

ECAD6007- The Learner: Who am I Teaching?

1550540

Title: A critical evaluation and the identification of next teaching and learning steps focusing on a case study of an individual learner or a group of learners, based on an observed critical incident.

Introduction

The critical incident used in this investigation can be described as a point of significant interest when observing a classroom that presents the opportunity for deeper understanding through analysis and investigation. It is both a professional and personal reflection on teaching practices and theory with both positive and negative outcomes considered. The combination of critically informed decisions and flexibility is essential to implicating the most effective techniques and routines in a classroom needed to develop a teacher's practice (Tripp, 2012). The critical incident analysis also puts into practice Kolb's reflective cycle by implementing abstract conceptualisation; in the form of learning by the experience upon reflective observation (Kolb, 2014). The focus of this investigation is to determine whether mixed ability seating plans have a significant effect on the learning progression for each student regardless of their skill level and its effects as a classroom management strategy. It will consider both the implications and successes of heterogeneous grouping for learning through evaluating literature-based research.

The research focus will take into consideration the context of the subject that is being taught, which in this case study, is art. This will greatly impact the research and the influence that mixed ability grouping will have on the classroom due to the subject's specific nature, which will be looked into in greater detail throughout the critical analysis. Its practical applications and collaborative nature will have direct contrasts to learning and pedagogical methods to other subjects; therefore will determine the specific outcomes of a heterogeneous grouping approach. The observed incident that has determined the aim of this investigation took place in a Year Nine secondary art classroom. There were 28 students present, with the classroom almost at maximum capacity, and were seated in short rows from the front of the classroom to the back. It was noted that the majority of the higher ability learners were placed at the back of the room, along with the quieter students of the group. There were three students that would be considered as minorly disruptive, who were strategically placed around the room, sat next to higher ability learners. Throughout the whole class, students were sat next to peers who they would usually socialise with along with children who they were not in the same friendship group as. To focus on the critical incident happening here, the learning was clearly disrupted to those who sat near these three students for a variety of reasons including conflict with the teacher, conversation with surrounding peers and higher ability learners having to peer-assist. This had a great impact on the higher ability and quieter learners particularly as they were observed to be less likely to challenge these students on their behaviour; letting their learning-focused time suffer. It can also be considered that it is in fact not their responsibility to rectify this, which will be a research point throughout this evaluation.

Literature Review

There are many positives of a mixed ability class setup from a social and emotional skills viewpoint that were observed during the case study. By sitting next to children they would not usually sit with, they are learning about and accepting differences between peers who do not have similar backgrounds, skills levels and interests to them (Hemmons, 2022). The importance of learning these holistic skills within the classroom was reinforced in 2020, when the Welsh Government set out its '*Four Purposes*' with '*healthy and confident individuals*' at its core (Hwb, 2020). The introduction of cross curriculum approaches reinforces the need for discussion amongst peers and gaining a new perspective of life, which is possible with mixed ability grouping. Communication and interaction have been identified as one of the '*4 Areas of Need*' for '*emotional, social and behaviour development*' in children (GOV.UK, 2023). These needs were set out by the government to especially aid SEND learners, so would be particularly helpful implementing this within the classroom for ALN and lower ability learners. This approach does however conflict with a number of '*Pedagogical Principles*' set out by the Welsh government in the new curriculum for Wales in 2020. The first is that the teaching '*challenges all learners by encouraging them to recognise the importance of sustained effort in meeting expectations that are high but achievable for them*' and secondly that teaching '*encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning*' (Hwb, 2020). Based on research of mixed ability classes in Sweden in 2019, the majority of the class's higher ability students reported disliking mixed attainment due to behavioural problems in the class (Tereshchenko et al., 2019). Although the study took place in Sweden, this is the exact consequence of mixed ability classes that was observed in preparation for this investigation. The disruptive behaviour breaks the 'sustained, independent effort and concentration' needed to achieve effective learning acquisition set out by the Welsh government and in '*Rosenshine's 17 Principles of Effective Instruction*' (Teacher Toolkit, 2023).

