: 103)

ENERGY AND ENTHUSIASM

Energy levels can be difficult to maintain, day in, day out, and it is important to manage your workload effectively. The government have recently published documents to support schools and teachers with this.

KEY READING

www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-teachers-workload/reducing-teachers-workload

Effective time management will allow you to stay enthusiastic, teaching across the curriculum. Even if it is not your 'favourite' subject to teach, it is important to remember that for some children it *is* their favourite. Use their knowledge and enthusiasm to ignite your own.

INTEGRITY

It could be argued that teaching is a profession that has a moral purpose (Fullan, 2001). Teachers are certainly an influential factor towards children developing into purposeful citizens who positively contribute to society. Teachers are role models for those they teach, some of the parents they interact with and colleagues with whom they work. To act with integrity at all times can be challenging but must be the aim. A good reference point is to remember why it was that you decided to enter this profession in the first place.

RESILIENCE

Teaching is challenging. The demands put on teachers can at times be intense and the unpredictability of working with children reduces levels of control for the teacher. The term 'resilience' is used a great deal in the world of education, but rarely explored in terms of what 'being resilient' actually means. Going beyond the commonly held view that resilience is bouncing back from adverse situations, Pemberton defines the notion of resilience as 'the capacity to remain flexible in thoughts, behaviours and emotions when under stress' (n.d.). This resonates with later discussion in this chapter relating to developing a growth mindset.

KEY READING

<http://carolepemberton.co.uk/resilience-coaching/critical-question>

PERSONAL ORGANISATION

The daily life of a teacher is not only busy but also requires several mindset shifts. For example, a teacher's day may include the following foci: finalising resources for the day's learning; discussions with a teaching assistant about the day ahead and the role they are required to play within this; discussion with parents about their child; teaching and learning; pastoral care and intervention; assessment; data collection and analysis; attending and/or leading staff meetings; reflecting on the learning achieved that day to feed in to tomorrow's planned learning ... and sometimes more. To achieve all of this in a professional manner, high levels of personal organisation are required. Being organised is not simply about doing things in the right order by the right time, but it is about prioritising activities, knowing what is most important and what will have to wait.

CRITICAL QUESTION

Which of these attributes are already strengths and which might cause you the most angst?

COLLABORATION AND RECIPROCITY: LEARNING WITH AND FROM THE CHILDREN

To develop effective collaborative learning experiences we need first to develop strong relationships with children, based on an excellent knowledge of the local contexts of their lives. An awareness of the 'ecological, social, and economic context of the place in which they live' (Freire, 2001: 122) is vital if we are to 'become acquainted with their way of being in the world, if not become intimately acquainted then at least become less of a stranger to it' (ibid.). This enables us to plan, resource and teach in a way that is relevant and meaningful to the children. It requires us always to discover what the children already know and build on this. One way of doing this might be to start a new topic on a Friday, rather than a Monday. In this way, you can introduce the concepts, find out what children already know, set them some homework to explore the topic over the weekend and then adjust your plans before the following week.

Learning needs to be perceived as a shared experience, where openness and a willingness to accept that we all have different knowledge underpin the classroom ethos. A group of pupils and teachers will know things as individuals; as a collaborative group they will know more and begin to realise that they can extend their knowledge through listening and sharing. Vygotsky (1978: 88) wrote that 'human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them', and we need to develop ways to capitalise on this inherent sociability.

INFO 1.1

Learning with and from children

- Involve parents where possible
- Find out what children do in their spare time and plan activities which include reference to these
- Use writing journals where children can record anything they wish
- Start all new topics by finding out what children know
- Design home corners/role-play areas/book corners to relate to children's lives
- Create bilingual resources and displays, recognising and celebrating difference
- Plan for plenty of discussion and interaction in every lesson.

CLASSROOM LINK

What does this mean for classroom practice?

