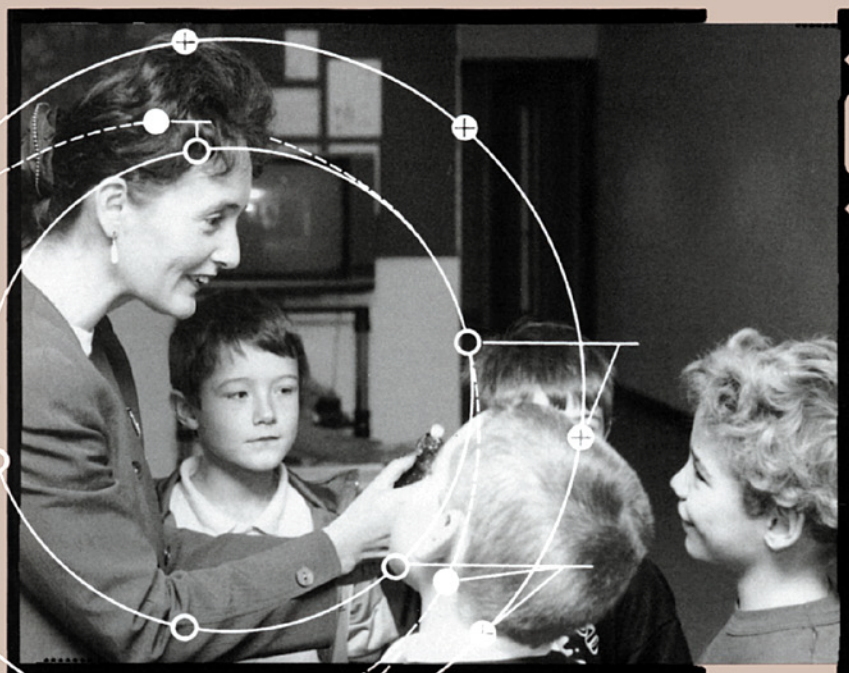


DAVID McNAMARA



**Classroom Pedagogy**  
and **Primary Practice**



**Also available as a printed book**  
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## Classroom pedagogy and primary practice

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In this provocative book, David McNamara looks at primary education as it struggles to create for itself a post-Plowden ideology. He argues first of all that a 'teacher-centred' approach to teaching in the primary school, especially in the later years, is actually in the best interests of the children. The teacher must be seen to have ultimate responsibility for what and how children learn, and at the heart of the complex relation between teaching and learning is the subject matter of teaching defined in the broadest sense. The upshot of debates about teaching methods, matching, and curriculum organisation should be to focus upon the tasks provided for children so as to foster their learning. Second, McNamara attempts to define the distinctive professional expertise of the primary teacher—the application of subject knowledge within the special circumstances of the classroom—and to show how this expertise can be articulated and codified to establish a body of educational knowledge which is both derived from practice and practically useful to others.

At a time when primary education is at the top of the political agenda, this book takes a refreshingly unbiased look at the educational issues involved. It will help teachers at all levels to define their own role in the creation of educational knowledge.

**David McNamara** taught in primary schools before his university career and has researched and published widely in the fields of teacher education and educational practice. He is currently Professor of Primary Education at the University of Hull.



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# Classroom pedagogy and primary practice

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David McNamara



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*To my mother and father*



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## Introduction

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Primary education has been subject to intense scrutiny and debate during recent years. The foundations in literacy and numeracy established in primary schools are regarded as necessary prerequisites for later success both within the educational system itself and beyond in the world of work. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that people hold strong views about how young children should be educated during the vital primary years. The debates about primary schooling are often couched in broad terms between, say, those who advocate 'traditional' or 'formal' approaches to education, and those who favour 'progressive' or 'informal' methods. All too easily the arguments take on a political flavour, as when 'progressive' educationists are cast as left wingers or wishy-washy liberals and 'traditionalists' are regarded as conservatives or reactionary bigots. All parties to the primary debate claim, of course, to have the child's best interests at heart and to know how to teach children so as to foster their learning.

