

## Perspectives

### Roy Blatchford

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I spent November on a different continent. As always, it offers the opportunity to climb inside another culture, to reflect on one's homeland, to view the world's restless geopolitics from a different perspective.

Working in government and independent schools in a number of jurisdictions, I visited 170+ lessons across the 3 -18 age range, always co-observing with teachers and asking the question, 'Do you see what I see?' Further, we decided to watch all lessons through the eyes of the children, sitting alongside them and focused on four questions:

1. Am I happy and motivated in class, collaborating with my friends to make progress?
2. Am I using my time well in class?
3. Is the teacher aiding and extending me, given my starting points?
4. Does the teacher *deepen* my learning from time to time?

The big picture was very positive in relation to questions one and two; and variable with questions three and four. It is true across the world that teachers wrestle nobly with these latter two. And teaching in multi-lingual schools, where three or four languages are often marching together in children's heads, presents singular challenges - and professional fulfilment.

The contemporary UK phrase is 'adaptive teaching', as empty a phrase as 'quality first teaching'. I favour the word 'differentiation'. Why?

First, any selection of teaching methods or learning approaches makes its own value assumptions and by implication transmits these.

Second, the whole way in which learning is organised and managed in classrooms rests on fundamental beliefs about the learner and the learning process.

Third, it is not just that doing things differently for different people relieves tedium and is more efficient as a means of instruction. Above all, it is the fact that the key moral value is that each member of the class is an individual with her or his own rights, character, disposition to learning and level of understanding.

Wherever two or more are gathered together for any learning activity, differentiation kicks in - and remains the hardest thing to do consistently well in school classrooms.

**In a nutshell:** where a range of students' needs are fully met, teachers leave the textbook behind, take happy risks, ask searching questions, embrace digression, set rich tasks - all rooted in their own great subject knowledge. In the case of early years settings, that is expert knowledge of *how* young children learn the vital three Ss: to skip, to sing, to share.

Pointedly, students say their learning is deepened when teachers help them to make intriguing *explicit* links between different curriculum subjects; and when 10% of the learning is 'out of the window', embedding understanding of new skills and knowledge through application to everyday life.

Those are the memorable lessons, whether in primary maths and science or secondary art and history - and students of all dispositions and heritage tongues tell you that time and time over.

Too few schools systematically interview small groups of children every week and ask for *their* take on learning. We should embed such practice, promoting oracy. We should ask our students: 'What are you thinking and seeing when we teach you?' We should climb inside their skin. We should take note of what they say - and respond in our classroom practice.

Their different perspectives matter.

## **Postscript**

In a month of memorable moments .... a class of regular seniors harmoniously reading aloud a non-fiction text for three minutes; followed by a short competition involving three consecutive volunteers: how many words can each read aloud coherently and audibly in a minute? Quite brilliant.

Roy Blatchford's latest book is ['The A - Z of Great Classrooms'](#).