One viewpoint of the downfalls of same ability grouping is that of Nick Burton; teacher and author for the '*Teacher Toolkit*' online. The online teaching blog is widely used and peer-accredited, whilst Burton writes from first hand experience within the classroom. His observations conclude that same ability grouping can have a severely negative effect on a student's confidence. He says that children are acutely aware of what group they belong to and, even with scaffolding in place, can show much lower levels of motivation and resilience than that of their higher ability peers (Burton, 2018). In order to combat this, children of lower abilities must still be challenged and stretched in a way that is relevant to their learning. Work that is too easy for them can even widen the gap of learning progression. On the other hand, work that is too difficult can result in students who are bored, present challenging behaviours and can lose all confidence. Burton's opinion is backed up by the research of Vygotsky and the Zone of Proximal Development. Learners retain information most effectively when working with a more knowledgeable other at a level slightly above their current achievement acquisition (Vygotsky, 1999). Burton's evaluation is also evidenced in the work of Dr Robert Bjorks' '*Desirable Difficulties*'. There is a fine balance of too much challenge and not enough. Too much a challenge will in fact slow down the learning, but an optimal challenge point will help gain understanding and long term memory of a topic (Durrington Research School, 2019). Behaviour

theorists, most notably, Vygotsky used a very similar theory using '*achievable rewards*' in their work regarding the ZPD to encourage learning progression.

The following section of the literature review evaluates heterogeneous grouping in the art classroom environment. Subject specific factors will have a profound effect on the impact mixed ability grouping will have on teaching and learning. It is important to analyse the students' expectations in contrast to core subjects where there are not the same '*rigid competencies*' (Carney, 2023). Art is not a set subject so is therefore automatically a heterogeneous subject. Students are expected to all start at the same point and build upon their own personal standards with the aid of differentiation for lower ability and ALN learners. This presents difficulties for the teacher in addressing each individual's learning styles. Although there is no official scientific research into the effective impact of this theory (Carroll, 2022), there is a universally accepted understanding that children learn in one of four ways according to educational theorist Neil Fleming's '*VARK Model of Student Learning*' (Teach Edx, 2023). For teachers to accommodate visual, auditory, reading and kinesthetic learning styles, the '*12 Pedagogical Principles*', and '*Rosenshine's 17 Principles of Effective Instruction*' to suit every learner as well as differentiate for mixed abilities is an almost impossible task. WISE (Wellbeing in Secondary Education) conducted a study of the mental health of teachers in 2022 and concluded that they had more reported cases of '*work-related anxiety, stress and depression than any other UK profession*' (Evans et al., 2022). Among the top causes for these results was the experience of unmanageable workloads. On the contrary, a mixed ability classroom could help implement the '*Ask Three Before Me*' strategy. By seating learners next to someone of higher ability than them, they are able to learn from other pupils before reaching out to the teacher, therefore reducing their workload (Heick, 2021). It is argued that this learning strategy in fact '*neglects the gifted students*' by making them responsible for the learning of others, which presents the ethical challenges within inclusive education of mixed ability classes (Tirri and Laine, 2017).

Due to the course content and varied expectations, mixed ability grouping is often used as a behaviour management tool within the art classroom, as seen here in the case study. Classroom and behaviour management can have a profound impact on the class' learning progression when implementing the most effective strategies (Walters, 2017). As previously mentioned in the research of Vygotsky and Dr Robert Bjork, students may become frustrated, unco-operative and disruptive when not working at their '*desirable difficulty*' (Durrington Research School, 2019). The higher ability students would model desirable behaviour for the lower ability and more disruptive pupils to follow. In 1988, theoretical psychologist Dr Albert Bandura conducted research that confirmed the way in which children imitated and were influenced by modelled social behaviour (Evans and Bandura, 1988). Although this source dates all the way back to 1988, this theory is still applied in classroom management strategies today and was clearly visible during the first-hand classroom observation to mitigate potentially disruptive behaviour.

Case Study

The observation took place in a Year 9 KS3 art lesson, with a focus on designing typography and branding for packaging. Pupils were expected to use typography that they had already developed in a previous lesson and use skillful colour, shade and tone along with correct perspective to achieve a professional outcome. There were 28 children in the classroom with 3 children considered the disruptive pupils in this critical incident. For anonymous case study purposes they will be named *Child A, B and C*. At the start of the lesson, children were arranged so that most of them were sitting near a friend. There were a variety of abilities within these friendship groups with no set pattern to the seating plan. However, the point of interest for this critical evaluation is that only the disruptive pupils were arranged and strategically moved in terms of mixed ability levels. This became the research focus into the question of whether this is an effective way to encourage learning for both the higher and lower ability pupils within the class that were sat next to each other.

