LEARNING IN THE G-RATED CLASSROOM:
GREAT EXPECTATIONS, GREAT FOR KIDS, GREAT TO BE DIFFERENT... AND GREAT FOR ME

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Abstract

Students come to school armed with values and attitudes, skills and knowledge of various kinds, which have in part been shaped by the people and experiences that make up their world. Ideally, their teachers will draw on these experiences and knowledge in ways that empower their learning. The task for teachers is demanding, complex and problematic and it is sometimes easier for them to overlook the external influences on their students in favor of developing classroom programs that are, from their perspective, safe, familiar and generic. This paper describes one teacher's attempts to develop a culture of learning in her classroom through practices that focus on making learning explicit and which encourage children to make links between their time at school and their lives outside of school. It highlights three aspects of learning: the personal (understanding of self as a learner), the metacognitive (understanding how to learn), and the social (understanding how learning works in their world). The paper draws on the voices of students, students' work, teacher reflections and classroom vignettes from the primary classrooms shared by the teacher and her students. What emerges from this account is the value of students being explicit about their learning as a way of acknowledging their identity and agency in the learning process. The paper also highlights the importance of teachers developing pedagogies that are inclusive of all students as a consequence of practice that is more thoughtful and strategic.

Learning in the G-rated classroom:

Great expectations, Great for kids, Great to be different ... and Great for me

Introduction

Is it possible to develop a classroom curriculum that is suitable for all students?

Teachers are forever being confronted with documents that provide frameworks to guide instruction. Sometimes the guides match the needs of the students that teachers are working with, sometimes they do not. What happens to the students and their learning when the curriculum is less relevant? What, if anything, do teachers do to adapt their curriculum to suit the needs of their students and at the same time satisfy accountability needs of large Systems? These are the types of questions that teachers are required to address in their daily attempts to teach the students in their care.

In a world that increasingly relies on multi-media, to highlight the foibles and inconsistencies of current societal practices through representing true-to-life experiences in a popular genre, schools themselves are often the target of movie-makers. It is not uncommon to see stories
that tell of the failure of schools and teachers to meet the needs of their students. However, most movies aim to provide the viewers with the opportunity to be entertained, have their thoughts values and ideas challenged, even provoked and to inform them of a world beyond their own.

Some movies are given a "G-rating". Those that are, are deemed to be suitable for General exhibition, which translates to being suitable for anyone who chooses to watch it. This is an enormous leap of faith by the movie censors responsible for rating movies, who could never hope to be aware of all the variables that may make a movie suitable for each of its viewers. Nonetheless there is criteria that has been developed which is used to guide the censors and which generally satisfy both the public and the censors alike.

Drawing on the movie terminology then, can anyone genuinely suggest that there could be such a thing as a "G-rated" classroom? It may well be as equally ambitious as the movie censors, but the idea deserves consideration and a brief explanation of its origin.

The phrase, "G-rated" classroom was coined by a student in my third and fourth grade classroom, who called out his idea during a discussion about a movie that we had been studying in class. We had been discussing the movie's classification of a "G" rating and how it was intended to be suitable for everyone, when he said, "That's just like our classroom." When I asked what he meant he said "great expectations", which was our class motto at the time, "great for learning", and "great fun". The comment seemed to capture the imagination of the class and they enthusiastically made a list of some of the "G" values, in the class and asked me to make a "G-rated" icon to put on the classroom door so everyone could know what our classroom was like.

Can classrooms in reality have a "G" rating? Can we identify common factors of a curriculum, pedagogy of learning or a teaching methodology that serves all the members of the class in an equitable way and offers them real world connections that help them to make more sense of their world?

The students' "G" list included the phrases mentioned above as well as: Great to each other, Great ideas, Great workers, Great environment, and Grateful for the things we learn about. It is interesting to explore the idea of what a "G-rating" might include from a professional point of view and as the teacher-researcher in various classrooms typical of the one described above. I have deconstructed my own practise to attempt to identify the principles that work to make a classroom "G-rated". and put them forward for discussion in this paper.

A 'G-rated" Classroom will be built using the following principles.

The classroom:

- Acknowledges and begins with the students prior knowledge.
- Provides opportunities for real choice in what students want to learn and how they go about it
- Includes content relevant to the socio-cultural as well as the intellectual needs of the student
- Links classroom experiences and learning to their world outside of school
- Fosters learning independence
- Encourages students to learn more about themselves as learners as a way of finding their place in the world.