The reality which has to be faced is that no one has the golden key to learning in the primary school. After all, if we actually had reasonably secure and verifiable knowledge about how children learn in response to the teaching we provide for them, that would go a long way towards silencing the debate about how we ought to teach. In a sense it is unfortunate (in that it illustrates how muddy the waters are) that children can be sent to highly didactic infant schools and because of or despite of what is given them in the name of education they learn, while their friends may attend child-centred schools and still manage to learn. The debate cannot be easily decided and attempts to do so always push discussion back into issues such as 'What do we mean by learning?' or 'What is education for?' One approach to resolving the question about how best to educate children during the primary years is to seek to reconcile the strengths of both 'progressive/child-centred' and 'traditional/subject centred' approaches.<sup>1</sup> In practice it is more likely that primary schools will need to adopt solutions which place an emphasis upon either 'formal' or 'informal' methods.

One important lesson to learn from the controversy surrounding primary education is that the study and practice of education are not dispassionate or disinterested endeavours. All attempts to analyse teaching and learning, make suggestions for policy and practice, and engage in teaching itself are informed by values and beliefs. These may be covert and taken for granted or overt and based upon informed reflection. Our concerns for matters such as the relationships between schools and society, the content of the curriculum, or the layout of the classroom are influenced by our values and experiences and what we consider education is for and about. Teaching and learning in classrooms are of intense interest to politicians, pundits, parents, employers, educationists and others who have a legitimate and vested stake in children's education. Interest groups represent the broad range of political, ideological, and educational points of view and, because of the vast corpus of literature and research evidence addressing educational issues in all their varieties, any proposals for classroom practice can be buttressed by reference to some authority or body of information. The grounds for policy proposals and recommendations for practice may range from appeals to theory, research evidence, rational argument, experience, common sense, or the operation of the free market. These do not confer an element of objectivity or special authority upon the proposers or their proposals since what is appealed to is itself infused with beliefs and assumptions. A fault with much discussion about educational practice is that commentators offer their observations with authority and confidence leaving it to the audience to tease out the assumptions which have informed the analysis and proposals. It is preferable at the outset to make my position clear and articulate the educational beliefs upon which this book is based.

Teaching and learning in classrooms should be teacher centred. Embodied within this notion of teaching is a recognition that the teacher knows more than her pupils and that her mandate is to pass on to them knowledge, understanding, and skills which heretofore they were ignorant of. The teacher is the central figure in the classroom who is responsible for children's learning. A corollary is that those parties who have a legitimate interest in education should respect the teacher's authority and expertise in matters concerning learning in the classroom. If society places a special burden upon teachers to be responsible for children's learning, then teachers should not be regarded as the passive receivers of lay opinion or political precept. Teachers should be actively involved in the development of professional knowledge and because they have responsibility for children's education they should be equal parties in any discussions concerning the conduct of teaching and learning in the classroom.

The Plowden Report articulated a clear vision for primary education and proclaimed that, 'At the heart of the educational process lies the

child.<sup>2</sup> I wish to switch the emphasis and suggest that at the heart of the educational process lies the teacher. Consider Plowden's premise in other contexts: at the heart of the play lies the audience; at the heart of the operation lies the patient; or at the heart of the charter flight lies the passenger. There can be no question that the audience, the patient, or the passengers are a necessary and crucial part of the activity and that their needs must be attended to. But the essential reason why they are involved at all is because of the knowledge and expertise of the actor, surgeon, or pilot. It is the expert's competence which provides the rationale for and determines the success or failure of the enterprise. Equally, it is the teacher who is at the heart of the educational process. It is, of course, part of the teacher's professional responsibility to attend to the needs of her children and to have an appreciation of their characters, aptitudes, qualities, and dispositions but to shift the central focus from the teacher to the child does no service to either children or teachers. One of the reasons why child-centred and discovery orientated views of teaching are attractive is that they carry the connotation of enthusiastic children enjoying their work under the eye of a caring teacher. The teacher-centred, subject-centred view, on the other hand, is often associated with an image of a harsh authoritarian Gradgrind who demands that children engage in enervating learning in a sterile environment. There is no necessary or logical reason why this should be so. The so called 'subject-centred' teacher can be just as caring, friendly and sensitive to her children's needs and circumstances as the 'child-centred' teacher. Indeed the subject-focused teacher may be more aware of her pupils' needs since she recognises that in the longer term it is by doing everything possible to maximise children's learning that she best enhances their aspirations, educational opportunities and chances in life. The onus should be upon the teacher to take responsibility for organising the classroom for learning and for adopting a prescriptive stance towards what and how children learn.

