02

Creating a supportive environment

Great teachers create a supportive environment for learning

A supportive environment is characterised by relationships of trust and respect between students and teachers, and among students. It is one in which students are motivated, supported and challenged and have a positive attitude towards their learning.

Summary of Dimension 2

2.1 Promoting interactions and relationships with all students that are based on mutual respect, care, empathy and warmth; avoiding negative emotions in interactions with students; being sensitive to the individual needs, emotions, culture and beliefs of students

2.2 Promoting a positive climate of student-student relationships, characterised by respect, trust, cooperation and care

2.3 Promoting learner motivation through feelings of competence, autonomy and relatedness

2.4 Creating a climate of high expectations, with high challenge and high trust, so learners feel it is okay to have a go; encouraging learners to attribute their success or failure to things they can change

Elements of Dimension 2

1

The first element of this dimension concerns the quality of the relationships between teacher and students. Teachers should show respect and sensitivity towards the individual needs, emotions, culture and beliefs of their students That respect should also be reciprocated: teachers should behave in ways that promote student respect for the integrity and authority of the teacher. Teachers should convey care, empathy and warmth towards their students and avoid negative emotional behaviours, such as using sarcasm, shouting or humiliation. This element is multifaceted and complex, and it is arguable that the range of issues it covers justifies allocating more than one element to it. There are two particular aspects of teacher-student relationships that deserve specific attention: relationships with students with SEND (special educational needs and disabilities) and culturally relevant teaching.

The requirement for respect and sensitivity towards students' individual needs is amplified in both importance and difficulty when those needs are more diverse or extreme. Developing good relationships of trust and respect with students with special educational needs, neurodiversity or disabilities often requires specific knowledge and adaptation. Generic labels such as SEND or their subcategories cover a wide range of individual differences, and the processes by which they become attached to individual students – or may go undiagnosed – are also variable. Great teachers know their students well as individuals, are well informed about the nature and requirements of their students' specific needs and have strategies to accommodate them.

Another key part of this element is the need for teaching to be 'culturally relevant' (Ladson-Billings, 1995): great teachers are aware of, respectful

towards and responsive to the cultural identities of their students. This is particularly important when the students' culture differs from, and has the potential to conflict with, that of the teacher or school. Teachers must ensure that good relationships and academic success are compatible with students honouring their cultural competences, values and identities.

2 The second element views the classroom environment through student-student interactions and relationships. Classrooms where students respect and pay attention to each other's thoughts, and feel safe to express their own thoughts, are more productive for learning. Where students cooperate with each other effectively, they are able to benefit from learning interactions with their peers. By contrast, in classrooms where relationships between students are characterised by aggression, hostility, belittling or disrespect, learning is impeded. The teacher plays a role in promoting these positive student relationships and interactions. This aspect of the classroom environment is an element of the Praetorius et al. (2018) model, the Dynamic Model (Creemers & Kyriakides, 2011) and the CLASS framework (Pianta et al., 2012).

3 The third element of the supportive classroom environment focuses directly on student motivation. Students who are motivated to study, learn, engage and succeed are more likely to do so. In considering motivation, we follow Praetorius et al. (2018) and draw on Deci and Ryan's (2008) self-determination theory (SDT) and, in particular, its application to education (Guay et al., 2008). SDT prioritises the kinds of **motivation** that support the individual's wellbeing and development as much as their task performance. SDT distinguishes between two kinds of motivation: autonomous (which is characterised by a feeling of volition, though may have either intrinsic or extrinsic value that has become part of the individual's identity) and controlled (characterised by feeling "pressure to think, feel, or behave in particular ways", either through explicit, contingent reward/punishment, or "introjected regulation": feelings such as guilt, shame or contingent approval). Autonomous motivation is promoted when individuals feel that three basic needs are met: autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy refers to feeling that they choose their behaviour and that it is aligned with their values and interests. Competence means feeling capable of producing desired outcomes and avoiding undesirable ones. Relatedness means feeling connected with and mutually supported by other people.

Motivation:
In everyday parlance, motivation simply refers to the rationale for an individual's behaviour. Within education, it also refers to a whole field of research with a focus on the complex factors affecting student motivation. As this element demonstrates, there are multiple ways of classifying motivation.

4 The fourth and final element of creating a supportive environment concerns teachers' expectations and attributions. Teachers should demand high standards of work and behaviour from all students, being careful not to convey lower expectations for any subgroup, especially one where a common stereotype may be negative. Even when lower expectations may be indirectly conveyed with good intentions (e.g., praising students for poor work to encourage them; avoiding asking challenging questions to students who seem less confident or helping them sooner when they are stuck), it may still undermine their learning. High expectations may be seen as a form of 'tough

love'. Demanding high standards can mean requiring something that teachers do not genuinely believe is likely, so some suspension of disbelief may be called for. When goals are ambitious and demands are high, learners must feel safe to have a go and take a risk, without feeling pressured or controlled. This requires an environment of trust and a complex balance of asking a lot but still being okay if you get only part of it. And whether students succeed or fail, it matters how they account for it: attributing either success or failure to things they can change (such as how hard they worked or the strategies they used) is more adaptive for future success than attributing results to things that are out of their control (like luck, 'ability', or not having been taught it).