Teaching is a highly interactive and social practice that relies heavily on strong trusts, relationships and effective communication between the teacher and the learner if the
learning is to be as effective as possible. In every class, both teacher and learner bring knowledge and experiences to the classroom that will affect the outcome of the work done within it. Many of the experiences may have aspects in common but the likelihood is that most will be unique and different but highly influential on the relationships that grow from the shared classroom experience. Vygotsky's work on socio-cultural theory tells us that most learning takes place in an environment where the learner with the support of a more experienced teacher or supporter, acknowledges and builds-on to what the learner already knows.

Vygotsky describes it as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978). He calls it the Zone of Proximal Development. Essentially the "Zone" refers to the place where there is a focus on the connections between people and the cultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences that have a relevant and common goal resulting in extended learning. Reflective teachers who consider the consequences of Vygotsky's theories and their impact on the way they approach the teaching and learning in their classroom may find reasons to alter their practices.

Historically teachers in classrooms have been encouraged to "control" the many aspects of the classroom program, and through the curriculum they use, enhance the academic, social/emotional, physical, moral and cultural development of the students. With this view there is clearly a danger that the rich tapestry of what each individual person brings to the classroom could be overlooked in favour of the prevailing values of the teacher. We can only hope that teachers acknowledge the situation and through explicit articulation of their goals and philosophies about teaching and learning, strategic planning of a relevant and meaningful curriculum and inclusive and reflective practices that school may in fact become "G-rated." The challenges for teachers are enormous and there are no easy answers about how to meet them.

This paper describes and explains the framework that I use to implement a classroom program that makes "school-learning" purposeful for students and relevant to their lives out of school. The research outlined takes into account the experiences of my colleague Jo Osler as well as my own. The vignettes and ideas that are used to describe particular outcomes of practice come from different students in different classrooms over a period of eight years This is intended to reinforce the notion that the knowledge presented has been developed and sustained in many contexts, and does not merely describe one successful year of teaching. The teaching is described by explaining the following features, understandings about learning, laying the foundations for learning, creating a climate for learning, and developing the physical environment as a resource for learning. I believe the ideas and discoveries will resonate with all teachers regardless of their specific workplace and provide opportunity for reflection that will enhance the quality of their practice.

The paper is also intended to highlight the value of reflective practice and to offer the educational community a "snapshot" of ways of linking theory to practice.

Identifying understandings about learning

A defining moment.

"What is the curriculum?" I asked the two grade five classes. "A day off!" chorused several students. "When we stay home, but the teachers have to come!" added someone else, while many other students nodded in agreement.
“Okay then,” I pressed on “Why do you think students come to school?” Again our students were quick to answer, they were confident they knew the answers to these very straightforward questions. “To get a good job!” “To see your friends.” “To learn things.” Some of the students came to school because no one was home. “I can't stay home, my parents work.” A couple of students even came because the alternative was police and possible jail. “It's the law!” Really, no arguing with that!

“Okay then, what do you think the role of the teacher is?” Silence, this one stumped them. Students had a great deal of trouble explaining their thoughts, until one child piped up with, “Kids come to school, so teachers can get paid, that's their job!”

Jo and I looked at each other; this incredible eye-opening interaction had confirmed our suspicions, that some of the critical components of school were a complete mystery to the students.

(Jill Flack - 1994)

This vignette highlights the commonly held views of many students about why they are at school.

What is clear after discussions with students is, 1) students need to understand themselves as learners - they need to learn how to learn, 2) teachers can create a classroom climate that is conducive to learning, 3) knowing the purpose for learning is a necessary component of good learning, 4) learning needs to knowledge what the learner already knows and school-learning needs to connect with life's experiences.

In the mid to late 1980s Dr John Baird and Dr Ian Mitchell established the Project for Enhancing Effective Learning (PEEL) in an outer suburban school in Victoria, Australia, where teachers committed to meet regularly and discuss aspects of the teaching and learning experiences in their classroom. PEEL was and remains very successful as an ongoing teacher-led approach to professional development. Amongst many aspects of teaching and learning explored in this project, PEEL has continually raised the importance of students becoming more meta-cognitive as a way of making their learning more meaningful to their lives at school and out of school.