Teachers must, of course, care for children and be sensitive to their personal circumstances and in this sense they may be regarded as 'child centred'. Nevertheless, because of the nature of their professional responsibility, their concern for children's learning must have a cutting edge. The term 'sharp compassion'<sup>3</sup> has been used to illustrate the point that within the caring professions there is little room for sentimentality. The professional must have compassion for her clients but it must be a hard headed compassion whereby she acts in their best interests. This contrasts with the romantic image which often characterises much primary education.<sup>4</sup> All teachers should be caring and sensitive folk but since their mandate is to be responsible for children's learning their compassion should be tempered with a sharpness which always seeks to promote children's learning. The predicament which teachers must accept is that formal schooling is an imposition upon the child and seeks to change him.

I wish to place the teacher centre stage and assert that

- The teacher is the crucial authority in the classroom who is responsible for children's learning. While the teacher cannot legislate for children to learn or teach so as to make them learn it is her responsibility to do all that can reasonably be expected and teach intentionally so as to foster children's acquisition of knowledge, skill, and understanding.
- The teacher is responsible for organising teaching and learning within her classroom so as to optimise the opportunities for children to engage in learning activities and tasks.
- The teacher should focus upon the subject matter of lessons (however defined) and consider how best to represent and communicate content, rather than speculate about the nature of the child's mental processes and aptitudes which are conjectured to shape the child's capacity and disposition to learn.
- When children fail to learn the teacher should be disposed to examine the content of lessons and how material is represented and conveyed to children rather than seek accounts or reasons (such as lack of intelligence or poor home environment) which provide explanations for children's failure to learn but which may remove the onus from the teacher and offer no advice about how to remedy the situation.
- The way in which the teacher can do most to improve children's life chances and educational opportunities and help them overcome any adverse biographical circumstances is by doing everything possible to foster their acquisition of knowledge, understanding, and skill.

By placing the teacher at the centre of the educational process I also wish to establish her as a professional whose practical endeavours to promote children's learning are based upon judgement and reflection informed by a body of professional knowledge. Unfortunately, much of the knowledge base which teachers have had presented to them does not and cannot underpin their classroom practice. Rather than be the receivers of inappropriate information teachers should contribute to the development of a corpus of knowledge which is rigorous, subjected to critical analysis, and also directly relevant to classroom practice. In short, to assist in the development of usable professional knowledge. This may seem an unrealistic aspiration but when we locate teachers within the context of current educational debate and policy making and note the way in which the teacher's authority and credibility is being eroded it is evident that a strategy must be found to re-establish teachers' professionalism in a way which ensures that their expertise is attended to by those people and groups who wish to influence teaching and learning in the classroom. As society has elevated the importance of education it has intruded more into the processes of teaching and learning. In the postwar era and increasingly

during the past two decades schools have become more exposed to the scrutiny of inspectors, advisers and parents and subject to audit and appraisal. Much of this interest and activity is to be welcomed in so far as concerned parties think clearly and sympathetically about education and expose professional practice to examination. There is a sense, however, in which education has been appropriated by policy makers, reformers, politicians, academics, researchers, inspectors, advisers and administrators and taken out of the hands of practitioners. The teachers not only support a huge workforce of 'experts' but in doing so their own authority, experience and status is questioned and devalued. New languages are devised by academics, educational psychologists and designers of new curricula. These can be imposed upon teachers (by, for example, the National Curriculum Council or the School Examinations and Assessment Council) or be promoted as avenues to a new enlightenment and professional advancement (by academic educationists). The teacher is always on the receiving end. George Steiner has expressed concern about the dominance of the secondary and the parasitic in our culture and explored the way in which the practitioner's performance or creative act becomes subject to an ever-growing body of analysis and criticism generated by critics and commentators which becomes an end in itself. He asks whether there is anything in what they say and argues for the removal of the 'interpositions of academic journalistic paraphrase, commentary, adjudication'<sup>5</sup> and the need to recognise that the performance, of itself, is and should be the critical act; in his telling phrase, 'our master intellegencers are the performers'.<sup>6</sup>

