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Acknowledging Wurundjeri WoiWurrung Biik



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Balancing structured instruction with creative freedom: Navigating the path to effective and joyful learning

Jen's First Classroom – The Silver Gums (Year 1, 2014)



Matt's first classroom in Incheon, South Korea (2008)



Presentation's summary



To what degree should teachers have agency over how they teach in their classrooms? This presentation explores the tensions between the “Science of Learning” and the “sciences of learning” perspectives, and how differing conceptions of evidence shape contemporary debates about teaching and policy.

Focusing on Australian policy contexts, it examines the rise of mandates for structured, evidence-based instruction and weighs the opportunities and risks these policies present for learning outcomes, social inclusion, and teacher autonomy. The session brings together research evidence and policy analysis to illuminate the trade-offs between standardisation and local decision-making.

Attendees will come away with clearer criteria for evaluating claims about evidence-based teaching, and practical questions to guide decisions about curriculum, assessment and classroom practice.



Core characteristics

- A focus on **analysing large data sets** to **identify common patterns** of how humans learn;
- One largely **unified body of evidence** about how **most/all students learn** most effectively; and
- Drawing on the assumptions of the physical sciences, this paradigm believes that **variables can be controlled through the scientific method**.

- A focus on **individual experiences** and **contextually specific environments**;
- Multiple bodies of evidence that are **contextually dependent** and **often in tension**; and
- Some researchers within this paradigm believe that **variables cannot be meaningfully controlled** due to the complexity of human interactions and classroom ecologies.

Implications for teaching

- Teaching needs to align with this unified body of evidence and **high-quality teaching has similar characteristics** in most classrooms.

- Teaching needs to be **contextually responsive** so **high quality teaching often looks different** from classroom to classroom.

Why are we having this debate now in Australia?



- Reporting on Australian results from the *Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)* and the *National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)* has shaped perceptions of educational achievement (Ainley et al., 2022).
- Proponents of this narrative argue that these assessments shed light on the systemic issues, such as disparities in teaching quality and resources, which may indicate a broader education crisis requiring a national response (Getenet & Getnet, 2023).



Why are we having this debate now in Australia?



- The messaging around quality of teaching has clearly resonated with governments at both state and federal levels. See:
 - the Victorian Literacy Teaching Model (VLTM) 2.0; and
 - the New South Wales (NSW) Instructional Model.
- These models encourage teachers to adopt a **consistent approach to instruction**, including whole school approaches to lesson routines, a gradual release of responsibility whole class instructional model, and feedback mechanisms to support student progress, aiming to standardise teaching practices across each state while allowing flexibility to address diverse student needs (Rubino & Hajek, 2024).

What about the joy of the learning experience?



- Teachers always need to consider the learners in front of them and take into consideration factors such as their interests, their energy levels, events happening outside of the classroom, and most importantly, their academic and social and emotional needs (Hornstra, 2015).
- While explicit instruction is essential for providing clarity and structure in developing foundational knowledge, it should be complemented by teaching approaches that foster creativity, self-expression and joy (Cronqvist, 2024).

So where does this leave us?

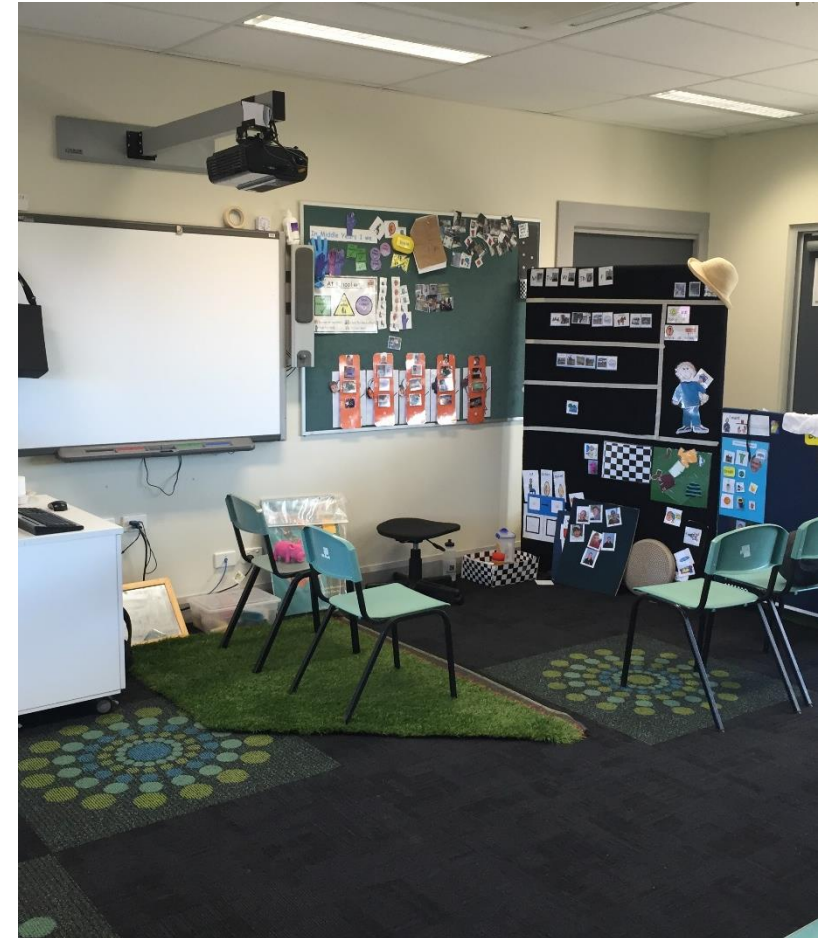


- Education is not solely about test results and data-driven outcomes; it is about inspiring curiosity, fostering creativity and relationships (**social inclusion**).
- By supporting teachers to develop their research literacy while preserving their professional agency, we can create a learning space where students want to come to school and be engaged.

Discussion prompts



- To what extent does privileging a singular “Science of Learning” in policy and practice risk narrowing teachers’ professional judgement, and how might systems balance evidence-informed consistency with the need for context-responsive pedagogy?
- How can educators meaningfully integrate explicit instruction with creativity, joy, and belonging in ways that are not seen as competing priorities, but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of high-quality learning?



Thank You



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