Reflecting on a definition of metacognition, Baird and White stated in 1992 that:

A learner who is learning meta-cognitively knows the nature of good learning- they know for instance that good learning involves various types of linking; they are aware of their own learning; they are aware of the extent to which they are understanding the work, they are aware of what they are doing, why they are doing it and how it fits in with previous work. This knowledge and awareness means that they control their learning by taking appropriate actions both to enrich their understandings and to seek help as needed.

The ideas and findings of the PEEL project documented over the years call on teachers to reflect on their practice and to seek out ways of making learning and teaching more effective for their students.

It makes sense that every child will benefit from knowing more about their own learning and how that knowledge can empower them in their lives and many of the practices documented in the project offer suggestions and support to teachers who wish to target ways to improve their students' meta-cognitive awareness as a strategy to improve their learning outcomes.
How then can teachers establish a classroom program that fosters learning independence so that school learning and out-of-school learning support each other in the students' growth and development? What might this look like in the classroom?

**Laying the foundations for learning**

Intuitively it has been acknowledged many times that teachers who have a highly developed and strong pedagogical basis for their way of teaching have been more likely to maximise the opportunities to promote successful learning in their classrooms. The Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS), a very broad study that explores many aspects of education with the intention of identifying how student learning, both academic and social, could be enhanced, took place from 1998-2000 throughout government schools in Queensland Australia. The study formally identifies, amongst other things, productive approaches to classroom practices that are features of teachers and teaching that are most influential on high performance outcomes of students. The coding that was used in the classroom observation component of the study includes four main areas, intellectual quality, connectedness, supportive classroom environment and recognition of difference.

"The findings indicate that even where teachers believe in the importance of productive pedagogies (and aim for it in the lesson structure, curriculum selection and activity), they often set tasks low in demand, disconnected from the world and intellectually unchallenging" (Education Queensland, 2002)

In the area of 'connectedness' sometimes listed as 'relevance', the areas targeted for exploration were knowledge integration, background knowledge, connectedness to the world and problem-based curriculum. Classrooms that scored highly on this section can be summarised as places where all knowledge is seen as problematic, there is consistent use of meta-language, subject areas are seamlessly integrated, student's background and experiences are consistently incorporated into the lessons and students are engaged in projects requiring sustained effort. In short the teaching is required to be strategically connected to the students and their need to operate in their world. The challenge for teachers is to find a way to make that a reality for their own classroom.

Teachers in the PEEL project faced similar challenges and during the early years of PEEL participating teachers developed a list of behaviours that they believed were used consistently by effective learners that would help them develop a vision for what they wanted for all their students. (See Appendix 1.)

This list represents an accumulation of experience, informed observation and teacher wisdom that has become known as the list of Good Learning Behaviours. The list with minor variations can be applied to the type of behaviours that children need to develop to use in their daily lives and therefore provide an appropriate foundation to set the agenda for a relevant classroom program.

If we were to summarise the list to make it easier to remember and communicate, as a sort of mantra for students then it could be that, **effective learners take action. They find links, make good decisions and ask appropriate questions.** Consequently the skills of learning can be identified as questioning, linking and decision-making, with the skill of reflection providing a thread through each of the other skills.
The principal features of questioning can be described as students realising that questions provide insights to their understandings and prior knowledge, use questions as tools to establish inquiry goals and questions to develop the skills of reflection.

Linking refers to students realising that school is more than a series of unrelated episodes and learning is making personal connections by "building on" to prior knowledge and linking it to new learning.

The principle features of decision-making can be summarised as students developing skills to manage the many choices that face them in their life and learning, realising how their decisions affect themselves and their work as well as others' and learning to accept responsibility for their own learning.

Returning to the "G-rated" image briefly, it is possible to see that these skills of learning are desirable for all students. Modifications and interpretations of the skills will be needed to suit individual needs and differences but the underpinning principles will remain the same.

**Communicating this 'agenda for learning' to students in the classroom**

In keeping with involving the students in the entire process of their learning development it is desirable even necessary to develop a way to communicate the 'Big Picture' of the strategy teachers adopt to support them. Once students have experienced a more democratic and personalised approach to their learning it is possible to 'talk through' what they have learnt. The visual representation of the journey of a class of grade 3 and four students, (9 and 10 year olds) provides a model for learning that can be and has been adopted for many students since the model was developed. (refer to Appendix 2, Moving-On-Map)

The model was developed with students after two terms of a school year during which the teacher with the students had worked together to understand more about how to develop learning independence provides a framework in this paper, to explain what students need to know to assist them in understanding how to take control of aspects of their own learning.