Some practical ideas:

- Involve parents where possible - reading with children, encouraging parents from other cultures/who speak other languages to share experiences/literature/artefacts.
- Find out what children do in their spare time and plan activities that include reference to these - resources/books/websites/television programmes. You could encourage children to bring in texts or objects from home that link with the topic. Remember though that some sensitivity is needed here - there may be things children do not want to share and would rather keep for home only.
- Use writing journals where children can record anything they wish - words and phrases, song lyrics, poems, drawings/notes.
- Start all new topics by finding out what children know - using KWL (what is already known; what would like to be known; what has been learned) grids/online collaborative spaces, e.g. padlet/working walls.
- Design home corners/role-play areas/book corners to relate to children's lives, or where possible, encourage the children to design them.
- With the children, create bilingual resources and displays, recognising and celebrating difference within and beyond the classroom (Bower, 2017).
- Plan for plenty of discussion and interaction in every lesson. Alexander (2004: 21) fears that interaction between teachers and children is often based on questions that only require brief answers with 'an emphasis on recalling information rather than on speculating and problem-solving'. Try to ensure that there is time for extended interactions, using talk partners, group discussion, debates, for example.

1 What is teaching?

Within a teaching model centred on collaboration and reciprocity, children challenge and develop teachers' learning, and there is the potential for a 'transformation of participation' (Rogoff, 1994: 209) to occur. Read the case study below to see an example of this.

CASE STUDY

The incident occurred in a Year 6 class (10- and 11-year-olds), with a Bulgarian boy - Petr. This child had limited spoken and written English at this stage as he had only been in England for a few months. The learning focus was on identifying the oceans of the world and there was a map on the interactive whiteboard, with all the ocean names erased. I asked if anybody would like to write in one of the ocean names. Petr's hand shot up and he approached the board confidently, rapidly writing in each of the oceans (correctly). He then pointed to Bulgaria on the map and proceeded to talk about his home country, his family and where they lived, and the places he had visited. The other children were fascinated and asked him questions and listened attentively. I abandoned my own lesson plan and passed the lesson over to him, and I am sure that the children and I benefited far more than they would have if I had stuck to my plan! An all-round positive learning experience. It was also extremely good for Petr's self-esteem and spoken English practice.

Collaboration and reciprocity are closely aligned with effective communication, and excellent teaching promotes this through planning for interaction, discussion, activity, questioning and reflection. Sustained opportunities are vital in order that children can immerse themselves in the learning; it cannot be rushed. It is important to pause at key moments and take time to investigate and explore further when children make interesting points, have incredible ideas, say something a little 'left field', have a misconception or wish to share their own personal experiences. We must not be quick to move on; instead, we need to relish these moments and promote reflection and discussion whenever possible.

CRITICAL QUESTION

How might the curriculum and planned schemes of work prevent teachers from 'slowing down' and providing time for collaboration and communication?

PROMOTING DEEP LEARNING: TAKING RISKS AND OPENING UP THE WORLD

To learn effectively children need to be inspired, enthused and curious. They need to develop in a way that will ensure that they are prepared to function in, and positively contribute to, the modern world. For this to happen, both teachers and children need to take risks with their teaching and learning, and be prepared to be challenged along the way. The following example describes how a student teacher was prepared to take these risks and, through a creative and innovative approach, promote enjoyment and deep learning.

CLASSROOM LINK

What does this mean for classroom practice?

The student contacted me (VB) to ask advice about the English lessons she was preparing for her Year 3 class for the following week. She was unsure as to the progression the children should be making towards writing their own haiku poems. I wrote her a 'skeleton' set of plans for the week, which she could then adapt and create more detailed plans to support all the children's needs. This was the planning sheet I provided:

- Day 1 - Does anybody know what a haiku is? Discuss haikus. Read lots of examples. Discuss the history of haikus. Children to explore some examples in their groups. Discuss syllables - what they are and how many in haikus.*
- Day 2 - Recap what haikus are and what they are trying to portray (tend to be focused on nature/senses, etc.). Read some more. Children to read some aloud. Choose a topic and ask children to mind map vocabulary for that topic. Collect vocabulary on board and discuss. Begin to model how a haiku might come together - asking children to contribute ideas. Explain that tomorrow you are all going to write one as a class and then they are going to work on their own haikus.*
- Day 3 - Read more haikus. Shared writing - create a haiku as a class. Children to choose their topic and start gathering vocabulary. They could begin writing their haiku in rough. Share some ideas.*
- Day 4 - Read some haikus. Read one that you have made up. Ask children to share some of their vocabulary. Children to work on their own haiku and then share with others.*