Child A was originally sat with their friends, where the overall ability grouping was on the low side. There was no aggravation to lead up to the disruptive behaviour, with the child being overly chatty and inappropriate from the start of the lesson. *Child A* was then moved from the friendship group to the end of a row next to a quieter pupil who was working independently and productively. This child was moved as a form of negative punishment. The teacher used an operant conditioning technique developed by B.F Skinner in order to decrease behaviour (Boorla, 2013). After some conflict and reluctance, the child moved seats and began working much more quietly and calmly for the rest of the one-hour lesson. It was observed that *Child A* began asking certain design questions to the high ability learner that they were moved next to. There are both positive and negative consequences of this particular incident. The interaction did result in a higher standard of work by *Child A* which illustrates that the use of '*encouraging collaboration*' set out by the Welsh Government is an effective pedagogical principle for learning within the classroom (Hwb, 2020). Although *Child A* was encouraged to work within their Zone of Proximal Development, the teacher should have been the 'more knowledgeable other' here and not a peer. The high ability learner's sustained concentration was neglected and lost when they had to take on the 'more knowledgeable other' role. The incident proved beneficial for *Child A* but detrimental to the high ability learner's education; therefore leaving the possibility open of the gifted student to in fact be left behind (Shirvani, 2009).

Child B had already been seated next to a high ability learner previous to the observation. The consequence here was that the high ability learner was distracted by *Child B* and was influenced into chatting to surrounding students by the negative behaviour. Rosenshine's Principle of Effective Instruction, to '*require and monitor independent practice*' was lost here (Teacher Toolkit, 2023), resulting in diminished learning. This illustrates that Bandura's theory of social behaviour influence can work both *in* favour and *not in* favour of classroom management (Evans and Bandura, 1988). The result was opposite with *Child A*'s move, with a positive effect on the low ability learner.

Child C had already been seated at a desk on their own in front of the teacher. It was later explained that this child had been consistently disruptive and inappropriate in lessons. *Child C*'s work would be classed as low ability and produced little to no work during the hour. They did not receive any social scaffolding like *Child A* had had from a higher ability learner, so

it is possible that the consequence of this was dissociation from the required task. Although this incident was requiring the student to take responsibility for their own learning, it triggered a 'fight or flight' stress response (Calm Classroom, 2022). Having a support system meeting the basic needs within 'Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs' with friendship, support connection and collaboration may help *Child C* succeed (Pichere and Cadiat, 2015).

In terms of a whole class observation, much of the literature review revealed that encouraging communication and accepting different abilities other than your own can help foster 'healthy, confident individuals' but this did not happen in this classroom (Hwb, 2020). Apart from the chatter between *Child B* and surrounding students, mixed ability learners kept to themselves and did not interact much with learners of different abilities and friendship groups. The consequence of this is that not much collaboration took place within the classroom. This worked in favour of the self-directed task but not for students who could have benefited from social scaffolding.

Teaching and Learning Methods

The key observations from the literature review present both successes and downfalls of a heterogeneous class approach. Mixed ability collaboration is essential to growing in emotional intelligence by expanding social and understanding skills of other learners (Goleman, 2012). Therefore, it is a teaching and learning method that will be brought forward onto my own teaching placement. My teaching philosophy and goal is to create a safe, inclusive environment where every child can recognise their potential and thrive within the classroom. The creation of a safe learning environment can help increase confidence in abilities in order to set the stage for effective learning (Clapper, 2010). The new Curriculum for Wales has a clear, holistic approach to learning in the hope to develop students who are '*healthy, confident individuals*' (Hwb, 2020), and implementing this classroom approach works towards that goal. All teachers have a responsibility for inclusivity for ALN learners within the classroom (GOV.WALES, 2009), and a mixed ability grouping approach provides lower ability and ALN learners with peer and teacher scaffolding as well as differentiation. This added layer of support will help adopt an inclusive and effective learning environment for all learners.

