

Artful tactics lead to success in classroom

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Anita Mortock, a PhD student from Victoria's Faculty of Education, has spent the last two years observing five, six and seven year old students in the classroom and analysing their behaviour during mat time.

Anita found that some children adopt competitive tactics to attract the teacher's attention, including being able to predict when the teacher will call them to mat time and getting there early, or arriving last and getting other children to move so they can sit down. She says children identified that being positioned close to the teacher meant they would have a better learning experience.

She says some children are astute at reading their teacher and as her research progressed, she noticed that social dynamics were increasingly evident during mat time. "There was no discernable communication between students, they just somehow worked together to isolate another child if they were considered to be lower in the [social hierarchy](#)."

"Children were constantly aware of their peers' reputation and were able to tell me about their perceived qualities of their peers—for example, 'he's lazy because he doesn't put his hand up' or 'I like to sit with her because she helps me with the answers'."

"One child would choose to sit next to a fellow pupil who they didn't seem to like, but knew the teacher looked at them a lot so they would get attention too."

Anita also noticed that some children would twist situations to their advantage to increase their standing with their peers, "One boy said to me: 'It's really important I speak out during mat time because then the class will know how clever I am'."

"This is important because when children can participate in discussions and ask questions, they tend to be able to retain information and learn more," says Anita.

Despite their relatively young age, Anita says some children had already learnt the importance of timing and were aware that during discussions, if you had to wait to give your answer there was a risk that someone else would give the same answer before you.

"They know how to operate the system very artfully and have a good understanding of the classroom environment," says Anita.

"One child was very articulate, saying that he used his good ideas during class discussions, but saved his best ideas for his own work so that when the class come back to the mat again his work might be used as an example for others. This reinforces his identity and reputation as a highly competent peer, which potentially makes him a desirable person to buddy up with in pair-tasks. What we are looking at here, is not just enhancing or maintaining an academic reputation amongst the children, but social positioning".

Anita hopes her findings will enable teachers to look more closely at their connections with individual children and examine how they make space for and make visible each child's contributions to the group.

"What is it that makes teachers work with one child with total joy but work with another because it is their job? It's about being honest about the fact that it is human nature to like some [children](#) more than others, and to put strategies in place to ensure practices and opportunities are equitable."

After speaking with Anita, one teacher acknowledged that she started actively trying to find something that each individual child brought to the group that was of value.

"Once they found it, the [teacher](#) was excited about the [child's](#) learning, which they hadn't previously felt."

Provided by Victoria University

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