

“WE BELIEVE THE FUTURE DOES NOT FIT THE CLASSROOMS OF THE PAST.”

Claire Sweeney is the Head of Junior School at Kelvinside Academy in Glasgow. Here she explains why she ripped up the rulebook of traditional classroom design to create an environment that focuses on play, relationships and actively engaging all learners.

If your child travelled back in time to a school in the Victorian era, their experience wouldn't be radically different from school today. The pattern of compliant children in long rows receiving information with the teacher deciding what, when and how things are learned hasn't changed. While the world has advanced considerably in every other way, our schools have a way to go to catch up.

If your child visited a school in Finland or Sweden, their experience would be radically different because of the strong pedagogical approach, which focuses on play and relationships, and allows for learning to take place through social interaction.

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Designing for interactivity

The way classrooms typically operate is a disservice to young people. Countless cognitive behaviour studies have shown how much better children learn when they are interacting, involved in the process, being appropriately challenged and having fun. We need to implement what has been learned from these studies and from our Scandinavian neighbours to help children develop the social and cognitive skills and competences they need to flourish in society, while their brain plasticity is at its peak.

We believe the future does not fit the classrooms of the past. That's why we chose to take action. We've ripped up the traditional classroom rulebook and started from scratch. Every single part of the design is there for a reason. Our classrooms now feel like completely flexible collaborative spaces, rather than classrooms. We've worked hard to create an environment that allows for different experiences every single day, where children can work together with their peers rather than be directed by a teacher. A place where they can question and challenge – not just accept things as they are.

Developing true understanding

Some children don't learn well at a desk. We believe children should be able to learn wherever they work best, whether that's on the floor with a laptop tray or

on bleacher seats. Our new flexible environment also includes a mobile teaching station, so teachers can go to meet learners where they are, and reflection pods where pupils can go and think about what they've been working on before they move on to the next things. Children learn best when they are active in their learning. The environment is set up in such a way that the children are afforded different opportunities to work and collaborate with different people.

Working together with peers removes the hierarchy and allows for more cognitive conflict. This is how true understanding develops, as pupils are constantly rethinking rather than remembering. This process allows them to develop an array of skills, a basis of knowledge and to connect with the wider world.

Designing for interactivity and play

When Primary School education shifted towards “active learning” in the early 2000s, the concept was sound, but it was completely misinterpreted by schools. Simply moving around does not improve education, it's about the active engagement of a child's brain. By giving pupils a say in what they learn and how they learn it, they become active participants in the process. Presenting information and learning is not one-size-fits-all. By giving children autonomy and letting them choose it doesn't mean they won't learn how to read, write and be artistic. It just means they will learn in the way that

engages them according to their own developmental abilities. The framework of the curriculum is broken; we want pupils to follow their own interests. We want to develop young people who are full of curiosity and wonder. The system that we had in place is creating compliant people.

As an adult you're allowed to get up and walk about in a workspace. By giving children the same freedom, we are teaching them self-regulation, which is vital for learning and life. We show our young people we trust them. Pupils don't ask permission to go to the toilet and we've found when we show trust in them, they don't abuse it.

A teacher could stand up and tell pupils how to share but in reality they'll only learn in the playground. So rather than leaving it to the playground, we create an environment where pupils can have real authentic experiences in the classroom. Many millions have been made by authors of self-improvement books educating their readers how to rediscover the ability to play, so why do we lose that in the first place? Classrooms are major culprits.

Growth mindset and mixed ability

Our teachers spend a significant portion of their time on personal development and all share a similar growth mindset. It's one of our values; that we invite challenge from pupils. If a lesson's boring, our teachers want

to hear that feedback so they can continue to evolve their approach. What are we as teachers going to do to make sure pupils stay engaged? It certainly won't be telling them to sit still and nod for long periods of time. Our classes are all mixed ability. Research shows that high-flyers will do well regardless, but if you take all the pupils who struggle in a subject and lump them together, these children are put in a box and their growth mindset and brain plasticity are reduced. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Pupils begin to tell themselves they aren't good enough at something, to stop trying. With mixed ability classes, pupils enter the zone of proximal development and are pushed to achieve more than they ever thought possible.

Our approach revolves around our fundamental belief that intelligence isn't fixed. So, we've created an environment where children can work together to improve as young people. From the moment pupils begin their early years education, we want to instil values and create an opportunity for pupils to follow their passions while developing all the social and cognitive skills they need. We have to be willing to challenge how things have been done in the past to develop pupils who can prosper in the future. ■