Through literature evaluation, mixed ability grouping can have both positive and negative effects on behaviour. Following on from Dr. Bandura's research of social influence, the influence can have positive and negative influences for both higher and lower ability learners (Evans and Bandura, 1988). These varying consequences were present in the case study with both *Child A* and *Child B*. Taking into account both of these possible outcomes, I will still adopt this classroom management strategy and take mixed ability grouping forward into my own practice. The negative 'chatting' influenced by *Child B* can also be combated with other behaviour management strategies such as teacher presence within the space, presenting choices, rewards and sanctions and setting clear expectations from the start of PTE 1 (Cowley, 2010). Throughout the observations that took place, mixed ability grouping is still a widely used strategy in most classrooms today which proves the real life positive impact it can have.

It is important to consider that, as previously discussed, skill levels in the art classroom will vary widely and will therefore be a naturally heterogeneous setting. Pairing friendship groups that will have varying degrees of ability is one possible method of creating a safe, welcoming atmosphere within the classroom where children will feel confident to explore creative techniques, concepts and processes. The feelings of inclusion by peers can help prevent disengagement, anger and isolation that contribute to the loss of learning (McGillicuddy et al., 2021). The classroom layout was in rows during the case study observation, which consequently left *Child C* isolated with no peer scaffolding or encouragement. As evidenced by McGillicuddy et al. 2021, this child became disengaged with the task due to a negative psychological impact on the child. It is also possible that the behaviour could have been worse sat next to peers, but there is no example of this during the observation. There was an opportunity for the student to feel supported by peers and further differentiation within the work set, which is something that I will take forward as a point of consideration of importance for placement.

Research suggests that using a classroom layout of small groups will assist in group work, engage in effective questioning and allow students to get to know each other and form meaningful relationships with peers. It is also more beneficial than having larger groups where

noise levels and attention could become counterproductive (Book Widgets, 2020). However, a study on the effects of classroom layouts for ALN learners found that 'on-task behaviour increased from 35% to 70%' and that disruptive behaviours were three times less likely to occur when working in rows or individually (InnerDrive, 2023). The conflicting research renders the solution difficult to reach, but I would consider the needs of my particular class, the specific tasks given during the lesson and its proportion of ALN learners when making future decisions. I would like to encourage more of a collaborative approach in my art lessons where grouping would be most beneficial, but will make sure there are rows of seating options available for learners who would work best independently. Considering the research into social and emotional development in mixed groups, a group set up would be particularly beneficial for Year 7 classes to help with transition or any new starters within the school year.

Another key observation is that mixed ability class grouping could present an increased workload in resource planning and differentiation. This teaching and learning method should be applied to every class automatically, but is heightened when facing a class with even more varying skill levels than a non-heterogeneous classroom. Going forward, it is important to consider the implications that excessive workload can have on a teacher's mental health and research ways in which differentiation can be achieved without adding on too much workload during the planning stages (Evans et al., 2022). Jim Smith worked as Assistant Headteacher and has written a number of peer-reviewed books focusing on Continued Professional Development and the easiest ways to implement these strategies. Smith suggests that the classroom layout and seating plan is a form of differentiation in itself. Allowing learners to choose whether they sit in groups or rows gives them the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning and to become independent thinkers (Smith, 2010). As we know from the new Curriculum for Wales, this has been set out as an essential Pedagogical Principle for effective learning progression by '*encouraging learners to take increasing responsibility for their own learning*' (Hwb, 2020).

Discussion

My own philosophy of education lies between '*perennialism*' and '*progressivism*'. The creative arts rely on knowledgeable modelling of the teacher to demonstrate and inspire particular techniques and processes. However, it is essential to allow the possibility of problem solving, abstract questioning and real world application of concepts in order for students to learn about and intelligently interpret the world around them using the arts. My role as the teacher is to share my academic knowledge to facilitate freedom to explore and experiment, where learning is process based with flexible outcomes within the success criteria to accommodate every learner and their abilities and skill levels. Bloom's Taxonomy model demonstrates that creative and analytical thinking is essential to excel cognitively and socially (Armstrong, 2023). This philosophy of teaching follows the Constructivist approach of Piaget, who theorised that learning is a result of the exploration and interaction of the world around us, and that we must grow and develop cognitively before productive learning can occur.

