

Developing Effective Classroom Management: A Critical Reflection on Theory, Research and Professional Practice.

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Effective classroom management is widely recognised as one of the most significant factors influencing pupil engagement, wellbeing and academic success. Although often associated with maintaining order and addressing challenging behaviour, classroom management encompasses a broad range of practices including the establishment of positive relationships, clear expectations, consistent routines and supportive learning environments. These elements contribute to the development of positive behaviour for learning, enabling pupils to participate fully in the educational experiences and achieve potential (Wang. Et.al 2025).

Theoretical perspectives have shaped understanding of how effective classroom management can be achieved. Maslow's hierarchy of needs remains particularly relevant to classroom practice, suggesting that pupils social, emotional and physiological needs must be met before higher levels of learning can occur (Welsh Government 2024).

Within Wales, these principles align closely with the Curriculum for Wales, which places wellbeing, inclusion and positive relationships at the heart of effective learning. The curriculum for Wales emphasises wellbeing, positive relationships and inclusive learning environments (Welsh Government 2022). Consequently effective classroom management extends beyond behaviour control and becomes a key mechanism through which the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales can be realised (Welsh Government 2024).

This essay will aim to critically evaluate the theoretical foundations of classroom management and examine how classroom environments , routines and teacher-pupil relationships influence behaviour for learning. Drawing upon educational theory, contemporary research, policy and professional practice. It will argue that effective classroom management requires a flexible and reflective approach that combines elements of multiple theoretical perspectives to meet the diverse needs of all learners.

Understanding the theoretical foundations of classroom management is essential for evaluating why particular strategies are effective in promoting positive behaviour for learning. Educational theories provide different explanations for how pupils learn, behave and engage within the classroom. While behaviourist, cognitive and humanistic theories offer distinct

perspectives. Contemporary research suggests that effective classroom management is most successful when teachers draw upon elements of all three approaches to meet the diverse needs of learners (Hill and Papay 2022).

Behaviourism focuses on observable behaviour and how it can be influenced through reinforcement and consequences. Skinner (1953) argued that behaviour is shaped by environmental stimuli and that positive reinforcement increases the likelihood of desired behaviours being repeated. Within educational settings, behaviourist principles are evident through the use of praise, reward systems and clear expectations. Such approaches can help establish consistency and predictability, which Welsh Government (2025) identifies as important factors in promoting positive behaviour and reducing disruption. However, behaviourism has been criticised for placing emphasis on external rewards and sanctions, potentially encouraging compliance rather than fostering intrinsic motivation and self-regulation (Hoy & Usher 2025).

In contrast, cognitive theory focuses on the mental processes that influence learning and behaviour. Piaget (1952) argued that children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment, suggesting that behaviour is closely linked to understanding and engagement. From this perspective, classroom management involves creating learning experiences that are appropriately challenging and meaningful. When pupils understand learning objectives and can access the curriculum successfully, they are more likely to remain engaged and display positive learning behaviours. The curriculum for Wales reflects these principles through its emphasis on learner agency, progression and active participation in learning (Welsh Government, 2022). Nevertheless, critics argue that cognitive theory provides limited guidance for responding to immediate behavioural difficulties within the classroom (Usher & Ford, 2022).

Humanistic theory offers a more learner-centred approach by prioritising emotional wellbeing and personal development. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs suggests that learners must have their physiological, safety, belonging and esteem needs met before they can achieve their full potential. Similarly, Rogers (1969) emphasised the importance of empathy, respect and positive relationships in supporting learning. These principles are particularly relevant within contemporary Welsh education, where wellbeing and inclusion are central to the Curriculum for Wales (2025). Positive teacher-pupil relationships can foster a sense of belonging and psychological safety, encouraging engagement and reducing behavioural difficulties.

However, while humanistic approaches can strengthen relationships and wellbeing, they may be challenging to implement consistently in larger or more complex classroom environments (Kumari, 2024).

Although behaviourist, cognitive and humanistic theories differ in their explanations of learning and behaviour, each contributes valuable insights into effective classroom management. Behaviourist approaches support the development of clear expectations and routines, cognitive theory highlights the importance of meaningful engagement, and humanistic perspectives emphasise relationships and wellbeing. Therefore, effective classroom management is unlikely to be achieved through a single theoretical approach (Welsh Government 2025). Instead, teachers must adopt a flexible and reflective practice that integrates elements of multiple theories to create positive, inclusive and supportive learning environments that meet the diverse needs of all learners.

Classroom management is underpinned by a range of psychological theories that seek to explain how learners behave and how positive learning environments can be established. Among the most influential are behaviourist, cognitive and humanistic theories. Whilst each offers valuable insights, no single theory fully addresses the complexity of modern classrooms. Consequently, effective classroom management often involves drawing upon elements of multiple approaches.

Behaviourism focuses on the idea that behaviour is learned through interactions with the environment. Skinner (1953) argued that behaviour can be shaped through reinforcement, with positive reinforcement increasing the likelihood that desirable behaviours will be repeated. Within the classroom, this may include praise, reward systems and recognition of positive behaviour. Such approaches can help establish clear expectations and routines, which Welsh Government guidance identifies as important for promoting positive behaviour and reducing disruption (Welsh Government 2025 & 2022). However, critics argue that behaviourist approaches can encourage compliance rather than genuine engagement and may fail to address the underlying reasons for behaviour (Peat, Fikfak, and Van der Zee, 2022).

