

Teaching and Learning in International Schools (2021)

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This is a book that should be a ‘must read’ for every teacher and administrator in any international school that aims to be recognised as educating for the future. In its organisation, its choice of themes, the way each chapter is constructed, its lay-out, and its use of agency to give teachers their own voices throughout the text, it is the book that should be welcomed and shared by teachers in the primary sector worldwide.

Divided into three parts, comprising a total of thirteen chapters, the pattern soon becomes familiar, and gives a wide range of information and how to transmit it on the full range of subjects to be encountered in today’s international schools. Part 1, headed *Cornerstones of effective teaching*, comprises four chapters: Student agency; Differentiation; Classroom management; and Collaboration. Part 2 focuses on *Progressive Pedagogical Practices*, again with four chapters: Play-based teaching and learning; Concept-based teaching and learning; Enquiry-based teaching and learning; and Transdisciplinary teaching and learning. Part 3, *Developing skills for the future*, has five chapters: Teaching computational thinking and digital pedagogy; Towards new mathematical thinking; Fostering multilingualism; and Intercultural competence. These headings give concise summaries of their content.

The best recommendation for the authenticity of the authors’ claims to give agency to students is in the reality of the authorship: there are 29 contributors, including the editors, and in a sign of their commitment to education they declare that all the royalties from the book will go towards the teachers’ professional development. The teachers are from a wide range of nationalities, languages, and backgrounds, and many have training in language education, so important in an international school.

In the introduction the editors outline the rationale for the book. They believe there to be a lack of books about effective pedagogy in an international school context and there is a need to be future-facing, a view backed by research which shows how important access to information and the recognition of how important creativity and divergent thinking is in learning. In fact each chapter has a section on what latest research has demonstrated. This leads to their next point, which is that since the educational field is changing so rapidly, many teachers may struggle with how to implement new trends in practice. Teachers are always in

search of practical ways to implement pedagogical methods, and this book gives practical explanations and many examples in every chapter. The teachers are all from the International School Utrecht, in The Netherlands, and their diversity of background and educational context makes them ideal practitioners to share their experience, knowledge and skills, with an emphasis on creativity and divergent thinking: bilinguals have been shown to be gifted in ‘thinking outside the box’.

The best way to give an insider view of the contents will be to focus in detail on one chapter, as the format is broadly comparable in other chapters. Chapter One, on student agency, focuses on the theory and practice of this central issue, which must surely be the key in today’s world. The two authors come from different backgrounds, with a range of educational study and experience behind them. They write about the benefits that student agency can bring to the classroom, the ways it will be of lifetime value to the students, and practices that can be engaged in to cultivate it.

The chapter comes under the following headings: Introduction; 1. Form, subdivided into What is student voice and choice - Research findings on student agency; 2. Function, subdivided into How can student agency be structured in planning, further subdivided into Formal planning and Informal planning, each with sections on Early years and Primary; then How can student agency be supported and modelled during a lesson? again with sections on Early years and Primary; then How do we differentiate student agency? with sections on Early years and Primary. 3. Connection, with Conclusion containing the subheadings: How to get started with student agency? and What helps agency schoolwide? This is followed by a detailed outline plan of a day in an Early years, and a Primary class, in the school. There are then five Reflective questions, followed by a list of References.

These ten information-packed pages contain so much of the knowledge that a teacher will need to fulfil the quote at the top of the chapter by Benjamin Franklin: ‘Tell me and I forget./Teach me and I remember./Involve me and I learn.’ The chapter justifies the intention stated at the beginning that ‘First, we address the benefits of student agency in teaching practices, and second, we showcase how ISUtrecht has implemented this framework in its own system.’ The authors point out that many researchers argue that a lack of a student voice in the classroom may lead to feelings of alienation, powerlessness and disengagement, whereas the benefits of agency are that the students are more engaged within the classroom, and they also become more resilient in both the academic aspect of learning and personal learning. Most importantly, the teacher puts trust in students so that they become more independent, self-aware

and more intrinsically motivated as learning and education is seen as a value in itself, not simply aiming at a goal.

The sections on delivery give details of actual lessons, what their aims are, how they develop, and what students are able to learn from them. They discuss how teamwork develops, and how students are able to choose their own subjects for further work at home. There are clear details of how the day at school develops, designing their own classroom layout, where to put displays, and from which books they would like to be read to.

The authors show a compassionate appreciation of how daunting such an approach may be for some teachers as they point out that for many teachers, ‘the idea of losing control of the class is that nightmare that wakes them up in the middle of the night,’ and then go on to a list of ideas and strategies that will help. The detailed outline of a typical day in Kindergarten gives a list of 15 procedures and activities, that can all be built on.