I arrived the following week to observe her haiku lesson on day 3 of the sequence, and was delighted to witness some really significant learning, where adults and children worked and learned seamlessly together. The children had all named their groups, using the names of famous haiku poets. They had an excellent understanding of the origins of this poetic form and they had learned some Japanese vocabulary. They used a 'back and forth' activity to elicit words relating to the topic upon which they were to write their haiku poems - you say a word, I say a word, etc. - and this was first modelled by the student teacher and her assistant. The student had invented what she described as a 'naiku' - a model which was *not* a haiku - and the children explored *why* it was not a haiku and subsequently what features made up a haiku. They then began structuring their own haikus. All this in just in one lesson, possible because the student had examined the skeleton plan she had been sent and had been flexible enough to expand on the ideas, plan for exciting activities using a range of excellent pedagogies and had, by her own enthusiasm and flexibility, promoted a deeper level of learning.

Biesta (2013: 1) believes that education, by its very nature 'always involves a risk'; that the children we teach are not simply objects to be moulded and disciplined but are subjects of action and responsibility. Thus, children must not simply be the recipients of education but the co-constructors of it. This is risky as when co-construction exists the teacher relinquishes control. Some teachers find this challenging; they like to be in control. In the example above, the student teacher was not afraid to use 'risky' pedagogies, relinquish some control and put the learning in the hands of the children.

The notion of risk-taking depends on what you consider to be a risk. The decision to take a risk, instead of 'playing safe', is sometimes rejected for fear of it negatively affecting outcomes. This is more likely to reflect the current culture of accountability than be a reflection on a teacher's philosophy of education. As Dadds

1 What is teaching?

(2001) argues, because of the increased accountability and expectations for linear progression, coverage of the curriculum – safe teaching – becomes the focus rather than learning. The focus comes away from responding to the needs of the children and merely reacts to the prescribed requirements of imposed curricula. Ironically, taking risks that open up the world to children in an engaging, exciting and different way will positively affect learning and progress, resulting in more positive outcomes. The tension here tends to be between curriculum coverage and the desire to take risks.

We would suggest that one way to avoid this tension is to focus on *learning* rather than content. Think back to the earlier example of the haiku lessons. Here, the focus was on the children's learning. Yes, the outcome was to write their own haiku poems, but along the way they learned so much more. W.B. Yeats is attributed as saying 'education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire', and the student teacher certainly lit the children's fire with regard to this genre. Biesta (2013: 44) suggests that a teacher is 'someone who, in the most general sense brings something new to the educational situation, something not already there' and this was reflected in the haiku lessons. The student teacher brought expertise to the educational situation in the form of scaffolding learning through exciting activities, in order for the children to become independent and curious learners.

'The lighting of a fire'? Something, perhaps, to grapple with when getting to grips with 'What is teaching?' Whenever you hesitate about taking a risk with your teaching, consider these words: 'we are kings of our own classroom and most of the time no one else is looking' (Kidd, 2014: 119) and go for it. The results will be career-changing for you and life-changing for those you teach.

CRITICAL QUESTION

What are the benefits of focusing on learning rather than focusing on delivering the required content?

THE TEACHER AND LEARNER AS INDIVIDUALS: SEEING THE WHOLE PICTURE

Effective teaching comes about through the choices you make. If you gave ten teachers the same learning objective for a lesson, they would be likely to come up with ten different plans, using a range of pedagogies and practices, resources, activities and assessment methods. The most successful of these would build on the children's prior knowledge, relate to the world in which they live, use resources to stimulate discussion and motivate learning, and would encourage the children to lead the learning where possible. Kidd (2014: 104) recognises that *each child will respond to different approaches and we build a repertoire of techniques to help them. This takes time, experience and judgement. It is not easy and it relies very much on building positive relationships and trust in classrooms.* This goes a long way beyond the once-popular notion of categorising children as either visual, auditory or kinaesthetic learners (VAK) and focuses on knowing the individuals you teach – and knowing yourself as a teacher – and designing the learning to suit their needs. We are not suggesting that each child in a class should be taught differently utilising individual lesson plans, but, rather, that acknowledgement and celebration of the diversity within your class will lead to a much more imaginative and flexible approach to the curriculum. Kidd (ibid.: 102), agrees that 'we cannot cope with teaching each [child] differently ... we need to find patterns in order to survive', while also arguing that we must 'reject suggestions of simple solutions'.

Meeting individual needs and preferences for learning may seem like a truly daunting task, but it is something that we all gradually get better at if we are prepared to be creative and open-minded.