Evidence for Dimension 2

This dimension is one part of the German three-dimensional model (Praetorius et al., 2018) and at the heart of the CLASS framework (Classroom Assessment Scoring System, Pianta et al., 2012). This prominence may partly reflect the origins of CLASS in early years settings, though the development and extension of CLASS to classrooms with older children has shown it is just as important there. Nevertheless, it may be that some aspects of this dimension are more important in some types of classroom setting than others (for example, with younger or more educationally 'at-risk' students, or those for whom schooling is generally a less positive experience; Pianta et al., 2012). Indicators of classroom climate also feature in two internationally validated instruments for measuring teaching quality, ICALT (van de Grift et al., 2017) and ISTOF (Muijs et al., 2018).

The importance of classroom environment and relationships is supported by several prominent psychological theories. Among these are Deci and Ryan's (2008) self-determination theory, which identifies feelings of competence, autonomy and social-relatedness as the requirements for students to be motivated and to achieve. Also invoked are theories of meaningful engagement (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000), self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 1996), attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and Vygotskian social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1962).

We might justify the need for these positive teacher behaviours on grounds of decency and human rights. But there is also empirical evidence to suggest that they are associated with higher achievement, along with other positive student outcomes (Hamre et al., 2014; Pianta et al., 2012; Praetorius et al., 2018). For example, evaluations of My Teaching Partner (e.g., Allen et al., 2011) show that when teachers work on improving the warmth and supportiveness of classrooms, student outcomes improve. There is also evidence of benefits for attainment from the evaluations of interventions that target social and emotional learning by improving classroom environment (Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

There is evidence that autonomous forms of motivation are more conducive to student attainment, persistence and depth of thinking (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004), though other studies have found mixed results and there may be some confusion in the literature about what kinds of teacher behaviours may be classed as 'autonomy-promoting'. The requirements of autonomy,

competence and relatedness are explicitly observed in the German three-dimensional model (Praetorius et al., 2018). In this framework, supporting autonomy means making work interesting and relevant, avoiding competitiveness or public pressure and allowing students choices about how they work; supporting competence means differentiating the difficulty level of work, adapting the level of support, giving students enough time to think and keep up, and responding positively and constructively to errors; support for social relatedness concerns the relationships between teacher-student and student-student outlined above. Praetorius et al. found an overall small positive association (0.12) between these observed behaviours and student attainment.

The relationship between high teacher expectations and student attainment has been a mainstay of educational effectiveness research since it began (Muijs et al., 2014). Although much of this research has failed to establish the direction of causality, to conceptualise 'expectations' properly, or to demonstrate that we know how to change teachers' expectations, there probably is enough evidence that both subliminal and explicit teacher expectations can influence student attainment and become, at least to some extent, self-fulfilling prophecies (Muijs et al., 2014). Moreover, it is a characteristic of effective interventions such as mastery learning (Bloom, 1976) that teachers require mastery from all students (Creemers et al., 2013). Another source of theoretical support for high expectations comes from goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002) which finds that, other things being equal (goals must be specific, accepted, possible and not conflicted), the more challenging the goal, the better the level of performance actually achieved.

Research on the importance of students' attributions is also abundant (Yeager & Walton, 2011). A range of interventions to help students expect early struggle, to see ability as malleable/incremental rather than fixed/entity or to attribute results to strategy use have found that future expectancies, persistence and performance can be improved by encouraging adaptive attributions (Dweck, 2000; Weiner, 1985; Yeager & Walton, 2011).

Although we are not aware of any direct evidence for this hypothesis, it may be that the teaching skills and behaviours that promote a supportive environment belong in the more advanced end of the teacher development curriculum. It may be possible for competent teachers to be quite effective in promoting learning for most students without really paying much attention to this dimension – that might explain why some of the empirically grounded frameworks, such as the Dynamic Model of Creemers and Kyriakides (2011), do not even include this aspect. Perhaps classroom environment becomes important for determining learning only when other things are well established, or matters significantly for only some students. Overall, it seems unlikely that devoting effort to improving this dimension will be a high-leverage strategy for improving outcomes for most teachers. Nevertheless, we have included it because: (a) there is good evidence that it can have at least a small impact on learning in general classrooms; (b) there may be some contexts or individuals for whom the impact is much larger; and (c) there is good evidence for its impact on wider outcomes, such as student wellbeing and attitudes (Pianta et al., 2012).