

## Why do classrooms look different today?

by Lisa Burman

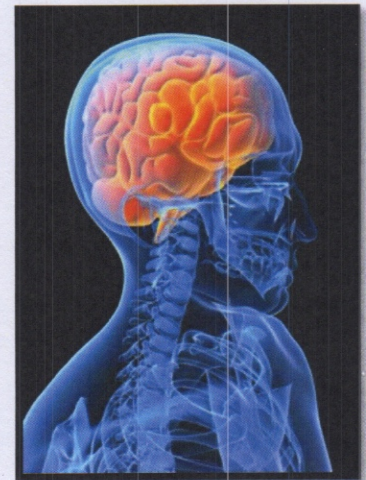
Many parents are surprised when they enter their child's classroom these days. Gone are the rows of desks facing the front of the room. Gone is the teacher's desk at the front. Gone is the blackboard nearby. All the things that made classrooms familiar to us as adults have been replaced by furniture, technology and room arrangements that often bear little resemblance to the classrooms we knew as children. Why?

To understand why educators world-wide are changing the look of their classrooms, we need to understand how different teaching is to when we were ten years old. Teaching (or pedagogy as it is often referred to in international studies) has undergone a transformation since the 1970s and '80s. This has sometimes been a gradual change, and at other times, it needed to be a quick response to a fast changing world and in particular to the influence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in our lives.

Why has teaching changed?

Parents often wonder "Why did teaching change? Did it have to change? I was taught this other way and I did all right." Teaching *has* needed to change in response to many factors including the following:

- **Neuroscience** – we now know a lot more about learning from brain research. There is still so much that is unknown, but new technologies and research have revealed new information about how the brain works and teaching must respond to this. Would you feel comfortable going to a dentist, or surgeon or accountant who was still using the tools and methods of the 1950s or '60s? These professions have responded to new information and new technologies and education also needs to do so. To not change in light of what we know about the brain is to do a dis-service to our young people as learners. Some insights that particularly impact on the way education chooses to teach include:
  - The brain more efficiently retrieves information if it is learnt in a meaningful context (eg: learning sight words in a big book rather than on flash cards only, connecting learning to real life situations like researching the local creek ecosystem).
  - IQ tests are a limited way of seeing intelligence. It is now accepted that there are many ways to be and to show intelligence, such as through visual art, language, sport, dance and music. These all use brain power in intelligent ways.
- Today's children are "**digital natives**" – everyone knows the impact that technologies (in particular ICTs) have on our daily life. Children today are "digital natives" because they have always lived a life that involves technologies. We grew up always knowing the technologies of the telephone, or the electric iron, or the electric refrigerator. Our grandparents might not have always known these





technologies, but they knew the technologies of the copper for washing, or the icebox for keeping food. Teachers now need to understand this new world of the 'digital natives' even though many did not grow up in it. They need to understand that this is the reality of the children they teach, and that they must adapt their teaching so that it is relevant and meaningful for a digital world, not for an old world view.

- **The ever-changing world** – as the saying goes, “The only thing that is constant is change.” Computers and other technologies are out of date after a year (or less!). Knowledge we once took for granted changes due to new research or changing borders in a world of conflict. Researchers and thinkers who specialise in “Futures” all agree that for today’s children to be successful in their future they need to be:
  - Adaptable and flexible – able to deal emotionally, intellectually and physically with change in all its forms.
  - A team player – able to collaborate, negotiate, compromise and work towards a common goal within a group.
  - An effective communicator – able to communicate in many “multi-literacies” (that is, written, verbal, electronic, visual and non verbal forms of communication).
  - A life-long learner – because much of what we know will change, it is essential to have skills and dispositions for learning for life. Always being open and able to learn means being curious, asking questions, knowing how to research for answers, being able to determine what is important and relevant, persisting when things are difficult, problem solving, reflecting, evaluating and setting personal goals.

#### **What kind of a physical learning environment will support this kind of learning?**

To develop adaptable and flexible thinkers, who can successfully work independently and in groups, the physical environment needs to also be flexible. Rows of desks facing the front do not support teaching children how to work with each other. Heavy tables that take up most of the space do not support the kind of teaching that changes and adapts to children’s needs. If there is only one way to set up a room, it will offer very limited ways for teachers and learners to work and learn together. Today’s children need (and have a right to) learning spaces that offer many possibilities for how they will work and learn.

