

Unit 1

Conditions of teaching and learning

1. Introduction

When planning your lessons, you need a sufficiently clear idea about the characteristics and learning conditions both in the class as a whole and among individual students. It is important to understand the children with their differences: the scope of variation in their skills and abilities, their strengths and weaknesses, their beliefs, attitudes and interests.

On the one hand, you will clarify the learning conditions in a class in terms of the teaching objectives you have in mind. On the other hand, when selecting objectives and topics, you will draw on your knowledge of the characteristics of individual children and the whole class.

By identifying the conditions of learning you will have completed the first part of preliminary clarifications. In your further planning, you must also take into account the general conditions under which your teaching will take place. Finally, you should not forget your own teaching skills; this is to ensure that you will make effective use of them, and develop them further without placing too demanding a burden on yourself in your teaching work.

At the beginning of this unit you will find key questions followed by work files that can be used whenever needed.

2. Task and key questions for conditions of teaching and learning

2.1 Task

At the beginning of this unit you will find the key questions. The subsequent questions for your self-control offer a more detailed approach to different aspects of learning conditions.

2.2 Key questions

- What knowledge and skills do the students already possess?
- What knowledge and skills do I possess?
- What external conditions must I be aware of?
- What do I know about the students as individuals?
- What elements of knowledge and information must the students command to enable them to tackle the new task ahead of them?
- Referring to the new subject matter, what (advance) information, skills and experience have the students already acquired? What is new for them, what is repetition, what is essential and what is supplementary?
- What techniques of working and learning may I expect the students to master, and what experience do they have with different teaching methods and forms of social interaction?
- What positive or negative attitudes, habits, prejudices or convictions may, or must I, expect to encounter?
- How can I overcome learning difficulties, learning barriers and resistance against learning?
- Have I adequately considered the children's willingness to learn, their state of feelings, their responsiveness, their learning needs, their expectations, their interests, their free-time activities, and their living conditions?

- What socio-cultural conditions and influences, and what systems of support are of importance for the work in the classroom? What role do parents, brothers and sisters, peers or other people of psychological importance play?

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Work file 1: How to take students' skills and knowledge into account

- What do I know about the class?
- What characteristics of the class should I take into account and respond to?
- How do I want to, or how must I lead the class (communication, social behaviour, disturbed relationships, etc.)?
- What is the class atmosphere like (developments in the group, ties of friendship, outsiders, etc.)?
- Which conventions are to be adhered to (language, duties, seating, rules of social interaction, rituals, special occasions, ceremonies and parties, etc.)?
- What is the size of the class, and what is its structure (gender, multicultural variety, etc.)?

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Work file 2: How to take my teaching skills and knowledge into account

- What general experience, skills and knowledge do I have?
- To what extent is my knowledge incomplete – referring to contents and subject matter, objectives, suitable teaching methods and the processes of learning?
- In which fields do I wish to learn myself (knowledge, teaching methods, professional skills, personal qualities, routine, etc.)?
- Which concept of human nature serves as my general guideline?
- What is the theoretical framework, or the simplified version of a theory, which guides my work as a teacher?
- How would I describe and classify my relationship to my students?
- Where are my personal limits, as far as working hours, stress, etc., are concerned? How do I make use of my personal working capacity?
- How can I reduce my workload by better planning, both of my work and other activities?
- How do I use, and economise on, my time budget, and how do I deal with sources of personal stress?

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Work file 3: Considering general teaching and learning conditions

- How do I account for the time of the day or year, and the disposable teaching time?
- How has the classroom been designed?
- How is the school equipped: quantity and variety of rooms, available media, materials, etc?
- What framework is provided in terms of school culture (joint projects for different age groups, team work and team obligations, co-operation with parents, authorities or experts for children with specific needs, etc.)?

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Work file 4: What are my basic attitudes towards students?

- Empathy, devotion (responsiveness to feelings, thoughts, views and needs), benevolent acceptance (personal esteem does not depend on any conditions), sincerity, stability, reliability
- Leadership in a spirit of esteem and respect (emotional devotion, inductive reasoning, authoritative control, support of social integration and democracy)

Relationships and communication in the class

- Mutual understanding
- Symmetric relationships
- Sexually non-discriminating co-education
- Meeting other people
- Friendship
 - Verbal and non-verbal communication
 - Adopting other perspectives and points of view
 - Self-perception and perception by others

Atmosphere of conflict prevention

- Fair and caring community, community of learners, shared responsibilities (teachers and students – both male and female)
- Co-operation, not competition
 - Social learning
 - Rules and conventions
 - Meta-communication and meta-interaction
 - Limitation and reinforcement

Educational measures

- Conflict resolution talks
- “Round table”
- Games
- Co-operation as guideline for modifying personal behaviour
- Supportive feedback
- Individual responsibilities
- Punishment
- Dealing with bullying and violence and in the class or school

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Work file 5: Rethinking discipline and order from a democratic point of view