CLASSROOM LINK

What does this mean for classroom practice?

Consider your use of resources: Use a variety of resources and manipulatives to support learning. Do not think that all children need to be using the same resources; instead, offer options and choice. Use resources as a method of differentiation.

Consider the availability of resources: Consider where your resources are stored. Are they put away in a cupboard where the children cannot access them? Consider making resources available on tables or different areas of the classroom and ensure children are aware of how and when to access these.

Consider the learning activity: Do all children need to be doing the same activity? Vary the activity to support, challenge and to meet individual needs. This may be using different tasks, through scaffolding or through enabling children to access very different activities that still enable them to achieve the learning.

Consider how technology can support learning: There are many opportunities to support learning through technology in very different ways. Explore different options, offer choice for the children to engage with these and enjoy learning from the children.

Consider the way you use your body: Goldin-Meadow and Singer (2005) suggest that teachers who gesture alongside their verbal instructions have a greater impact on children's learning and understanding of concepts and that children are highly attuned to the movements of the teacher. They suggest that this is even more powerful when what is spoken is conveying a differing message to what is being gestured. Therefore, always consider where you are and what you are doing in order to support learning.

Prioritise learning and process over outcomes and product: Outcomes are the end product of learning. A poem is not the learning but the product of learning. Avoid putting all your focus on the outcome and concentrate on the learning. Is it important that all the outcomes are the same? Could the children choose how to present the outcomes of their learning? Could this choice motivate and inspire learners?

When considering teachers and children as individuals it is essential to think holistically about the cognitive, social and emotional development and learning that takes place. As teachers, we often feel that we are being judged upon the outcomes of the children we teach: under pressure to focus on academic development and attainment rather than on social and emotional development and achievement. That is understandable but, in fact, a better awareness of the child – and ourselves – as a whole will lead to better teaching and learning and, in turn, to better results. This will include a good understanding of the stages of cognition that impact on 'what we can expect [children] to learn or hope to teach' (Wood, 1998: 49). It will also involve finding out as much as possible about the backgrounds of the children and their life experiences. This may vary greatly from child to child, and it should be remembered that children will process and understand their learning differently from one another according to these differing experiences or opportunities.

1 What is teaching?

There are several approaches to ensure that the whole child is being educated. The ASCD's Whole Child Initiative is just one example. Launched in 2007, this initiative aims to ensure that each child is healthy, safe, engaged, supported and challenged.

The question above may raise a smile, but it is a serious question. In their blog piece for *The Conversation* (2015) Lauren Schiller and Christina Hinton claim that there is a 'significant correlation between happiness and academic success'. So, perhaps if teachers gave more time to ensuring happiness, the academic outcomes might naturally follow.

KEY READING

www.wholechildeducation.org

CRITICAL QUESTION

How would teaching differ if teachers were measured on how happy and healthy the class were?

BUILDING EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: SAFE, SECURE AND STIMULATING

Children spend a lot of their time in school – in fact, a minimum of 190 days per year (Long, 2016), and during term time children spend more time in school each week than they do in waking hours at home. Positive and effective learning environments are, therefore, vital (see Chapter 18 for an exploration of inclusive learning environments). It is useful to look at the learning environment through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) (see Figure 1.3).

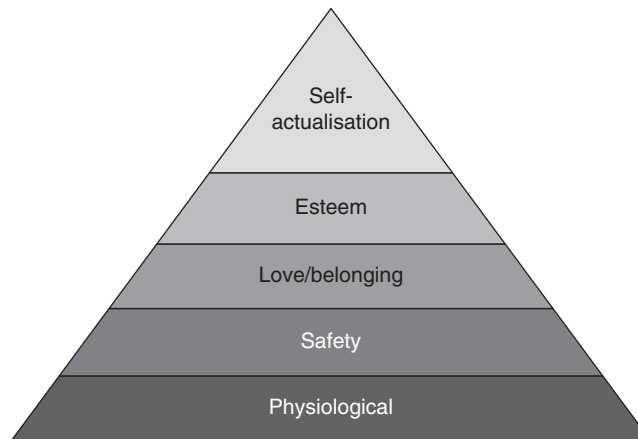


Figure 1.3 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

BASIC NEEDS: PHYSIOLOGICAL AND SAFETY NEEDS (FOOD, WATER, WARMTH, REST, SECURITY, SAFETY)

To meet children's basic needs it is vital that the learning environment provided is inviting and comfortable. This is not always easy when squeezing a large number of children into a fairly small space. Most teachers dream of larger, airier classrooms, but you have to work with what you have. Consider the temperature of the room and use the windows to let in air – classrooms can become quite stuffy and smelly on a summer afternoon. Carefully use the lighting and consider the use of additional (always safe) lighting such as lamps in a reading corner, for example.