When teachers understand that each brain is unique, and that each child has a unique learning style, they know that they need to offer a variety of ways to learn. They know that some children will learn better when they can move, even if it is being able to wriggle as they are sitting on the floor reading a book with a partner. Their brains make connections when they can move, but feel restricted and frustrated when they are made to sit still or to stay in chairs for too long. Smart teachers understand that these children do need to develop the ability to sit still in certain situations and will also provide opportunities to learn this. It is important to stretch out of our preferred learning style at times, but it is not effective for learning to always have to learn outside this zone of comfort.

If a teacher requires children to always sit at desks on chairs, many learners will be forced to work outside their preferred learning style or comfort zone for most of the day. This makes any learning extremely difficult for them. When these children are given the opportunity to sometimes sit on the



floor, or on a stool rather than a chair, or to stand at a counter, they can relax in their learning comfort zone and therefore better concentrate on the task at hand.



A flexible learning environment does not require every child to have their own desk where they will always sit. This is very 'old world' thinking about learning. Actually, this idea can be traced back to when schools were first designed in the Industrial Revolution, when the main purpose for schools was to educate future factory workers who had to learn to stay in one place for hours on end and only follow instructions. Even factories today are not like that anymore!

A smart teacher will organise the learning space so that there is room for independent and small group work at different times during the day. The flexible classroom also has space where the whole group can meet and develop a community of learners who live and learn together. This meeting space will also offer room for partners or small groups to gather around large sheets of paper, a digital white board, or with tablets, notebooks, laptops or clipboards when working collaboratively.

As digital natives, today's children need to use the tools they know and understand to be the most effective for learning and communication. This short article does not have space to give this justice, but suffice to say a flexible classroom may not be a 'room' at all but a series of spaces where children have access to various technologies and experts who can help them with their learning. Some of these spaces may in fact be cyber-spaces where children are connected to experts or other learners on the other side of the world.

### **Institutional or Flexible?**

We no longer live in the Industrial Age where most people had the same job for a lifetime, and where schools were first designed to develop good factory workers. However, schools have been relatively slow to respond to this reality. We've known for years that we are in a different world – "The Information Age" as it is called – but schools too often still look like the factories they were first built for with individual rooms and rows of desks. These old world classrooms are referred to as "institutional" spaces.

*"Total institutions control space, time, privacy, property, relationships, activities and tend to treat people uniformly as subservient, in the name of health and safety."* Greenman, 2005

Is this what you want for your child?



In order to change schools from “institutional” to “flexible” learning environments, many teachers work hard to make their spaces more homelike with soft colours, textures, plants, and lighting. Rather than set up the space solely around desks as the main focus, they set up tables in different parts of the room, giving the room a softness as opposed to a harshness when desks are the focal point.

When we feel comfortable in a space we are more likely to take risks. We feel safe and secure to be ourselves and to be a deep learner. Taking risks is something teachers care a lot about because they know that this is when true and deep learning happens. Without taking risks, the child might just ‘go through the motions’ to please their teacher and their parents, but not really learn anything new or develop mastery over new skills.

Flexible learning spaces feel different when you walk into them. You feel like you’d like to spend time there. Even without the children present, you can imagine many different types of learning happening. Some children will be at tables, and some on the floor. At different times of the day the teacher might gather the whole group together, but for most of the day, the children are active in their learning. The teacher is also active in the teaching role – with individuals and with small groups – modelling, showing, questioning, assessing and guiding. This environment promotes and develops deep engaged learning, flexible thinking and learning to learn for life.

### **Continue the Conversation**

Is your interest sparked? Are you curious about the decisions made by your child’s teacher? It is always best to make a time to talk directly with your child’s teacher/s. They are in the best position to explain their ideas and their thinking. Remember too that they live in the learning space with a group of learners every day. You might only get a glimpse of how the space is used when you drop off or pick up your child.

Avoid asking your child’s teacher about this when his/her attention should be with the children or getting ready for the day though. Ask if there is a good time that you could come back to school or to speak over the phone. You might also find it useful to begin the conversation with a sense of curiosity rather than a tone of accusation or suspicion. Try something like “I’ve just read an interesting article about how classrooms have changed and I’d love to find out more about how my child is using the learning environment. When is a good time to talk?”

*Reference: Greenman, J “Caring Spaces, Learning Places – Children’s Environments that Work”, Exchange Press: Redmond, 2005*



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