With this philosophy of education in mind and the literature reviewed in this investigation, I have made certain informed pedagogical choices to carry forward into my own teaching practice. My choice would be to initially allow small friendship groups to be seated together in order to adopt a safe and comfortable learning environment. This is supported by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory. In order to thrive both socially and academically, children must be supported through friends in their micro systems, and extended friends and teachers in their mesosystems. It is through healthily fueling a child's development that they can start to learn effectively (Ryan, 2001). The consequence of this seating plan would result in an extremely mixed ability layout of the class which would require many differentiation techniques. From my research, simple solutions such as high and low order questioning directed at different abilities can be used to address this (Smith, 2010). Educator Dylan William suggests that it is important to use these techniques to include all learners, as obligatory participation can help lessen the attainment gap within classrooms (Youtube, 2015). After considering both sides of the argument for a group layout with mixed abilities, this would be the best approach for my teaching philosophy and goals when on placement. By adopting a group environment, it reduces the opportunity for children to feel isolated, frustrated and alone when struggling with a concept (McGillicuddy et al., 2021). The consequences of this approach not being used was presented by *Child C* in the case study. *Child A* was moved near a high ability student, and started working productively after receiving support and positive behaviour influence (Evans and Bandura, 1988).

Through critical incident observations of the disruptions caused by *Child B*, I see the possible implications of these strategies. Having lower ability learners placed around the room may cause distractions for the high ability learners and those who prefer to work quietly and independently. The research has already addressed that inclusive learning should not be at the detriment to high ability learners, as that then becomes a non-inclusive classroom (Tirri and Laine, 2017). This is something to be aware of during placement and illustrates the importance of having clear and functional behaviour management strategies in place from the outset. In a study completed earlier this year, ALN learners specifically were found to have significantly higher levels of work focus when sat in rows with same ability learners opposed to mixed ability groups (InnerDrive, 2023). However, this study focused on independent study tasks and does

not factor in the collaborative approach that I would like to adopt in my own teaching practice. I will address each argument of the discussion by having a small section of the room set out in rows, one singular small row, or a quieter area of the classroom setup where children can learn independently if better suits their learning styles and additional learning needs, as I have a responsibility to do so and would want every child to access learning to the best of their abilities (GOV.WALES, 2009).

Key considerations for my own class whilst out on placement would include awareness of any ALN learners and how they work best. It is important to have the correct environment and differentiation options available to aid their learning in the most productive and effective way possible. Other observations would include close relationships and support systems within peer and class groups, children who are especially shy or reserved, and students who have the potential to become minorly disruptive so I can informatively assess where to place them within the room in terms of social groups and ability levels as a form of classroom management and learning progression.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The strategies outlined in this investigation for future personal teaching practice particularly cover the '*Pedagogy*' and '*Collaboration*' standards for teaching and leadership set out by the Welsh Government. In terms of Pedagogy, the purpose of the choices made is to '*create and sustain the conditions to realise the four purposes for learning and achieve the best for them in terms of standards, well-being and progress*'. The professional standard of '*collaboration*' is covered by the use of collaboration and abstract thinking through effective and appropriate questioning to '*build a climate of mutual support in which effective collaboration flourishes within and beyond the school*'.

From observation of the case study, there was a real life example taking place of progressed learning through mixed ability grouping for *Child B*. This was achievable through peer support and scaffolding. Going forward, collaboration and group work of mixed abilities would be beneficial for ALN and lower ability learners to progress socially, academically, and cognitively with the aid of peer support and differentiation. It was also an effective strategy for behaviour management as the disruptive behaviour was significantly reduced when sat next to a learner modelling desirable behaviour. Positive social influence has been proven to work in this observation. Through investigating the observed critical incident, my knowledge and understanding of child development and how this impacts knowledge and learning has greatly improved and is something I take great interest in when considering professional development and my own future practice. It has encouraged me to really evaluate *why* we make the pedagogical choices we do as teachers and how this has influenced the learners both in the classroom and even before they have set foot in the room. It highlights the importance of pastoral and well-being awareness and the huge impact it can have on a child's education, so it is therefore imperative that I pay attention to *who* I am teaching on an individual level.