**ACTIVE VS PASSIVE LEARNING**

*My pencils broken!*

A grade 2 student came to me, her arm outstretched, holding a broken pencil. "My pencil's broken!" she said. Quite clearly the student expected that this interaction, would result in me sharpening the pencil for her. Years of experience had suggested to her that this would be the case. How often do our students convey a request without framing it as a question?

We began to look!

Later, out in the yard, a grade 6 girl had the misfortune to fall in the mud during recess.

*Student: "I've fallen in the mud!" (quite agitated)*

*Teacher: "So you have. I can see it's all over your clothes."

*Student: "It's really wet and uncomfortable!" (quite assertively)*

*Teacher: "I'm sure it is!"*
**Student:** "I'll need some dry clothes!" *(quite demandingly)*

**Teacher:** "Oh, are they inside, in your bag?"

**Student:** "No! I need you to get me some!" *(quite frustrated and annoyed)*

**Teacher:** "Oh! You want me to help you! What did you want to ask me?"

**Student:** "Could you find me some dry clothes, please?" *(realization)*

It took a while before the student framed her request, or rather, demand in the form of a question.

We discovered that this interaction was typical of the many interactions teacher and students have in a day. We were, initially, very surprised. However we continued to look! It didn't take us long to realize our day was literally bombarded by these type of interactions with our students. Whether they were unable to frame a question or because they needed reassurance, the following types of questions and statements can seldom be classed as educationally productive.

- Do I have to rule up?
- Can I use textas for the heading?
- I can't do this!
- How many words/sentences/pages do I have to write?
- Will I put the date on the page?
- Does this work go in your Math's book?
- Does it have to be my best writing?
- Does spelling count in this?
- Is this right? Have I finished?
- What do I do now?
- I don't know what to write about?

In response to most of these unnecessary questions and demands, most teachers find themselves providing an answer.

We didn't need to look anymore!

This vignette highlights some passive learning behaviours that are typically displayed by students in many classrooms. The students are not to be blamed for these passive actions rather they have often developed a learned helplessness approach that comes from not wanting to displease the teacher but manifests itself as dependence when even the simplest decisions are handed over to the teacher for fear of making the wrong decision, or any decision at all really. Teachers on the other hand are quick to relate to the telling of these sorts of interactions that tend to plague their day and get in the way of their teaching and the students' learning. We would have to wonder what is happening if students are so disempowered or passive in their learning that they have to seek constant assistance for the simplest of tasks, and wonder what is the corresponding behaviour when they are faced with making decisions on their own outside of school. Surely school can be a place to encourage a pro-active approach to making decisions that need to be made and can be made by the students themselves. Maybe in our best efforts to be the most effective we can be, teachers overlook opportunities to develop the art of making appropriate decisions and do not articulate the process as often as we should.
The Moving-on map visually represents the fact that students themselves have a choice over the decisions that they need to make. The decisions can be about curriculum, academic performance, social and moral behaviour, anything that affects them in their life. Students need to know that they have the choice of whether to stay stuck or to move on. Children are often amazed to realize that they have actually chosen to stay stuck on occasions rather than making a more appropriate decision about how to move on.

One way to move on is to ask questions. Students need to be aware of the type of questions that can be asked, open or closed, fat or skinny, it helps to understand the difference and how posing questions can be linked to making informed and more appropriate decisions.

Teachers seldom deny the value of students asking questions but how many actually provide teaching "air-time" to be sure that students know how to ask the right question of the right person at the right time. Activities such as "Here's the answer, what's my question?" using question dice and question grids in lessons, reflective learning journals and specific question asking activities can support the development of asking better questions.

Once again, the Moving-on map visually represents the question pathway and helps students to become knowledgeable about their options.