- Order is necessary under all circumstances. A group without order and basic rules cannot be democratic.
- Limits are necessary. Rules may be wrong or inappropriate. But as long as they have not been replaced they must be respected. It must, however, be possible to change them.
- From the very beginning, children should participate in setting up and enforcing rules. Only in this way is it possible for them to identify with the rules.
- A classroom community cannot function without mutual trust and respect. In some cases it may prove difficult to create such an atmosphere.
- Team spirit must replace competition in the classroom.
- A friendly classroom atmosphere is of vital importance.
- The social skills of the teacher have an essential contribution to make (democratic leadership, developing a feeling of belonging to the group, building up relationships, etc.).
- Group communication is a permanent reality in a democratically led class.
- Students, both boys and girls, must be encouraged to explore something new and to learn from mistakes.
- Within the limits set, it must be possible to exercise liberties. Only in this way is it possible for individual responsibility to develop.
- Discipline and order will be accepted and complied with most willingly if they help each individual to express himself or herself, and if they support the group in developing satisfying relationships and working conditions.

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Work file 6: Rethinking the teacher's role from a democratic point of view

Teachers have to lead and accompany the class. This is their task. They have to decide on various things and also control everything. What teachers should not do is to aim at also controlling thinking processes and personal development of their students. Especially in EDC/HRE, the teacher becomes a role model for his/her students. How does he/she deal with conflicts? What idea of people does he/she promote? The following list gives a clue where one can position oneself. But it is clear, however, that according to learning situation, mood of the day, moments of danger or set-up of the group of students, etc., it can make sense to be more autocratic or to be more democratic. Generally it is important to note: my idea of a person as a teacher will leave an imprint on my daily work with the students.

Learning situation	
Rather autocratic	Rather democratic
Ruler	Leader
Sharp voice	Friendly voice
Order	Invitation, request
Power	Influence
Pressure	Suggestion
Demand of compliance	Winning over to co-operation
Imposition of tasks	Offering of ideas
Predominant mode of criticism	Frequent encouragement
Frequent punishment	Frequent support and help
"I'm telling you!"	"Let's talk it over."
"I decide, you obey!"	"I make a proposal and help you to decide."
Sole responsibility for the group	Shared responsibility with and in the group

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Work file 7: How to develop a democratic atmosphere in the classroom

If a teacher decides to organise the classroom more democratically this is connected with a big goal. The following table shows the steps that could be taken.

1. Where do I stand in which aspects?
2. Which aspect do I choose for tomorrow, for next week, next year?
3. How do I act as a teacher in order to make my school benefit from my learning progress?

Short-term objectives	Medium-term objectives	Long-term objectives
Teacher reduces use of extremely authoritarian expressions	Teacher develops habitual use of reversible expressions	Mutual understanding between students and teacher
Teacher gives reasons for his/her selection of subjects and materials	Teacher offers alternative subjects and teaching materials	Joint lesson planning by students and teacher
Teacher explains learning objectives to students	Teacher presents alternative learning objectives to students	Joint selection of learning objectives by students and teacher
Teacher gives reasons for his choice of teaching methods	Teacher presents alternative options of teaching methods	Joint decision on teaching methods by students and teacher
Teacher gives reasons for his marking of students' performance	Teacher explains problems of marking	Self-assessment by students
Introduction to democratic modes of conflict resolution	Teacher ceases to make authoritative use of power to resolve conflict	Conflict resolution by means of co-operation and communication
Teacher explains principles of how work in the classroom is organised	Students' suggestions on work organisation are considered	Students participate in decisions on organising work in the classroom

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Work file 8: How to develop school as a democratic community

EDC/HRE and the way to a democratic atmosphere cannot only take place in the classroom but also have to be developed within the school. In this respect, the most important key player is the school principal.

Within the Council of Europe EDC/HRE materials the tool “Democratic governance of schools” suggests key areas to work in and steps to take on the way to school as a democratic community (see also Unit 5 in this part, Work files 15-18).

These four key areas are:

1. Governance, leadership, management and public accountability
2. Value-centred education
3. Co-operation, communication and involvement: competitiveness and self-determination
4. Student discipline

Governance, leadership, management and public accountability

Various stakeholders such as legislators, local school boards, trade unions, students and parents as well as local communities make demands of school leadership. How are these challenges met by the school leader? What kind of management is applied by him/her in the school? Is leadership built on consensus and trust or is leadership characterised by mistrust and rivalry? How are responsibilities shared in the school? How is diversity dealt with by the school leader? And how does the school show accountability towards different stakeholders?

Value-centred education

How do values such as democracy, human rights and respect for diversity appear in formal and informal contexts in a school? How are values and social skills promoted as a prerequisite for peaceful co-existence in the modern globalised society? How are these values given thought in the school?

Co-operation, communication and involvement: competitiveness and self-determination

School is not separated from the rest of society or from the real world. How does a school communicate internally and externally? How does a school co-operate internally and externally? Does the school resemble more a dissociated company or does it resemble a door to the rest of society through its ways and modes of communication and involvement? What does a school mission statement say? How much is the school determined to put into practice its set goals when communicating and opening itself to the rest of society?

Student discipline

A lot of people work together in a school. What forces should be used to maintain discipline and order in a democratically governed school? What makes students follow given rules, and what makes them oppose them? Does a democratic school mean chaos without the students following any rules?