

run the risk



Learning through risk is a natural and innate urge, says Paul Dix, so don't stifle your class with a spoon fed curriculum...

Risk has become a dirty word in education. There's fear about accidents on school trips and a pervasive paranoia over safety that surrounds children and families. Compounding the issue are OFSTED's new orders on Safeguarding, and the recent ATL survey that suggests an increasing number of false allegations are being made against teachers.

In wider society the reduction of risk is coupled with less freedom for children to explore the world for themselves and on their own terms. In the classroom, risk is an essential element of teaching and learning. Not the kind of risk that would cause parents concern but risk that engages, interests, excites and motivates. Risk that allows children to walk the tightrope of failure with the safety net of a supportive classroom climate. Risk that breaks away from the monotony of prescriptive curriculum and formulaic teaching. Risk that raises expectations and achievement.

Being able to take a risk distinguishes outstanding teachers. Classrooms where students feel they can take a risk without fear of ridicule, embarrassment or shame are classrooms where students learn faster and are in more control of their learning.

Imagine learning a foreign language without ever taking the risk to speak it aloud, trying to comprehend particle physics without discussing it or learning to ride a bike without actually getting on the saddle. Risk taking when you are just learning a new skill or concept is, as they say, 'a big ask'. It needs a great deal of trust between peers and confidence in the teacher. Yet classrooms where risks are taken are fascinating places in which to learn. They are filled with the excitement of new ideas, the honesty of how humans learn, unexpected turns and a common pursuit of understanding.

Take a chance

In the classroom, risk is about teaching by asking rather than telling, genuinely exploratory and open ended tasks and being flexible enough to abandon a plan to pursue an unexpectedly intriguing path. It is teaching that has been made unfashionable by the formula fanatics who constantly tell us that there is only one way to raise achievement. By removing the crutch for the teacher and the predictability for the children you can demonstrate your own fallibility as a learner and help the children to understand

how to manage theirs. Learning through risk taking is a natural and innate urge that is suppressed by a spoon fed curriculum and uninspiring teaching formulas that leave little to chance.

Children learn better with risk that exerts gentle stress. It imprints learning in the long term memory without wasting too much time in the working memory. Risk that

frightens and causes panic encourages the fight or flight response that blocks the rational brain and higher order thinking. Finding the right balance for the individual and building the mutual trust that forms the safely net is the skill of the outstanding teacher.

How risk can build relationships

Experiencing success with physical risk builds confidence and self esteem. It cuts out the talk about trust and gives you clear reference points to return to when you are encouraging risk in more sedentary activities. 'Do you remember how you led Chelsea safely around the room with the blindfold? That is the gentleness and care that I need to see you use when you help her with her poem.' Trust games are a trojan horse for encouraging children to build relationships, gauging their limits with risk and the giving and receiving of trust. They immediately highlight

those children who shy away from risk, those who are comfortable with it and those who are too trusting. Standing back and watching reveals so much more than sitting and talking about it.

Risky Games

Establish your safety rules early and implement them vigorously. Be aware of the need to assess the risk for the group before embarking on the games. Check the space is safe, consider splitting the class into manageable groups for smaller spaces and demonstrate each game pedantically. When the atmosphere in the room is really focused, the exercises are tense, disciplined and revealing.

It is a good idea to use each of the activities below as a rung on a 'ladder of trust' and ask children to demonstrate the safe execution of each exercise before you teach riskier ones. Use the games regularly as a physical warm up in the mornings, as reward or as a wake up after lunch.

1 LEADING THE BLIND

In pairs, A and B, students lead each other using a tie or piece of string. A holds the string in both hands with eyes tightly shut while B slowly leads him around the room, avoiding contact with the rest of the participants. As are attempting to give trust by keeping their eyes closed and Bs are receiving trust and trying to use it responsibly. Experiment with shorter and longer leashes, leading around objects and in controlled conditions over obstacles.

2 TRUST CARS

Again in pairs, A with eyes shut and B leading but this time from behind – A is the 'car' and B the 'driver'. To begin with there are three agreed signals: hand on the left shoulder turn left (and keep turning until the hand is removed), hand on the right shoulder turn right and flat hand placed (gently!) between the shoulder blades to stop. As the exercise develops students will naturally think of other ideas for useful controls. B 'drives' A around the room; trust is seen to be broken if A opens his eyes. Develop the exercise by asking children to lead just with the voice, with numbers and compass points.

3 WALKING INTO WALLS

A and B stand opposite each other seven or eight metres apart. With eyes closed, A will walk towards B and only stop when the command is given. If the command is late, or A walks too fast the two will collide. Practise the exercise to show how long it takes for the command to be registered and the walker halted. Extend this exercise for responsible pupils so that the walker speeds up or is heading towards the wall rather than his partner.

Asking children to take a risk requires some good modelling from the teacher. Take some risks yourself by encouraging reflections on your teaching from the children's perspective. Dip your toes in the water gently or go for full immersion.

Paul Dix is the winner of a National Training Award 2009 and founder of Pivotal Education. Pivotal deliver sustainable training for schools and individual teachers and assistants.



A little risk...

DON'T BE AFRAID TO CONSULT YOUR AUDIENCE...

Try giving each student a voting slip or plastic coin at the end of the lesson and asking them to drop it in one of three marked pots 'Perfectly paced', 'A little too fast for me' and 'Not fast enough' or 'Great lesson, thank you', 'OK', 'Must try harder'. For younger children, translate the text into images, faces or photographs and everyone can have their say.

"In some classrooms risk is about letting children lead and putting the teacher in the position of the learner."