The third pathway that is represented on the map, relates to the skill of linking. Students are invited to make a link in their learning using one or more of the ways available to them, by accessing their own prior knowledge and experience, by referring to past work or by using the resources available to them in the classroom. By integrating different areas of the curriculum in a meaningful way, playing specific linking games such as 'read my mind' and 'find the link' as well as using the physical environment of the classroom as a resource for learning, and by incorporating talk of links and connections in everyday 'teacher-talk', students will be constantly discovering the value of connecting all aspects of learning. required to make decisions, link and ask questions will highlight the value of using It is fairly simple for students to make connections with opportunities to use questioning, linking and decision-making skills in their lives out of school as well as within it, especially if both teachers and students frequently articulate the links. Drawing students' attention to their daily routines and identifying when and why they use those skills in class.

The following vignette comes from the interaction between Jo Osler and her grade 1 and 2 students, and provides a stark contrast to the dialogue in the previous vignette. Jo had been strategically working on developing the student's metacognitive awareness during the year and this interaction highlights the potential of young learners to use independent learning skills that will be useful to them throughout their lives once they have been encouraged to develop those skills in their daily school programs.

Independent Learners?..... we think so!

"For the last few weeks we've been looking at weather, focusing on - How does the weather affect living things? - Does anyone have any new thoughts about our focus question?"

"What about you Ellie?"

"Umm... (A few seconds silence)... could I have some more time to think about it? Could you come back to me later?"

"Sure Ellie. What about you Tom?"
"I want to know how birds fly in a thunderstorm."

"Interesting question Tom. What made you think of that?"

"I was thinking back to the video we watched on birds migrating. There was a part where the birds were flying and then it looked like there was going to be a thunderstorm. I just wondered how they fly through storms?"

"Ellie how are you going with your thoughts?"

"I have a question now. Why do tornadoes start and what keeps them going?"

"How might you find out more about your questions Ellie?"

"I'm going to start with looking at the fact file on tornadoes that is hanging up in the room."

"An Enviro Walk Ellie. Great Idea! Tom what about you?"

"I need a book about birds from the library."

"That would be an appropriate place to start...... You all have your own tasks to do. What might help you with your work today? Sarah?"

"The displays around the room, especially the fact files on different types of weather."

"Where would you go if you wanted to spell the words cumulous cloud, Shae?"

"I'd look at the grid that we did on the different types of clouds we observed."

"While you're looking at the resources around the room, is there anything that you are no longer using, that needs to come down? Sam?"

"The artwork we did on water. It's taking up a lot of space and you really can't use it!"

"O.K. Does anyone disagree? No, then I'll pull it down today."

"What about the positioning of the displays or resources? Yes Kaitlyn?"

"The weather fact files are in a great position, I use them lots and they're easy to read."

"What about the Venn diagram that I have just put up? Kyle?"

"It's a bit high and it's hard to read. It would be better near the fact files!"

"Good idea. Remind me later and we'll change it. Let's get to work. If anyone wants to remain on the floor for further discussion about their work, then stay, if you plan to start now, think about the types of resources you need to begin work and decide where is the best place to sit. By the way I'll be working on the displays if anyone needs me."
"....Goodness is that the time, it's nearly lunchtime. Grade 1's and 2's we have quarter of an hour to discuss those reflective questions I gave you earlier. Join me on the floor! Let's start with the first one: What decisions did you make in your work? Broddy?"

"I had to decide whether to use a labeled diagram or a fact file to show what I learned from using the wind gauge."

"So what did you decide and why?"

"I drew a labeled diagram of my wind gauge but I decided I needed some more information so I wrote some facts on like a fact file..."

(Jo Osler - 1996)

What independent learning skills are students displaying in this vignette?

Questioning:

- Why do tornadoes start and what keeps them going?
- How do birds fly through storms?

For grades one and two students 6-7 years old, these are well thought out questions which provide insights to the prior knowledge they have about weather, the understandings they have developed and the learning goals they have established. Much earlier in the year these young learners had difficulty even posing questions, often they just provided a statement about the knowledge they already had; for example, "Frogs can jump." Sometimes our young students asked questions they already knew the answer to; for example, "Do frogs jump?" This type of question is what is called a 'skinny' question, as it only requires a yes or no answer. Although skinny questions have their place and are appropriate in some situations, they don't provide much information to the student asking them. These simple questions are 'safe' questions, because in most cases students already know the answer.