Figure 1.4 The reading corner in a Year 3 classroom at Blenheim Primary School, Essex

Consider your approach to access to water in the classroom. Do children have bottles on their desk? Ensure your learning environment is physically safe and secure, but also send messages of being an emotionally safe and secure space where children feel that they belong. Consider here how the children can co-create the learning environment with you, making suggestions and choices around layout and content. The learning environment belongs, after all, to the children, not the teacher.

PSYCHOLOGICAL NEEDS: BELONGINGNESS, LOVE AND ESTEEM NEEDS (RELATIONSHIPS, FRIENDS, ACCOMPLISHMENT AND PRESTIGE)

When considering psychological needs in the context of a learning environment, a good place to start is to consider the layout of the room. How are the tables laid out? Who is sitting with whom and why? Is there a balance between suitable learning groups and allowing children to learn alongside their friends?

1 What is teaching?



Figure 1.5 A class slogan co-created by all the children in the class at Blenheim Primary School, Essex

These may seem challenging questions to answer with the issue of not being able to please each and every child. However, it is important to see the learning environment as a flexible rather than a fixed space. The layout should not remain the same day in, day out. Instead, see your classroom as a stage requiring scene changes for each differing learning episode with the actors moving to work in differing areas of the stage among different cast members depending on the scene. Share and display work, successes and triumphs; celebrate success. Use the classroom walls to add a vibrant, welcoming, purposeful and celebratory nature to the environment, ensuring that all cultures and languages are promoted, so that children can 'recognise and identify with their surroundings' (Bower, 2017: 50).

SELF-FULFILMENT NEEDS: SELF-ACTUALISATION (ACHIEVING FULL POTENTIAL, CREATIVE ACTIVITIES)

A learning environment needs to have purpose and communicate high expectations. As mentioned above, it is important to share work, and successes yet purposeful environments are also environments that are clearly set up for learning to take place. Consider access and availability of resources and aim to create an atmosphere of creation rather than chaos. Think outside the box. Can children collate thoughts and responses through writing on desks or windows? Can a display evolve over a term of work rather than being a final piece? Use the space to inspire, set a challenge and motivate through taking some risks and experimenting.

CLASSROOM LINK

What does this mean for classroom practice?

A student teacher's lesson was recently observed where the children were exploring and creating their own newspaper headlines. The student encouraged the children to write their headlines on Post-it notes and they then stuck these to the flipchart. As children added their own, they were also reading their peers', learning from each other. The flipchart remained there as the children went on to do their newspaper reports during the week - not just a useful reminder but also a valuable source of vocabulary for them.

Building effective learning environments is also about creating an ethos whereby errors are not only accepted but welcomed. In fact, they are not errors at all but merely steps to success. Making mistakes is a fundamental part of learning, yet many of us feel ashamed to make mistakes, get things wrong or fail at anything. This mindset limits learning. Dweck refers to this as having a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2006). In brief, a fixed mindset characterises itself through a need to be perfect, be the best and always correct, leading to a fear of failure. Children and adults may avoid entering situations where there is the potential to get things wrong; they put a lot of pressure on themselves while at the same time may avoid challenging themselves, and not achieve their full potential. We need to ensure that our classrooms do not promote a fixed mindset, but aim for what is instead termed a 'growth mindset'. The promotion of a growth mindset will embed an expectation that learning takes effort (Dweck, 2006) and will support learners with embracing challenge, taking risks, learning from mistakes and developing tenacity – the perfect mindset to enable learning to flourish.

CRITICAL QUESTION

Is your classroom a growth mindset classroom? And if not how can you develop this?

