

# Negotiating the curriculum with students: a conversation worth having

**Recent reforms in curriculum encourage teachers to involve students more closely in decisions about learning. Kath Murdoch and Nadine Le Mescam suggest some key principles to help move this from an ideal to a practical reality in the classroom.**

Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change—personal change, community and organizational change, planetary change. If we can sit together and talk about what is important to us, we begin to come truly alive.

[Margaret J. Wheatley (2003) in *Turning to One Another: Simple conversations that restore hope to the future*, Berrett-Koeler Publishers Inc., San Francisco]

The value of increasing the role of students in decisions made about and for their learning is a persistent theme in the current discourse of educational reform. Many teachers are exploring new ways to give their students a stronger voice in the learning conversation that takes place in schools and there is plenty of evidence to suggest such involvement enhances learning. When students are really listened to, when they are valued and included in such decisions, they are far more productive and motivated.

Research also confirms the very real differences between learners, highlighting the need to recognise the learning preferences of the individual. If our aim is to nurture students as active, capable and responsible learners, then we must invite them into the teaching and learning conversation that has traditionally been 'secret teachers' business'.

The concept of negotiating learning is far from new. Well over a decade ago, the visionary educator, Garth Boomer, wrote extensively on the subject. Yet, the reality in most classrooms remains a long way short of his ideal. Involving students closely in decision-making sparks a range of strong reactions—from the excitement of possibility (I wonder what my students will do with this?) to the fear of losing control (As a teacher, what can and should I decide?).

## **New conversations for success**

In recent times, we have each been fortunate to observe and participate in primary and middle years classrooms where at least some of the curriculum is negotiated with students. In these classrooms, teachers and students have taken risks and have begun to have new kinds of conversations. Here, we share some key principles distilled from those experiences:

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### **Teachers are active listeners**

Teachers consciously and genuinely listen to (and document) students' ideas, wonderings, stories and experiences. Such conversations may be planned or spontaneous and can occur with the entire class, small groups or individual students.

Structures such as developmental play workshops, small group learning, or scheduled appointments for individual or group conferences can provide more time for quality, purposeful conversation. As one Year 5/6 teacher said, 'I love getting the chance to talk with the kids about what they are doing, as individuals. In the crowded, busy, day-to-day of teaching you don't get much of an opportunity to do that ... it's worth it.'

### **Students participate in decision-making**

There are many techniques teachers can use to invite students to participate in making decisions about what and how they will learn. Finding out what students are interested in learning about, or in learning to do, can provide fascinating responses. Older students may be asked to identify more specifically the things that interest or concern them—at a personal, community and global level. This information can be used to create and inform programs.

Similarly, even within a more teacher-determined environment, students can develop questions or issues that interest them about that topic—particularly when they are provided with stimulating, hands-on experiences that activate thinking and wondering. When teachers take time to observe what motivates individuals, they are often amazed by the depth and breadth of student interests.

### **Choice and responsibility begins early**

If we want our students to develop as independent and responsible learners, we must give them plenty of practice. Providing choice (even about the smallest things, such as where to sit in the classroom) builds important decision-making skills and tells our students that we trust and respect them.

Observing a pre-school environment, where students are often given many more choices than those at school, can be a salutary reminder of the capacity even very young children have to manage themselves. Students who are empowered to contribute to the conversation about their learning from the outset become highly skilled in the process as they move through the school.

### **Teacher planning is informed by student learning**

When we thoroughly plan our day, week, term or year, we can fall into the trap of leaving little space for the learning opportunities that arise unexpectedly. Plans need to remain flexible so that we can act upon what students reveal to us about their needs and interests. It is all too common for teachers to ask students, 'What would you like to find out?', then proceed with what they had planned to do anyway! When this happens, the message is clear—it is what the teacher wants that really counts.

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Of course, thorough planning is essential; however, in the successful classrooms we have seen, teachers regularly ask themselves such question as: What are my students revealing to me? How will this refine where we go next? How do my plans need to be modified? This is conscious, empowering teaching.

### **Different students explore different content**

One of the greatest blockers to a more differentiated and student-centred pedagogy is the perception that students need to be 'covering' the same thing—often at the same time and at the same speed.

While we would argue that not all curriculums should or can be negotiated in this way, the pressure of what we 'have to cover', and the time available to do it, can blind us to the potential of more independent, varied pathways. Increasingly, curriculum documents identify broader, generic skills—such as thinking, collaboration, communication—that can be developed across a range of content.

Brittany, a Year 6 student, reflects on what her negotiated inquiry has taught her. While the content of her inquiry was rich, it is the personal development that shines through when she says, 'This inquiry has given me a better view on the world and I will be a whole new "ME" ... I now know I will look at the world through a different perspective, as if it were a different eye ... I would like to know how others take in their units (topics) and how they now view the world. I wish everyone could have a better perspective and learn what I have. Just imagine ...'

### **Negotiation is carefully scaffolded and structured**

In considering greater negotiation with students, many teachers worry about potential chaos or loss of structure in the classroom. From what we have experienced, negotiating can be much more purposeful and meaningful if structures, routines and record keeping are tightly in place. Essential skills such as questioning, time-management, self-assessment, decision-making and critical thinking need to be explicitly modelled and discussed.

In addition, successful teachers actively work on dispositions that accompany independence—persistence, risk taking, patience and having the confidence to seek assistance and receive feedback.

Such skills and dispositions are clear in this reflection from a Year 6 student who revealed, 'I have found my confidence has deeply improved, and I am amazed at the organisation skills I have developed. I now feel confident about conferencing with my teacher ... and I know that I am interested in my topic, and really enjoy it. I think it's great to learn about (negotiating) because what you learn pretty much stays with you forever.'

### **Teachers and students see themselves in new ways**

Many of the teachers to whom we have spoken have identified the process of 'letting go' as critical to their capacity to truly value and listen to the voices of their students. What are they

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letting go of? Not rigour or structure as is so often suggested, they are relinquishing the need to control the learning experience and to make all the decisions.

Similarly, students themselves may not initially respond well to the invitation, particularly if they have become accustomed to most decisions being made for them. Honest dialogue about these challenges is an important part of managing change.

### **The rewards**

All of us want to feel valued, to have a voice and to have our opinions respected by others. As adults, we usually consider it our right to be heard and to have a say in matters that affect us. When this is denied, we are left feeling disempowered, unmotivated, distrustful or even angry. Similarly, students have a right to participate in decisions about their learning.

Acknowledging and respecting this right in the classroom can reward us with learning outcomes that often far exceed our expectations. It is definitely a conversation worth having.



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