

Editorial



James Clarke
Editor

A bit of a Twitter spat erupted a few weeks ago. Sam Freedman, an Executive Director at the UK's Teach First (a social enterprise that seeks to put the best graduates teaching in the poorest schools) used his 140 characters to comment "At yet another BSF school today with open classrooms + no walls. Had these architects never met any children?" Former editor Dr Sharon Wright was one of many responses when she commented "open plan only works if pedagogy changes as well. Curriculum drives design and means largely cellular spaces in our projects now."

Whether or not this was what was intended, Sharon touched on what, for me, are the two critical issues: that more agile, responsive learning spaces are only successful when the teaching practice matches those spaces, but perhaps more importantly, as long as schools are judged by their results in a specific curriculum (here in England, that's now the EBacc - English, mathematics, two sciences, a foreign language and history or geography) then they'll understandably concentrate on achieving those fixed metrics first and that can have the effect of encouraging them back to the traditional: somewhere known and seemingly safe.

Of course it doesn't need to be like that. I remain an unashamed fan of what Di Pumphrey and her team are doing at West Thornton Primary Academy in South London (and as I write this, Anne Knock is taking a group of her fellow teachers from Sydney around it!) ... not because she had the gall to haul a VW Camper Van into one of her classrooms (see news pages), but because nobody can deny it doesn't support great learning - her school is rated as outstanding, is a teaching school and delivers on those fixed metrics too with above average national test results. "Our environments work" Di replied to Sam Freedman's tweet "because we've also looked long and hard about what good teaching and learning looks like in them and what skills, knowledge and attitudes we are trying to develop in them, so [the] environment and delivery supports learning towards those goals". If, like them, you had the courage to look long and hard at teaching and learning, would you still suggest that didactic direct instruction is the only, or even predominant mode appropriate in the 21st Century? Would you still advocate corridors lined by cellular rooms, each accommodating 30 same-age children sat in rows facing a single teacher?

Questioning how we challenge (and ultimately change) attitudes is, to me, what this magazine is all about. Its success will be when it's read, not just by like-minded architects and educators, but by teachers, parents and governors who simply want to broaden their minds about what's happening successfully in schools around the world and to establish what can be learnt by it. It shouldn't become an echo-chamber: somewhere we sit Casandra-esque smugly celebrating our latest projects. It should be somewhere we can evidence why, what we're doing works and works well. It should be honest enough to show when it doesn't. And it should not be afraid of continuing to look at where other approaches work well, question why, and learn by them ourselves. To do that we don't need talk, we need action because all the talk in the world won't change children's learning. What will be the great projects we'll continue to showcase, wherever around the world they are and whoever has completed them. Enjoy!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James Clarke'.