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS A TEACHER: SUSTAINING CURIOSITY AND INTELLECTUAL INTEGRITY

An essential aspect of being a teacher is recognising that we are also learners and always will be. Part of this is the need for a proactive approach to professional development. The current prevalence of school-based teacher education, where student teachers are learning 'on the job', potentially without access to research findings or theoretical underpinning of ideas, coupled with a lack of funded professional development for teachers, means that opportunities for teachers to keep up to date with the latest research – beyond practical ideas or policy implementation – appear limited.

If, however, we are prepared to consider the concept of professional development as more than attending a course or training, the possibilities are boundless. Arguably, professional development in terms of opportunities

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for extended discussion between colleagues is more useful than traditional forms of professional development where knowledge is transmitted from an 'expert' or where awareness is raised about new policies and how they should be implemented. Leung (2004: 38) writes that *there is no neat one-to-one correspondence between external stimulus or provision of new knowledge and the desired teacher uptake (and subsequent change in practice) intended by sponsoring authorities and policymakers*. Perhaps it is more likely that change will be enacted as a result of extended discussions and a sharing of theory, practice and experiences, and that professional development is most useful when it is 'self-directed, collaborative, inquiry-based learning' (Johnson, 2006: 243).

A valuable way to ensure this self-direction is always to be questioning and reflecting on your own practice and thinking (the importance of reflection during placement is explored in Chapter 13). Skilled reflection is the foundation of highly effective teaching. It can, however, be painful and uncomfortable, for a number of reasons.

Inevitably, where teaching and learning are concerned, there are issues about which we hold strong beliefs, and learners may well need to be supported through what Meyer *et al.* (2010) refer to as 'threshold concepts'. The idea of threshold concepts *builds on the notion that there are certain concepts, or certain learning experiences, which resemble passing through a portal, from which a new perspective opens up, allowing things formerly not perceived to come into view* (ibid.: ix). Learners have to go through the process of knowing something in a particular way, gaining some new knowledge – through reading or experience or discussing with others, for example – then revising and challenging – even completely changing – the way they think about something. This process is rarely easy; it can be disturbing, distressing, frustrating and can challenge our sense of who we are as it entails 'a letting go of earlier, comfortable positions and encountering less familiar and sometimes disconcerting new territory' (Rust, 2005: 54) as new knowledge is assimilated.

This 'troublesome' knowledge (Timmerman, 2010: 4) is gained at different rates by different individuals, influenced as the process is by, among other things, a person's openness to change; the timing of the approach to a threshold concept; the distance between their existing knowledge and beliefs and the new concepts; and the ability to accept that a change in the way we look at the world might be painful both cognitively and emotionally. For us as teachers, it is worth keeping in mind these threshold concepts and this troublesome knowledge, not only when we think about our own learning, but when we imagine how the children we teach are feeling when we introduce them to new concepts and knowledge. An openness to the challenge is a powerful and significant factor in our professional development as teachers.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Training to be a teacher is fundamentally about discovering the kind of teacher you want to be. This can include a realisation that you might not 'fit' into every setting and that the process of becoming a qualified teacher needs to involve gaining experience in different settings so that you start to recognise where you feel most comfortable.

It is hoped that this chapter has in some way begun to answer the question 'What is teaching?' In summary, teaching is about creating a safe, supportive and trusting environment that fosters learning. Yet always aim to go way beyond this towards what Faltis and Abedi (2013: viii) describe as 'extraordinary pedagogies' wherein they believe that 'schools and educators must learn and do more than the ordinary'.

Dadds (2001: 43) writes that current pedagogy 'is silencing enquiry and diverse critical perspectives of both teachers and children' and the repercussions of this are potentially wider than merely in relation to learning. As teachers, educators and researchers, we cannot ignore the political climate in which we work, but we have to believe that it is possible to work creatively within it. This relies on professional judgement, challenging our own assumptions and attitudes, and a realisation that commitment to our own continuing professional development is essential. Thus, we can develop opportunities to share ideas and experiences; stay open to the challenge of learning, broadening and deepening our own knowledge and understanding; go beyond the normal and expected in order to engage and motivate children; and recognise, utilise and celebrate what children bring to the classroom.

That, for us, is teaching.

ASSIGNMENTS

If you are writing an assignment discussing 'what is teaching?' you may wish to:

- consider your own philosophy of education;
- explore how good teaching supports children's learning;
- consider the challenges and barriers to innovative teaching and learning, and why these challenges exist;
- consider the importance of safe, secure and stimulating learning environments as an important factor in high-quality teaching.

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