TEACHING AND LEARNING - Overview

Introduction

We advocate a consistent approach to teaching and learning, strongly informed by research evidence into what works in the classroom. We recognise the importance of personalising learning to the needs of individual children and classes. Teachers are free to use their professional judgement in this regard. We are interested above all in doing what has impact. Our focus is upon all children in our classes making maximum progress across the curriculum.

Our Curriculum Policy lays out our key intentions for pupils' learning, the content we teach them and the ways we organise learning. The purpose of this policy is to set out the principles and practice of great classroom teaching. It should be read in tandem with the Curriculum Policy.

A Theory of Learning

Over time numerous theories about how best to teach have influenced our profession. These have often been based on opinion or wider social and political pressures and ideologies. The ways we teach are generally not the product of systematic, objective research. This is why approaches to classroom practice are so varied across the world. An analogy could be made with the state of Western medicine in the Eighteenth Century: numerous different approaches existed, mostly based on speculation and experience. Since then, the application of thorough, scientific research has transformed medicine into a consistent professional discipline.

In recent years two forms of research have begun to bring clarity to what works in the classroom and why. Firstly, large-scale meta-studies of existing research have built a strong and consistent evidence base around effective practice. Secondly, advances in neuro-science have provided much better understanding of how brains learn and thus why certain teaching strategies are effective.

A key synopsis of current research is Mike Bell's 'Classroom Teaching that Works' leading onto 'The Fundamentals of Teaching: A Five-Step Model to Put the Research Evidence into Practice'. Our school is a member of the Evidence Based Teachers Network (EBTN). Teachers are encouraged and expected to engage with research and evidence to inform and develop their practice.

Assumptions in Education

Despite evidence to the contrary, two key assumptions are common in the education sector. They limit learners and create inequality. We **do not** do the following:

1. Classify learners according to 'ability' in a permanent way: It is common practice in schools to use language such as 'tops', 'highers', 'middles', 'lowers' etc to describe children in terms of their perceived 'ability', as if this were a permanent thing. This narrative strongly influences practice. Teachers commonly give different levels of 'differentiated' work to different ability groups and separate children into different ability 'sets'.

We recognise that in all our classes pupils are at different stages of learning. We see this as a reflection of their current ability, not as something innate or inevitable. Neuro-science emphasises the plasticity of the human brain. Our capacity to do or understand anything can improve. Good teaching, self-belief and practice are far more important than predisposition.

Research evidence shows that setting by ability has a detrimental impact on the majority of learners' self-esteem and academic outcomes (see IoE Best Practice in Grouping Students). It is self-fulfilling, condemning pupils in lower sets to lower outcomes because of the deterministic and limiting expectations it places upon them.

Moreover, in education systems that set by ability, the process tends to following lines of existing social inequality far more than any meaningful measure of intelligence. It is our contention that in the context of social inequality, any system which classifies and separates people will favour those who are already at the top. Setting by ability reinforces and embeds lines of disadvantage.

Instead We Believe in Success for All: Our brain capacity, intelligence, or ability are not fixed. As teachers we should never write students off or label them as 'low ability' or 'less able' in a permanent way. Our talk and praise should be focused on the efforts children are making, not their outcomes.

In our school we do differentiate work and set by ability in limited, temporary and careful ways (for example in phonics groups). We do so as a sensible, logistical response to teaching a cohort of children who are currently at very different levels. However, we seek other ways whenever possible. In particular, we focus on giving children choice from a range of different challenges, trusting them to know themselves best as learners, lesson to lesson.

Our key principles are:

a. We develop confident, ambitious growth mindsets in our pupils. No child will leave our school thinking that there is no point trying in a subject because they just can't do it.

b. We understand that when a child is struggling, this is not because they are intrinsically 'low ability' (except in some cases of children with significant special needs), but because they have a gap in prior knowledge, making it very difficult for them to access the new knowledge we are trying to teach. We do not give them a simplified, 'differentiated' version of the new knowledge. We work out what their gaps are and fill them.

Lower expectations for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds: We recognise that contextual factors associated with economic disadvantage can transfer to disadvantage at school. These factors include:

● The negative impact on brain development and behaviour of living in stressful circumstances.

● Potentially limited exposure to language and vocabulary.

● Potentially limited expectations of success in school and wider life.

● Limited opportunity to engage in wider cultural experience, learn from it and develop broad 'cultural capital'.

However, if we limit our expectations of pupils on the basis of their circumstances, we will embed their disadvantage, adding to it by limiting their progress and success as learners.

Instead We Believe in Success for All: The fact that children from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve less well through our education system is a national problem. It is also not true in all schools. Research and evidence demonstrate that outstanding achievement for disadvantaged pupils is possible (see How Effective Schools Support Disadvantaged Pupils to Achieve). We intend to achieve it. We define ourselves not by the problems our pupils face but by our ambitions for them. Through the right curriculum and excellent teaching year on year in all our classes, we aim for all children to make maximum progress.

Evidence Based Teaching in Practice

The EBTN describes six stages to outstanding teaching and learning, outlined below. These stages describe an effective learning cycle, enabling pupils to close gaps in existing knowledge and build new understanding in a comprehensive, long-term way.

The following table provides an overview of these six stages.

