

Comment

New Beginnings

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Imagine that it is the second week of the new school year, September, 2008. Sitting quietly, your new class wait patiently for the day to begin, calm, attentive and alert. There have been none of the usual tantrums amongst the sensitive, about returning to school and none of the squabbles amongst the more headstrong as they struggle to re-establish the old hierarchies and friendships. As their new teacher, you have been accepted and the parents are delighted with all you have done so far. New children have been welcomed warmly into the class and are almost indistinguishable from the more established members of the group.

But you have not died and gone to heaven. One child straggles into the room, late and, as usual, without any of the equipment that she needs for the day. She briefly distracts the others. You do not sigh or raise an eyebrow or question why she is late. You know. It is not her fault. You make a mental note to see her stepmother after school.

You also notice, with a quick glance at the class 'Feelings Thermometer' that one boy has put his marker on the 'I'm not OK' section. Hardly surprising, given what you know about how he spent his weekend. He is chatting happily to his friend, but his marker is a signal. He knows you know, and you will find a moment to talk with him before the morning is out.

And so the day begins. All are ready and teaching and learning may begin.

It takes courage on the part of school leaders to give staff permission to spend at least one whole week to begin the creative journey towards achieving desirable classroom environment such as this. Imagine the Head saying 'I want you to spend at least a week with your classes – beginning a 'belonging' project', inviting families to help and visit, asking question and discussing dilemmas, getting to know each other much better, playing games, agreeing rules – oh and it will take you at least a day to make a wonderful class mobile together. After that, take stock of the effect that new members are having on the group and don't forget to consider the effect of those who are not here anymore'.

Many will look at you in horror! They will have their Literacy and Numeracy planned to start on the second day of the new year. For many, it will take courage to abandon that planning and teaching, as it is safe ground – a way of being with the children that they know, understand and feel comfortable with. However, maybe the promise of fewer problems and issues later in the year, and a better quality of teaching and learning will persuade them, at least, to give it a try. Those who have tried it would testify to the value of the foundations laid by investing this time and energy in 'New Beginnings'.

Teachers can explore the idea of safety with children, asking questions such as:

- *What is it like to feel unsafe/safe?*
- *What are the effects of this on you? On your ability to learn?*
- *What would make this classroom feel safer?*
- *Is it safe, here, to learn? To be known? To share your feelings and tell people things?*
- *Is it safe for everyone?*
- *How can we all contribute to the feeling of safety?*

The beginning of the new school year always brings with it a spectrum of emotions for children, parents and staff. Schools recognise this well and staff usually spend the last week of their holidays ensuring that their rooms are bright, well organised and welcoming, and planning a fun-packed first day. This day is often spent listening to the many enthusiastic tales of holiday exploits, admiring new pencil cases, giving out new books, establishing new routines and then, of course, undertaking the more serious tasks of setting clear expectations and discipline. However, these activities are still often punctuated by tearful refusals to enter school, fractious squabbles and visits from nervous or complaining parents. Lonely newcomers to the group often react in one of two ways – withdrawing completely or assuming the role of class jester. This important and prestigious role, of course, previously belonged to another child who now has to assume the even more important role of class idiot or even bully. Teachers and teaching assistants often wonder what can have changed in the space of the summer holidays.

The gathering together of a new group at the beginning of a new year is a huge challenge. The group will never be identical to the one that finished the previous year. Even in the unlikely event that no children have left, none have been added and the teacher is the same, the group is still changed. Six weeks have passed since the group was last together and in that time, every member will have had experiences, as yet unshared and however imperceptible, that will have subtly changed them. With that changing comes an inevitable change in the dynamics of the group.

For this reason, one cannot underestimate the vital and deep impact that the experience of the first return will have on the group – any group. Whilst the bright clean classroom, the new books and new routines all play their part, there are much subtler and more serious issues to be considered and attended to.

When I was a headteacher, I used to take the whole school for singing once a week. One of the children's favourite songs was 'Don't Build your House on the Sandy Land' and they used to sing it with great gusto. It had a jolly and catchy tune which they loved, but for me it always served to remind me of my true mission as a teacher and Head, and the fact that no matter how excellent a school, a teacher or a lesson may be, the whole 'educative' process is largely a waste of energy and time if the children themselves are 'on sandy land'. In this context, 'sure foundations' represent emotional balance. Staff may argue that this is unachievable for some children who go home each night to emotional turmoil within their families, and of course spend weekends and long holiday periods in these environments. To some extent, they may be justified and correct, but with a little persuasion and training, they can come to realise that there are plenty of ways to create as positive a learning environment as it is possible to do for all children, and that the key time to start creating this is at the start of a new school year.

Teachers are already very good at having fun with their pupils and creating that atmosphere of 'relaxed alertness' in which almost all children learn best. Many also add to that fun by using trust games and team-building activities, all of which are an excellent start to the 'bonding' process which a new class needs. However these will only go so far in creating a true 'systemic' classroom. The business of building an effective community will not just happen, but needs to be thoughtfully planned and made explicit. Moving the 'child as individual' and 'child as part of his or her family system' towards 'child as one of a class or community' is indeed challenging and serious stuff, and a transition which adults must support sensitively and carefully! Creating a 'safe' place to learn is far more than making sure that children will not trip over frayed carpet ends. It is about creating a culture where everyone is significant, acknowledged and valued without regard to background, disability, differences or temperament.





To 'belong' is an imperative for all human beings. Children will recognise and understand this from an early age. However, their primal loyalty will be to their family system, whatever it is like. Teachers need time to establish the ethos of acceptance and reassure children that there is no conflict of loyalty for them between home and school. Believing this can be one of the greatest challenges for teaching staff who often judge families to be failing in some way, in their responsibilities towards their children. By honouring all of the families within a class and by allowing all children to be open in their honouring of their own and each others' families, teachers can come to truly know and understand their pupils on a very deep level. This pays rich rewards in the relationships within the class. Obviously just as pertinent are issues of culture, religion, ethnicity and lifestyle, all of which may be very diverse in the modern classroom. Differences need to be celebrated in a very explicit way and teachers will find many colourful, exciting and creative ways to do this at the start of a new year, and throughout the subsequent months, if given the time to do so. The importance of involvement of families in this task is a given and an early parent 'event' can help to get parents contributing at the onset. There are not many parents who can resist the pressure from their children to visit school. For those who can, unthreatening events such as popping in for a cup of tea or to see a display of work or plant some bulbs can help persuade even the most reluctant of them to visit school.

In terms of 'belonging to our class', there are other questions to ask of pupils and discuss with them:

- Who belongs here? (don't forget the adults who work in the room)
- What do we expect of each other?
- What are the rules of belonging here?
- What do we do when somebody breaks our rules of belonging?
- What sort of things can make people feel that they do not belong?
- What can we all do about that?

There are many activities which have been developed by **ecl** practitioners, many of them teachers, which are worth exploring in the first week of term and then throughout the year to embed the systemic ethos in the classroom. These are available at www.nowhere-ecl.org

The Group Mobile and the Feelings Thermometer have also been trialled by many teachers and found to be invaluable resources for underpinning systemic values and encouraging children to explore and discuss their feelings and develop a sensitive awareness of each other. In the modern classroom, where teachers and pupils are encouraged to be target driven, performance orientated and competitive, the ethos of striving for individual excellence can easily work against the attempts to create a sense of community or whole group responsibility. A healthy balance can be maintained, but it takes commitment and understanding to do so.

One week at the start of a year does not seem such a huge investment for what can prove to be a huge payback for everyone in the classroom.

