Part V
Knowing Students' Learning Needs

Introduction

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To effectively plan and help students learn, you must first know something about the needs of those you are teaching. Your students will come from very different backgrounds and have various learning needs, and thus Murray and Moore (2012) talk about the need to recognise individual students' needs and strengths rather than viewing the class as a single unit. Teachers need to create a classroom that caters for all students' different ways of learning, linking this specifically to Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI).

The four chapters in this section all deal in some way with knowing the particular needs of the range of students you might find in a classroom and the need to make learning accessible and meaningful for all. The issues explored and reflected upon range from engaging students through visual aids, the issue of inclusion for students who are challenged with their learning, the idea of listening to the children's voice, through to the issue of readiness for formal schooling.

Nikki Cardillo in Chap. 20 was led to reflect during her practicum experiences on the use of visual aids and why teachers valued visual aids within the classroom in a range of school settings. She came to teaching with a prior belief that the visual was beneficial, but she had not thought deeply about why this was so. She explores the issue of students who are visual learners, reflects on the displays in classrooms and their effect on the classroom climate and their use as aids to learning, including the visual charts and posters used for behaviour and classroom management.

In this regard, Fisher et al. (2014) recognise that teachers can use visual aids to encourage students to better connect to new concepts, but they say that as number lines, shapes, artwork and other materials tend to cover elementary classroom walls, too much of a good thing may end up disrupting attention and learning in young children.

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In Chap. 21 Cam Foulis reflects on his own school experience of being a student who struggled with learning and experienced being withdrawn from the classroom for extra help. During his practicum experiences and seeing similar students challenged by learning expectations, he was led to reflect on his own experiences and on how these students were catered for and encouraged in their learning in today's classrooms.

The issue of inclusion and differentiated learning has been a much researched area, with the issue of withdrawal or in-class support being much contested. Wiener and Tardif (2004) found in their research that children in more inclusive classrooms had more positive social and emotional functioning. Children receiving in-class support were more accepted by peers, had higher self-perceptions and fewer problem behaviours than children receiving withdrawal group support. Cam's experience led him to believe that there is certainly more recognition and knowledge about how to work with children who need extra help or individual programs in schools today. He concluded that it is important to highlight strengths, have constructive communication with parents, and have high expectations for all students.

In Chap. 22 Sadie Sandery explores the question of children having a voice in their learning. Do we allow for children's own experiences and interests when planning? She reflects on whether adherence to curriculum can also allow children's ideas and interests to lead the learning direction. Copple (2003) says that allowing children to participate in the planning in early childhood can lead to empowerment. Children's play should be valued, verbal interaction plentiful, and children should be encouraged to frequently engage in planning and reflection.

Readiness for school is the issue taken up by Elke Sharp in Chap. 23. Sometimes it takes only one child to cause us serious reflection on a broad issue. Elke concludes that she still has a lot more thinking to do about this issue, but acknowledges that being equipped with the pedagogical knowledge to assist all students no matter what their entry skills is important. Lewit and Baker (1995) ask the question, 'is it the child who should be ready for school or the school that should be ready for the child?' It is very difficult to measure how ready the child is or how well equipped the school is to cater for differentiation. Julia Haynes (2013) writes that the current emphasis on the concept of school readiness can place some children under pressure to perform educationally in ways that they are developmentally not ready for, particularly with an earlier starting age, and can lead to early labelling. However the effective provision of pre-school education can lead to improved cognitive and social outcomes.

References

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