

Julie Fendall is a classroom teacher currently in Sydney's Blue Mountains. She has been a teacher-research assistant on the Schooling for a Fair Go project and an Honours student at Western Sydney University. For her Honours thesis, she wrote a study of Brooke Newton's classroom. This article is an extract from that thesis. Brooke Newton is an AP in Sydney's South-West. She was an early career teacher when her involvement with Fair Go began, both in a classroom being observed by Julie, but also later in Schooling for a Fair Go. In the latter, she was both a mentee and a mentor carrying out action research on her own practice. Brooke became involved in the Fair Go Program because she wanted to develop a deeper understanding of how to engage students and also because she wanted to continually reflect on her own practice to help every student succeed.

The classroom space: First impressions

1K's classroom is found in a large multicultural public school located in the outer suburbs of Sydney. The room, located deep in the school grounds, is on the first floor at the end of an open-air veranda overlooking a grass playing field (see Figure 1.1).



Figure 1.1. The veranda entrance to 1K's classroom. Photo. Copyright 2013 by J. Fendall.

The classroom's external windows and the walls lining the veranda are welcomingly decorated by smiling 'student-faced' buzzy-bees. These photographed student faces hover in the window adjacent to the bold statement "1K loves to learn" (Figure 1.2). The windows display numerous photographs of students engaged in a variety of learning activities and a number of work samples. The effect visually suggests that learning is the core business of this classroom.



Figure 1.2. 1K loves to learn. Photo. Copyright 2013 by J. Fendall.

Figure 1.3. Parent board. Photo. Copyright 2013 by J. Fendall

Tracking along the veranda wall, the display ends in a ‘Parent Board’ to communicate with 1K’s families (Figure 1.3). As expected, messages are displayed in the form of school notices and upcoming events. However, additionally, three sets of shiny white laminated posters attract attention. Each poster uses a sentence starter: ‘In writing we are learning... This is because...’ These notices display learning intentions to send a clear and important message home to 1K’s parents and families: in 1K, learning is explicit, purposeful and connected to the world outside the classroom.

Next to the classroom door sits a Science table that currently displays the silkworm box accompanied by a chart, “How to look after your silkworm” (Figure 1.1). The Science table is worth mentioning as an indicator of teaching and learning styles in 1K. The central teaching approach offers hands-on experiential learning opportunities. The table is covered in laminated white A3 paper for students to record their observations in black marker, encouraging thought and reflection through flexible learning spaces.

These noteworthy observations of the classroom’s physical presentation from the veranda offer a sense of what is important in 1K: students, learning, communication and community.

As I enter through the door, the room appears substantially larger than a standard classroom. An expansive floor space spreads out towards the centrally located furniture (Figure 1.4). More correctly, there is a noticeable lack of furniture: three desks and six chairs. Questions spring to my mind about where the students sit to work.



Figure 1.4. The expansive open space in 1K. Photo. Copyright 2013 by J. Fendall.

Looking more closely around the room, attention is drawn towards the classroom edges, walls and windows. The spaciousness of the first impression is in complete contrast to the crowded walls. The surfaces are adorned with words, information, photographs of students, work-samples, post-it notes and black-marker comments on white, laminated paper. It is relevant at this point to re-consider the context of this classroom where every student has a language background other than English, and to be reminded that these Year 1 students are 6 to 7 years old. Within this context, the metalanguage used to support higher-order meta-cognitive learning experiences in the classroom seems extraordinary. A visitor to the classroom might mistakenly question the ‘wordiness’ of the crowded classroom walls for its English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) students. But these are the students’ words: their work and their reflections.

There has been just a moment to consider the physical and structural learning environment in 1K before the bell rings and the school day starts. The teacher, Brooke, and the 23 students of 1K enter the classroom; their pace is comfortable, calm and purposeful. The classroom hums with student conversation and laughter and it looks and feels different already.

As standard practice in 1K, Brooke uses a visual learning goal to explain the lesson she is presenting to the students. She employs tools, such as traffic lights, to gauge students’ understanding of the task and provides students with marking criteria for self-assessment and peer-assessment to scaffold their learning.

Brooke’s final instruction is to “Find a place where you can do your best work” (Observation). Significantly, each student chooses where she or he wants to work.