In this spirit I articulate what it is that constitutes the essence of the teacher's expertise and authority and explore how teachers may contribute to the process of developing a corpus of professional knowledge which will establish teachers' authority and underpin their right to be fully and equally involved in educational discussions and decision making. My analysis addresses the central function of schools which provides the rationale for their establishment, namely teaching and learning in classrooms. Schools have many other worthwhile functions; for instance they care for children, they seek to foster standards of behaviour and values, and they act as focal centres within the community. These important dimensions of the school's work are associated with its primary function but a school which does not take teaching and learning as its essential task fails in its responsibility to children and becomes redundant since the school's other valuable activities can be undertaken within other institutions. Many factors impinge upon the classroom but I refer to them only in so far as it is necessary to address my central theme. Hence I do not become extensively involved with discussions about the content of the curriculum and what children ought to know since the reality facing the teacher is that there is, currently, a statutory requirement to teach the Basic Curriculum (this does not preclude



thinking critically about the curriculum and appraising its 'teachability' and suitability). Similarly I do not become involved with matters of school policy and the general organisation of teaching and learning within the school as a whole. I concentrate upon the educational process in the classroom, bearing in mind that events without will have an influence upon what takes place within.

For the most part I have in mind teaching and learning in primary schools, especially during the junior (KS2) years but I hope that my analysis has a wider relevance and may inform discussion concerning teaching and learning during the infant and secondary phases.

Why *Classroom Pedagogy*? The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* notes that nowadays the notion of pedagogy has a hostile tone with implications for pedantry, dogmatism, or severity and the *Longman Dictionary of the English Language* notes that pedagogy is usually used in a derogatory sense. It is worrying that the word traditionally employed to signify the art and science of teaching and to convey the notion that the teacher is responsible for learning should carry such negative associations. It suggests that we have shifted too far from the idea that the teacher is an authority who should be responsible for learning. Pedagogy is important and needs re-establishing within educational discourse. It will not be suggested that pedagogic practice can be based upon scientific principles drawn from theory and research in the social sciences but I will propose that we have a substantial body of knowledge relating to pedagogy which identifies certain themes and issues which have clear implications for classroom practice and which should at least be considered by teachers before deciding to teach in one way rather than another. There is no consensus as to what constitutes 'good' primary<sup>7</sup> practice and teachers should be wary of those who seek to impose models of 'good' practice upon them.

Professional conduct requires informed discussion about good practice and a recognition that judgements have to be made between alternatives. All teaching decisions entail making choices and at the very least pedagogical knowledge addresses the nature of these choices and identifies possible benefits and costs associated with making them. Teaching and learning are fundamental ways of behaving which pervade activities within many settings such as the church, the parade ground, or the sales convention. Hence *Classroom Pedagogy* to denote the distinctive nature of teaching and learning within classrooms. The essence of the teacher's task is not that she teaches, *per se*, but that she does so within a particular institutional environment characterised by distinctive factors which make class teaching a demanding challenge which requires special professional expertise and training.

Chapter 1, 'On teaching', and Chapter 2, 'On learning', articulate the case for an alternative way of regarding teaching and learning within the contexts of primary classrooms. My aim is to suggest that teaching and

learning are not incredibly difficult notions to understand, requiring an arcane and complicated vocabulary. In passing I seek to remind readers why much of the recent 'theorising' about teaching and learning has, justifiably in my view, been subject to criticism. I also aim to show that a more 'traditional' approach to primary teaching is appropriate because it reflects the way in which most primary teachers are disposed to teach when left to their own devices. Chapter 3, 'The teacher's responsibility for learning', argues that in so far as is reasonable the teacher should be held responsible for children's learning but this must be tempered with the recognition that to some degree learning must also be seen as the independent achievement of the child. Each of Chapters 4, 5, and 6 'Relating teaching to pupils' aptitudes', 'Organising teaching to promote learning', and 'Organising subject matter for learning', focuses upon a central aspect of primary education and makes suggestions as to how the class teacher should cope with the problems of matching learning tasks to children's abilities; organising and managing children for group or whole class teaching; and teaching through subjects or topics. Chapter 7, 'Pedagogy in practice', illustrates the case articulated in the previous chapters with reference to the specific problem of teaching subtraction, diagnosing children's learning difficulties, and thereby deciding how to teach so as to aid their learning and understanding. Chapters 8 and 9, 'Teachers' pedagogic expertise', and 'The professional authority of the teacher', shift the emphasis. I demonstrate how it is possible for the practising class teacher to make a worthwhile contribution to the knowledge base for teaching and in so doing contribute to a process of re-establishing the professional expertise and authority of primary teachers and, thereby, ensuring that their voice is listened to in educational decision making and policy discussion.

I attempt to avoid partiality and achieve consistency in the use of personal pronouns by using she or her when referring to teachers (since the majority of primary teachers are women) and he or him in all other cases.