Following chapters continue in the same mode. Chapter 2 on Differentiation opens with the quote ‘If a child can’t learn the way we teach, /maybe we should teach the way they learn,’ by Ignacio Estrada. After acknowledging that ‘many teachers lack the resources, knowledge or expertise to differentiate their teaching in a systematic and profound manner,’ the authors give several explanations of the skill, and follow this up with examples from their own experience. Again, there are research findings, extensive examples of good practice from their school, different methodologies, useful materials, and insights into assessment models. Finally there is a summary in table format.

Chapter 3 on Classroom management opens with ‘the main goal of our teachers is to make the children fall in love with the concept of school and education. A love that needs to be fed on a regular basis’, and continues in this vein, outlining the positive use of assessment for the learning environment, and giving detailed descriptions of the three types: diagnostic, formative and summative assessments. In this chapter there is a brief mention of a Home languages strategy. It is pointed out that ‘As teachers in an international school, in our lessons, we need to consider the variety of cultures or the diversity of languages spoken in the class of our students.’ This issue is hugely important and is often overlooked or sidelined in international schools for a variety of reasons: for example, the parents are entranced by the added value of their children learning English, the world’s current lingua franca; the lack of understanding by many in management and the teaching staff of what it means to grow up in a different culture and language; the potential financial costs implicit in providing instruction for the many different mother tongues in an international school. Fortunately, ISUtrecht is gifted with teaching staff from many different language backgrounds, and native English speakers

have language training backgrounds. However, charging extra fees for mother tongue classes, as is the case at this school, can potentially put a barrier to taking up lessons. The solution is to have one or two afternoon slots a week when all students have mother tongue lessons, provided free.

The authors mention that ‘Our English language acquisition specialist entered the class, greeting various children in their home languages. In an instant, the children’s attention was directed to her and the class was ready to start. As teachers in an international school, in our lessons, we need to consider the variety of cultures or the diversity of languages spoken in the class of our students. Very often there are children at the very beginning of learning the school language of instruction, English. In order to promote a safe and welcoming environment for these students, the teachers learn basic words in a variety of languages such as ‘hello’, ‘thank you’ and ‘good morning’, to make sure that the child feels part of his/her community.’ Chapter 12 on ‘Fostering Multilingualism’ goes into detail on how each child’s language potential is developed and encouraged.

The section on collaboration is credible, involving all those in children’s schooling, and ensuring on-going communication and cooperation. The diagram of how this works sensibly puts Senior Management as one part of the process, not the dominant part, as so often is the case. The aims of this collaboration are for six objectives to be put into practice: Trust and Respect; Connection and Reciprocity; Shared values; Reflection and Improvement; Lifelong Learning; Egalitarianism. The latter is vital if an idealistic model is to be put into practice, and it is defined here as: ‘This extends from the students to all the staff members and the parents. We all have a voice and everyone is acknowledged. In lesson plans, the students’ interests are taken into account. In leadership meetings, feedback from parents and teachers is considered. Parents, teachers and students are also represented in senior management meetings or in advisory bodies such as the Division Council.’ Teachers who were asked for their opinions reported how: ‘Collaboration gives them the feeling of being trusted and being able to trust.’ This gives the power to everyone to have a voice and to be supported.

The fact that the curriculum is seen as a dynamic instrument is shown by the fact that the ‘curriculum is yearly reviewed not only horizontally but also vertically. Together with the teachers from the previous and the next grade, we compare our learning outcomes and build our curriculum according to it. In other words, at the end of the year, Grade 2 teachers will sit with Grade 3 teachers in order to share what the focus was in each of the transdisciplinary themes as well as what they learnt regarding language and mathematics.’ There is also regular communication between classroom teachers and subject teachers, potentially a point of

conflict. All the different areas are interconnected and integrated including the classroom teacher, specialists, English Language Acquisition teachers and student support teachers. There are specialists for music, physical education, drama, Dutch language acquisition and visual arts. 'The classroom teacher works together with an ELA teacher, who has a 45-minute timeslot within their schedule to meet with the grade teachers in order to plan their language lessons, collaborating to decide upon the language goals of that week and how the ELA teacher is going to work with the students. This is sometimes done by taking the students out of the classroom or by providing the students with extra support in-class. The grade teachers together with the ELA teacher look at the contents of the lesson and later on the ELA teachers modify the lesson to adapt it to the needs of each student.' Since second language students are now 80% of students in international schools worldwide, this a vital procedure for a well-planned programme of instruction for these students.

What comes across above all throughout the book is a sense of a dynamic, thoughtful intention to plan for the future, and to really do their best for the students in the school, in every subject and at every level, while helping teachers in every way possible. As they write in a conclusion to one chapter: 'Education has greatly evolved and adapted to the times. It is no longer limited to a book, and a class with students who are supposed to learn the same things in the same way and where there is no room for creativity is seen as outdated. As teachers, we have a big responsibility on our hands since the world around us has become so big and complicated that we need to be ready to understand it. We need to teach the children to be ready for it.' For those looking for a guide to put this into practice, this book will be a huge help.

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