Observations and interviews reveal that student choice is an integral component of 1K. Three students choose to sit at the available desks whilst the remaining students are either on the floor working with

Find A Place Where You Can Do Your Best Work

Brooke or have chosen to lie on the floor by themselves or in small groups (Figure 1.6). Two students collect a small soft couch and a beanbag and go outside onto the veranda (Figure 1.7). Four students find stools and a small table at the back of the classroom to work together. One student enters the tent, another lies outstretched from the green caterpillar tunnel (Figure 1.8). This small detail of choice in student placement within the classroom space speaks volumes of the teacher's trust in her students and the students' self-regulatory capacity to be responsible for their learning. Consequently, choice enables students to work independently or collaboratively whilst sending empowering messages of ability, place and control to the learners.

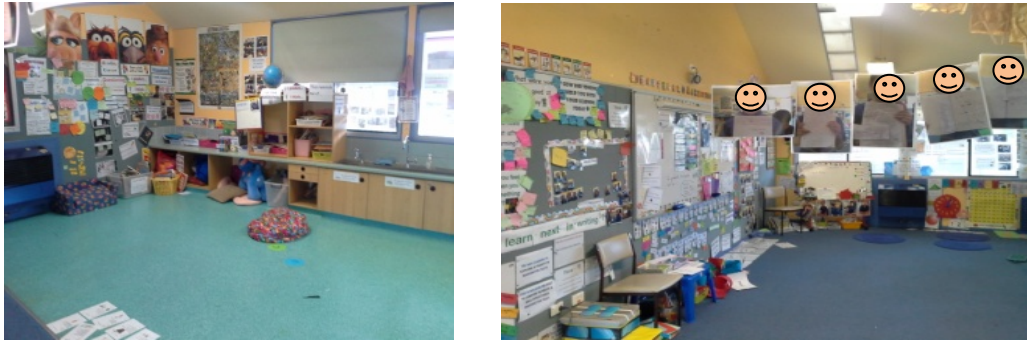


Figure 1.6. Learning spaces: Open floor plan. Photo. Copyright 2013 by J. Fendall.



Figure 1.7. Learning space: The veranda. Photo. Copyright 2013 by J. Fendall



Figure 1.8. Learning spaces: Tent and tunnel. Photo. Copyright 2013 by J. Fendall.

iPad reflections

One student, who has completed the assigned task, moves to the reflection wall and takes an ‘iPad pass’ lanyard (Figure 1.9), places it over her head and approaches Brooke to ask, “Please, can I use the iPad?” (Observation, student comment). The teacher, without hesitation or further instruction, directs the student towards the iPad located on her desk.



Figure 1.9. iPad pass lanyard. Photo. Copyright 2013 by J. Fendall.

Working in partnership with another student wearing an ‘iPad pass’, one student reflects on her learning whilst the other video records the reflection. “I felt proud of myself because I used adjectives and similes...” (Observation, student comment). After describing her learning, the students reverse roles and the second student conducts her learning reflection, and this is also recorded. The students watch their video clips with great interest, laughing and talking. This simple, high affective, high cognitive reflection system is a great example of an interactive self-regulatory learning resource. Replaying the videos act as reflection mirrors for students to see themselves as learners who think about, and reflect upon, their learning. In addition, the video files are stored in the students’ folders to share with their families at any given opportunity.

“The kids in my classroom help me learn”

Beyond the classroom’s appearance as a physical, flexible learning space, Brooke’s considered pedagogical application of the *MeE* Framework’s ‘engagement processes cultivated high affective spaces (see article by Geoff Munns on the *MeE* Framework in this Special Edition). When asked for their feelings towards their classroom, all of the participants became animated in their speech and expressed strong, affective

connections to their classroom and their class. The students commonly identified themes of fun, friendship, aesthetics, space, ownership and choice (Fendall, 2014).

1K felt that friends played a key role in their learning, making connections between working with friends and improving their learning. One student commented, “When I work with my friends I concentrate and have more energy to write” (Fendall, 2014, p. 60). A second student linked his affective response to learning through peer-assessment: “I like working with my friends, they help me correct my work” (Interview, student E). Several students identified talking with their friends as an important part of their learning. This is significant as many teachers perceive talking between students as a distraction from learning. When describing his drawing, in which a large speech bubble hovers over the classroom next to a colourful rainbow (Figure 1.10), the student said, “I am talking to my friends because they get their ideas and they help me” (Interview, student B).