Sequence		Specifics
0	**Orientation:** This is about creating the right context for learning before it begins. It includes the space we learn in, the culture of behaviour in the class, the attitudes pupils bring to learning and the attitudes that inform teachers' behaviours.	**Classroom Environment:** Classrooms should be organised, accessible, attractive spaces, that value children and learning. They should reflect our professionalism and encourage calm focus.
		Behaviour: Strong behaviour management, based on clear, consistently applied rules and positive reinforcement is fundamental. Children need to feel secure and relaxed to learn. They need to know where they stand and have a high level of trust in staff. They need to behave in ways which promote learning and minimise distraction and stress. See our Behaviour Policy.
		Mindset: We know from neuroscience that all children have potential and can improve with practice – our intelligence isn't fixed or limited. Pupils need to understand this too, otherwise they will limit themselves. We need to develop growth mindsets in our pupils, building their self-belief, resilience to mistake making and ability to sustain effort.
		Expectations: Teachers need to have high expectations for all pupils and believe in their capacity to succeed. They need to ensure that their language and behaviours do not limit pupils, particularly through fixed concepts of ability, socio-economic disadvantage or other forms of unconscious bias.
1	**Prior Knowledge:** New learning builds on what we already know. Teachers need to help pupils remember and connect with what they already know about a topic before teaching anything new. Gaps in prior knowledge need to be identified and filled before pupils can effectively access and embed new knowledge.	**Assess and Update Prior Knowledge:** By helping pupils bring existing knowledge to mind, we reinforce it and lay the foundation for new knowledge to be learnt. By knowing what our pupils know, we can effectively plan to fill gaps and teach them meaningful next steps. It is crucial teachers engage in ongoing assessment of learning and use it to inform teaching. If gaps exist in pupils' existing knowledge, teachers must focus on filling these before moving pupils on to new learning.
2	**Presentation:** This is about how we present new material, so that it engages pupils and they can effectively access it.	**Link to prior knowledge:** Teachers need to help pupils connect new knowledge to what they already know.
		Working memory limits: Working memory is limited, so new material should be presented in short chunks and reinforced before moving on.
		Give the big picture: To engage with specific learning intentions pupils need to understand how they link into a wider learning journey. They need to see the long-term, as well as short term goal. Knowledge organisers are a helpful tool.
		Multisensory approach: The visual, auditory and kinaesthetic aspects of our brain are all vying for stimulation. We make our presentations far more engaging if we use visuals and demonstrate as well as explaining.
		Link abstract to concrete: Our brains have no mechanism for understanding pure abstraction. We can only engage with abstract ideas through our understanding of the concrete world. Examples are key, as they bring abstract ideas into specific reality. Narratives and analogies are very useful too, helping pupils understand new concepts by relating them to things they can more easily imagine.
3	**Challenge:** This is about the tasks we set pupils and the extent to which they meaningfully stretch and deepen understanding. The purpose of challenging tasks is to exercise the pathways connecting new material to prior knowledge so it goes into long-term memory. Tasks that are too easy only	**Planning without limits:** It is crucial to know what children are currently capable of to set challenging tasks well. It is also important not to limit learning by creating ceilings to what we expect pupils to achieve. Differentiating tasks needs to be done carefully. Pupils need opportunity to move rapidly to more challenging work once they have mastered a task. Giving pupils choice from a range of challenges or differentiating through outcome and feedback is often most effective.
		Agile teaching: The ways in which pupils respond to learning are never entirely predictable. Teachers should not stick rigidly to lesson plans, but continually assess pupils' responses to learning and adapt lessons as they go along.
		Collaborative methods: Working cooperatively requires pupils to continuously present, explain, justify and adapt their ideas. It requires them to check their thinking against that of others. It provides support and challenge, enabling pupils to learn from each other.

	exercise prior knowledge. Tasks that are too hard cannot be achieved and so exercise nothing.	**Graphical methods:** This means organising information into a map or chart, based on the relationships between them. The use of 'Graphical Organisers' has evidenced impact on pupils' ability to access and remember new knowledge. They reflect the process of connection that takes place in the brain when learning new knowledge.
		Modelling: A highly effective strategy for enabling pupils to engage in challenging tasks is to show them what a good answer looks like. This shows pupils what they are aiming for. Examples should be built with a class, so that the process of effective working as well as the outcome is modelled. Exemplary models should remain available to pupils whilst they work on their own challenges.
		Thinking tasks: Once pupils have learnt new knowledge it can be reinforced and deepened through application to open-ended problems, which require complex, exploratory thinking.
		Metacognition: This means thinking about your thinking. Using metacognition and encouraging pupils to reflect on their own learning encourages self-regulation and independence. It enables pupils to rehearse and embed what they have learnt, assess the effectiveness of their approach to learning and seek to improve.
4	**Feedback:** In any challenging learning process in which pupils engage in new knowledge they will make mistakes and develop misconceptions. Feedback enables pupils to review, adjust and improve their learning. It stops gaps opening in understanding and corrects misconceptions.	**Effective Feedback:** Effective feedback needs to be precise and timely. It should involve opportunity for pupils to apply it to improving their work. It should engage pupils in thinking about their learning, not simply tell them what to do. Self and peer assessment are very effective strategies to use. Questioning is also a powerful feedback tool.
5	**Repeat:** new learning has to be repeated and reinforced for it to be truly remembered and understood. Memories form as links between nerve cells in the brain, which form when the pathway is used several times. Pupils will rapidly forget new learning unless they re-engage with it several times.	**Types of repetition:** There are numerous ways to repeat learning and teachers should choose approaches most suited to the subject matter. For some learning to become truly automatic, regular practice is necessary. The act of recall, or remembering can be a key feature of repetition practice, ensuring pupils re-engage recently formed memories.
1	Re-assess: Return to step 1.	