

## CLASSROOM VOICES

# “Our role is to meddle in the middle...”

Whether it's football or education, if you're not interfering with play, you shouldn't be on the pitch, says **Dr Dave Walters**

All too often I see teachers getting exasperated by their pupils not engaging in deeper thinking. But the reason this is happening is that their students don't have the content to draw upon in order to do just that.

Equally, there are some school leaders who adopt a 'guide on the side' role and attempt to lead from a detached position (usually behind a desk via email). But in the case of both teachers and schools leaders, our role is to 'meddle in the middle'.

## Getting it right

In the real world of education, everyone is frantically trying to 'get it right'. Some educators are clear about what 'it' actually means for their school, and base their vision and practice on clear and robust evidence of what actually makes a difference to the achievement of children.

These educators create resilient organisations based on authentic education and have no fear when the inspector calls. Others flit about with no real vision, knee-jerking their way through trying to stay out of a damaging inspection judgement. Some in the second category tend to base their work on anecdote or, worse, prejudice. So, what does the first approach actually look like?

## Use the evidence

Well, for a start, it has a sharp focus based on robust and extensive evidence that is clear and uncluttered by impenetrable theory. Let's face it, who out there would honestly be foolish enough to confess to being in favour of evidence-averse practice? But the nature of evidence is a highly contested issue and we must guard against drawing *absolute*

cause-effect links at the expense of intelligent interpretation.

For example, over the last 60 years or so, IQ measures across the globe have increased. Over that same period, the sales of wholemeal bread have also accelerated (you can see where I'm going with this). Now, who in their right mind would say that eating wholemeal bread makes you more intelligent?

## Thinking matters

As far as a sharp focus goes, it would be hard to find many educators out there who would not agree to children's progress being paramount, alongside their welfare and safety of course. If we work back from this position evidentially, we see that progress comes as a consequence of learning.

Clearly, children are not going to improve if they do not learn new concepts and skills. In order to learn, thinking is vital – just going through the motions superficially might be an easy option, but real learning reflects the saying 'no pain, no gain'. So, learning comes as a consequence of thinking. If children merely practice what they can already do, then thinking is minimal. Real thinking comes as a consequence of what psychologist Anders Ericsson calls

deliberate practice, which in turn comes as a consequence of working in one's zone of 'proximal development'. This is a place where one is working just outside one's comfort zone, and follows the Goldilocks principle – not too hard, not too easy, just right.

And it is here that the educational off-side rule comes into the equation.

## The off-side rule

Educationalist John Hattie has rightly highlighted the important role of the teacher and leader in raising achievement for our children. But this role is not as a 'guide on the side'. The reality is that when we are novice at something, we need a lot more content, and so the teacher needs to adopt a far more direct approach. The danger lies in stopping at the level of content, and so the teacher needs to be skilfully attuned to knowing when to switch from the direct teaching of content to an approach that fosters deeper understanding.

For those of a particular age, you may well remember the off-side rule in football undergoing some changes. Originally, off-side was off-side. Then, it became off-side only if you were interfering with play. Then it became off-side only if you were 'active' in the game. I remember Brian Clough's response in a TV interview. Typically, he took a robust stance: 'If you are not interfering with play then you shouldn't be on the pitch!'.

The message is clear: if you are on the educational pitch then make sure you are active and interfering with play – and bring evidence into your practice.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Dave Walters, is director of research, Thinking Matters, and deputy head of a secondary school in the west of England.