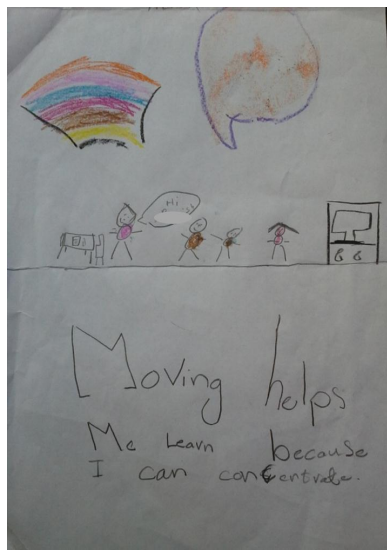


Figure 1.10. Moving helps me learn because I can concentrate. Drawing artefact by student B. Copyright 2013 by J. Fendall.

Student interviews and drawing responses clearly indicated that 1K experienced their classroom as a community of learners, neatly expressed by one student as, “The kids in my classroom help me to learn” (Fendall, 2014, p. 67 Interview, student A).

Creative spaces and ‘e’ngaging experiences

At a glance, this case study classroom brings to mind the exemplary teachers who use ‘creative processes’ and design ‘creative spaces’ to facilitate imaginative, creative and high intellectual quality learning experiences for students in low socio-economic status communities (Cole et al., 2013; Orlando & Sawyer, 2013). This classroom buzzed with activity, movement, and discussion. Observations suggested that 1K were engaged, confident, self-regulatory and reflective learners. At one level, the workings of this class appeared to be a straightforward task for the teacher. Yet, as another teacher, experienced in Fair Go pedagogy, observed: “An untrained eye would walk into that classroom and think ‘Oh, aren’t these kids

Find A Place Where You Can Do Your Best Work

wonderful!’ It doesn’t just happen like that. There is a lot of thought process behind each of those practices” (Fendall, 2014, p. 44). Those observations capture the image of ‘teacher as a conductor’, waving arms in time with the music so that, “the orchestra produces glorious sounds, to all appearances quite spontaneously” (Bransford et al., 2007, p. 1).

As the skilled classroom ‘orchestra conductor’, Brooke coordinates “a total environment where tools, spaces and mindsets are stimulating creativity and thinking” (Ferrari et al., 2009, p. 46). Students in 1K employed classroom systems (for example, success criteria, traffic light cards, iPad reflections) and a range of developing micro-skills (a learning meta-language and taking on a learning disposition) to question, make connections, explore options and reflect on their learning, in an authentic way. These scaffolding features structured a high-operative space: where students as self-regulatory learners were given agency to remove scaffolding when they judged themselves to be ready. The interplay here is significant as students receive positive messages around voice, ability, knowledge, control, and ownership, and hence appear to understand themselves as independent, successful learners.

Brooke’s reflections on these experiences

I can remember in my first few years of teaching, whilst being involved in the *Fair Go* Program, I would drive home from work thinking about the different ways that I could encourage students to discuss their learning individually and with each other. Being a part of the research project inspired me to think deeply about each student in my class and the environment, that as their teacher, I needed to create in order to engage them in their learning.

During the time of this project I was continually challenged by my colleagues to think of creative ways to get each child to reflect on their learning and therefore reach a deep understanding of what was being taught. The experience taught me how to solicit feedback and to be open to alternative perspectives and ideas. The project enabled me to take risks and it guided my planning for student engagement. I learnt how to effectively evaluate the purpose and impact of each lesson I taught and I developed a greater understanding of what motivated each student to connect with the content.

The different practices I implemented as an early career teacher to create a classroom where student voice was not only encouraged, but celebrated have been ingrained into my pedagogy. Being involved in this project, as well as having my teaching observed for research, enabled me to build continual reflection into my daily practice and gave me the desire to actively search for and investigate the most effective ways to meet the learning needs of my students. It made me aware of the messages I was giving to students and highlighted to me the importance of building a classroom where the students and I played a reciprocal role.

The experience built my confidence to give a range of teaching ideas ‘a go’, since I always had the students at the centre of all of my decisions. Through the lenses of many colleagues in the project, I was able to broaden my understanding of how to engage students in their learning and it is an experience that I fondly look back on as foundational to my pedagogy.

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