

Good to great classrooms do...New research on pedagogical strategies and the formula for excellence in primary school classrooms

Wendy Berliner *Guardian Professional*, Monday 31 October 2011 04.04 EDT

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A happy classroom, with sensitive behaviour management, is part of the formula for excellence.

What exactly is it that "excellent" primary school teachers do that makes their practice different from "good" primary teachers? Well we have some interesting answers from researchers at University of London's Institute of Education.

Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford, professor of education at the Institute, says that it's a bundle of behaviours working together that can make a difference to children's development and, therefore, their life chances. All children benefit from classrooms like this but disadvantaged children benefit most of all, she says.

Iram is one of the lead researchers on one of this generation's outstanding pieces of research on the educational development of children, with particular focus on those from disadvantaged backgrounds – a longitudinal study of around 3,000 children who are being tracked from ages 3-16 known as EPPSE – Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education - being run by academics from London, Birkbeck and Oxford Universities.

Her finding about what the difference is between "good" and "excellent" in classroom teaching is just one small part of the study that had been going for more than fourteen years. It looked specifically at effective primary pedagogical strategies in English and maths in Key stage 2 (ages 7-11) in the English national curriculum.

The behaviours individually are not rocket science – they can be found in good classrooms everywhere – but it is the combination of all of them together which produces the chemistry to transform good to excellent practise and therefore children's academic and social/behavioural outcomes, she says.

So what are they?

1. Excellent organisational skills – teachers make sure all children understand the learning objectives and associated concepts and have extremely well organised resources and smooth classroom routines.
2. Positive classroom climate – adults and children in the class like and respect one another. Classrooms are happy places, children are less disruptive and behaviour management is sensitive (no-one is humiliated).
3. Personalised teaching - teachers are sensitive to the individual needs of children and provide resources to match those needs. The teachers are more likely to link learning in the classroom with the world outside the classroom door and to provide homework that links directly to lesson content.
4. Dialogic teaching and learning – this harnesses the power of talk to extend and stimulate student thinking to advance their learning and understanding. It provides opportunities for higher order thinking.
5. Plenaries – teachers in the best schools are twice as likely as teachers in poor schools to use a plenary and they use it to recap on the lesson, provide feedback, challenge thinking and provide opportunities for further discussion.

Because plenaries seem to have such a big effect, here are some examples of them highlighted in the research:

- At the end of a poetry lesson introducing alliteration and onomatopoeia, the teacher asked the children to write a chorus of the class poem together – it had to include alliteration and onomatopoeia. The teacher then asked individual children to add in verses they had written during the lesson to create a whole class poem. The session was so effective the children were disappointed when it ended!
- At the end of a maths lesson which involved asking the children to measure desks and sort out an imaginary desk order – the teacher resolved the variety of results by turning to a discussion on averages and middle numbers for the plenary. The children shared their results with each other and discussed options for finding the most representative measure (median, mode, mean) and were encouraged to argue for their point of view.

Lots more examples of effective plenaries can be found on the Guardian Teacher Network here.

Effective Primary Pedagogical Strategies in English and Mathematics in Key Stage 2: A study of Year 5 classroom practice from the EPPSE 3-16 longitudinal study. Download from the Department for Education website here

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