As a recommendation, it would be highly advantageous for placement students to have information regarding ALN learners, class abilities and close pupil relationships prior to embarking on lesson planning so that key pedagogical choices can be made with these factors in mind. This would ensure maximum impact early on in the placement by excelling the time it takes for a student teacher to learn and accommodate all of the students' needs and learning styles into lesson plans.

Appendices

Appendix A

Date, time and year group:

Year 10 Set 1 class. Tuesday 10th October. 14:15 pm.

Where and when:

Literature. High ability class with a questioning portion of the lesson.

What happened:

Students had just come in from lunch for the last lesson of the day. There was a fatigued atmosphere amongst the students in the classroom. The class layout was in rows facing the board. Once the teacher had started a questioning exercise about a piece of text, there was a noticeable lack of engagement. There were the same pupils repeatedly with their hands up, whilst the teacher encouraged different students to answer questions.

Areas of possible exploration:

- What are the most effective questioning strategies to encourage engagement
- Does the time of the day or layout of lessons greatly impact participation and engagement of students
- Most effective, informal 'assessment of learning' techniques to adopt in the classroom
- Are there alternative call and response techniques that can be used for effective learning
- Is the work level too difficult or too easy

Additional Notes:

- Research into 'desirable difficulties' and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development
- Quiet and shy characters in the room, what strategies can be used to include them in the learning
- The Classroom Experiment-choosing who answers questions in creative ways

Appendix B

Date, time and year group:

Year 8 Mixed Ability class. Tuesday 10th October. 12.00 pm.

Where and when:

Mixed ability maths class. Small class of 16 pupils.

What happened:

The more advanced, high ability learners were sat at the back of the classroom and became increasingly less engaged throughout the lesson. However, they were working quietly compared to others towards the front of the classroom. The whiteboard technique was used to assess the pupil's understanding of the topic, where the high ability learner's answers were consistently correct. The back of the room also had much quieter students compared to the front of the class. There was one particular student with their hand up for a considerable amount of time. This was missed by the teacher who was busy demonstrating the equation and assessing work shown on whiteboards. The student then had to ask the peer next to them for help. Although peer scaffolding and support was available, we are unsure if the information they were told was correct or not.

Areas of possible exploration:

- Work too easy for high ability learners
- Teaching resilience and strength in challenge
- Are rows the most effective set up for learning
- Should high ability learners in fact be at the front of the classroom rather than the back
- How much does the seating plan matter
- Should the class be mixed ability or should maths classes be set much earlier than Year 9/GCSE
- Are peers responsible for class's learning

Additional Notes:

- This was a much smaller, calmer class than most others observed
- Does class size affect learning or seating plan
- Layout- pupil/teacher safety, mixed abilities, teacher circulation and learner visibility, interaction, collaboration and peer assessment.
- How would these considerations work in a creative environment and does it aid learning and classroom behaviour management.

Appendix C

Date, time and year group:

Year 9. Tuesday 10th October. 10:20 am.

Where and when:

Mixed ability art class. Children sat in rows. 28 pupils all together, quite a full classroom.

What happened:

There were three disruptive pupils within the class. One of them was sat on their own from the beginning of the lesson. I assume they had been disruptive in previous lessons for this to be the case. The students had been allowed to sit in friendship groups so class was naturally mixed ability. Quieter students sat at the back. One child was moved near a higher ability, quiet pupil. After some argument did actually got on with work after the move. The pupil was asking other pupils for help which could be seen as positive (peer support) and negative (distraction). The third pupil was moved to sit within a group of quieter students but these children did get distracted and started chatting also after the disruptive child was moved.

Areas of possible exploration:

- Effect of mixed ability grouping for behaviour management and learning progression
- Are groups or rows layout best, assess pros and cons
- Behaviour management strategies, specifically for the art classroom
- The importance of group work, peer collaboration and peer scaffolding

Additional Notes:

- Lesson was before lunch, are children relatively calmer in the morning or afternoon
- How important is mixed ability grouping for behaviour management and learning
- Explore how the context of the creative classroom can change theories and approaches to teaching and learning when it comes to grouping and seating plans

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