In contrast, cognitive theory focuses on how learners think, process information and make sense of their experiences. Piaget (1952) proposed that children actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment. From a classroom management perspective, this suggests that behaviour is influenced by learners' understanding, motivation and ability to engage with learning tasks. The Curriculum for Wales reflects cognitive principles through its

emphasis on active learning, learner agency and the development of metacognitive skills. Effective classroom management therefore requires teachers to provide engaging and appropriately challenging learning experiences that support pupils' cognitive development (HWB 2023).

Humanistic theory places learner's emotional and social needs at the centre of education. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs suggests that learners must feel safe, valued and a sense of belonging before they can achieve their full potential. Similarly, Rogers (1969) emphasised the importance of positive relationships, empathy and unconditional positive regard. These ideas are particularly relevant in Wales, where current guidance highlights the importance of relationships, wellbeing and inclusive learning environments in promoting positive learning behaviours (Welsh Government 2025 & HWB 2023). Humanistic approaches can be highly effective in supporting learner wellbeing and inclusion, particularly for pupils with additional learning needs (ALN). However, they may provide less practical guidance for managing persistent disruptive behaviour (Peat, Fikfak, and Van der Zee, 2022).

Although each theory contributes to understanding classroom management, contemporary research suggests that the most effective practice combines aspects of all three approaches. Estyn (2025) found that successful schools maintain high expectations and consistent routines while also prioritising positive relationships, wellbeing and inclusive practice. Similarly, Welsh Government guidance emphasises proactive, relationship-based approaches alongside clear structures and expectations (Welsh Government 2025). Therefore, effective classroom management is best understood as a flexible and reflective process that integrates behaviourist, cognitive and humanistic principles to meet the diverse needs of learners.

While these theoretical perspectives provide valuable insight into effective classroom management, their true value lies in how they inform day-to-day practice. Reflective practice enables educators to evaluate the effectiveness of classroom management strategies and consider how theory can be applied to meet the needs of diverse learners in real educational settings.

Gibbs' (1998) reflective cycle provides a useful framework for evaluating professional practice and identifying areas for development. This reflection focuses on a maths intervention session delivered by the writer to a small group of pupils with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), during which low-level disruption and disengagement affected the flow of learning.

During a numeracy intervention, several pupils entered the session unsettled following break time. Despite the learning objectives being clearly explained, some pupils engaged in off-task conversations, while others were reluctant to begin the activity. As a result, learning time was lost and the pace of the session slowed. To address this, the writer used verbal praise to reinforce positive behaviour, reminded pupils of the established expectations and adapted the task to increase participation.

Several classroom management strategies were evident within this situation. The use of praise and positive reinforcement reflects Skinner's (1953) behaviourist theory, which suggests that desired behaviours are more likely to be repeated when positively reinforced. The writer also modelled appropriate learning behaviours, aligning with Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory, which emphasises the importance of observation and imitation.

Furthermore, the decision to adapt the activity recognised the importance of learner engagement highlighted by cognitive theory (Piaget, 1952). Some pupils appeared disengaged because the task did not initially meet their learning needs. By providing additional support and breaking the task into smaller steps, the writer increased accessibility and participation.

The writer also prioritised positive relationships throughout the session. Rather than focusing solely on sanctions. Encouragement and supportive dialogue were used to maintain pupils' self-esteem. This reflects Maslow's (1943) view that learners must feel safe, valued and respected before they can engage effectively and also aligns with Welsh Government (2025) guidance, which promotes relationship-based approaches to behaviour support.

The use of praise and positive relationships successfully re-engaged most pupils and reduced disruption. The intervention was completed and pupils demonstrated improved participation by the end of the session. However, the initial disruption suggested that routines following break time were not sufficiently embedded. In addition, reliance on reactive strategies meant that learning time was lost before behaviour improved.

This experience reinforced the importance of combining behaviourist, cognitive and humanistic approaches rather than relying on a single strategy. Research suggests that consistent routines, engaging learning experiences and positive relationships work together to support behaviour for learning (Marzano, 2003). The incident also highlighted how pupil behaviour can be influenced by emotional, social and learning needs rather than deliberate non-compliance.

In future interventions, the writer will strengthen entry routines and provide a short settling activity to support transition into learning. Greater emphasis will also be placed on adapting tasks to meet individual learner needs from the outset. In line with Curriculum for Wales' principles, the writer will continue to prioritise positive relationships and learner wellbeing while maintaining clear expectations and consistency. This should further promote engagement, minimise disruption and create a more effective learning environment.

In conclusion effective classroom management is a complex and multifaceted aspect of teaching that extends beyond simply responding to challenging behaviour. This essay has demonstrated that successful classroom management is underpinned by a combination of behaviourist, cognitive and humanistic theories, each of which offers valuable insights into how positive learning environments can be created. Whilst behaviourist approaches emphasise the importance of reinforcement and clear expectations, cognitive and humanistic perspectives highlight the significance of learner engagement, wellbeing and positive relationships.

The discussion has shown that classroom environment, routines and teacher-pupil relationships play a crucial role in promoting behaviour for learning. Consistent routines and structured environments can reduce disruption and increase engagement, while positive relationships foster a sense of belonging, trust and respect. However, contemporary classrooms are increasingly diverse, requiring educators to adapt their approaches to meet the needs of all learners, including those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

The reflective analysis further demonstrates that effective classroom management is most successful when theory is applied flexibly within professional practice. In line with the Curriculum for Wales and current Welsh Government guidance, behaviour support is increasingly viewed as a proactive, inclusive and relationship-based process. Therefore, effective classroom management requires a reflective approach that integrates theory, research and professional experience to create positive and supportive learning environments for all pupils.

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