Linking:

The students in this classroom snapshot have become effective at making links in their learning. "I was thinking back to the video we watched on birds..." "And I'd look at the grid that we did on different types of clouds..." are just two of the comments which show students are making links to past work. Students are using the displays in the physical environment to help them make the links between their past learning and new learning. These comments also show they see links between past and present tasks, that the activities done in the classroom are connected in some way and not simply isolated episodes.

Decision-Making:

"I need a book about birds from the library..." "The displays around the room..." These students are not only making effective decisions about what they want and need to learn, they are also making decisions about how they will approach their learning and what resources will be appropriate. This classroom snapshot also describes one student's dilemma about how he will present his work. Broddy decided initially to use a labelled
diagram, but realised its limitations. He used the labelled diagram procedure then combined it with a fact file procedure, which involves more written information.

"It's a bit high and it's hard to read. It would be better near the fact files!"... "The artwork we did on water. Its taking up a lot of space and really can't use it."... "The weather fact files are in a great position, I use them lots and they're easy to read." These students not only make decisions about their own learning, but about the usefulness and effectiveness of the displays, which make up the physical environment. This group of students clearly share ownership of the classroom and in this classroom snapshot they are displaying their responsibility to maintain the effectiveness of their learning environment.

A further example of how it is possible to trust that students can and will make appropriate decisions about their learning, is featured in this account of one young students ability to take charge of his own learning.

Taking a break!

During the year our students had learned to determine whether their learning was effective or not. Taking a break became a common occurrence for students who felt tired during their work. In the beginning when this was a novelty, we often had many of our students on break, most of the time. We suppose you could say we had a few teething problems! However luckily for us and our students, we moved on... Tom, a 6 year-old learner, who had up until this point had been an extremely dependent learner, was seriously involved in a literacy sequence. After writing lots, he told me his hand was sore and decided he was tired and needed a break. He spent the next 10 minutes enjoying a book, perched up in one of the beanbags. This part certainly wasn't unusual and something all of our students could do. But the best part was that his effective decision-making skills didn't end there, he did return to his work of his own accord, found where he was up to and continued to write some more.

Developing metacognitive awareness is helpful not only to students but for teachers as well.

The following reflection represents the type of thinking that helps teachers to become more strategic about their practice so that they learn to synthesise the knowledge they gather from observing their students with their knowledge of how students learn. It seems that encouraging teachers to be explicit about their knowledge leads to deeper understandings of why they do the things that do they so that their teaching is far less random and much more strategic overall. Not only are the students developing their skills of questioning, linking and decision-making, but teachers are also.

Learning to Link.

Attempts to link by grade 5 students were very successful; they seemed to take to the idea of linking with very few planned teaching activities. Students seemed to catch on quickly to the conscious effort we had made to make the activities in our classroom program connected in every possible way. With our younger 6-7 year old students this wasn't the case, although they linked quite naturally, they had trouble articulating the links they made in their learning. One of the most effective lessons was showing our grade 1s and 2s a chain, stressing how important each link in the chain is to the overall strength of the chain. We then related this to their knowledge, each link represents new learning which is linked to their prior knowledge. This was a turning point for many of our students, they had begun to understand the notion of prior knowledge and the idea that learning builds on this.
CREATING A CLIMATE FOR LEARNING

Any climate for learning affects and is affected by the attitudes of the teachers and learners within the learning environment. Teachers are in an extremely powerful position to influence the tone of the classroom as well as providing the learning opportunities that they set up in their classrooms and consequently how the students see themselves as learners. For this reason teachers need to ensure that students experience some measure of success and it is possible to identify two areas for consideration that would enhance their level of esteem and ownership of learning for all students, increase the likelihood of success and these are co-operative learning practices and supported risk-taking.

Co-operative learning practices provide opportunities for students to develop skills that satisfy their own individual learning needs while working on tasks that require the skills and input of other students. A vital component to any co-operative learning session needs to be the opportunity to reflect on the decisions that the group and individual have made and the work that they have done. Students need to be encouraged to consider reflective questions like; what impact did the decisions you made have on the whole group? How did the group decide who should complete each of the activities? What decisions did each of you make about the activities you completed. How would you change any of the decisions you made?

Supported risk-taking. Much has been spoken and written about the need for students to "take risks", as a way of enhancing their learning. For some children simply attempting the set tasks at school represents an enormous "risk" and doesn't always equate to improved learning outcomes. Perhaps a more appropriate approach is for teachers to provide opportunities for students to take risks where the risk of failure is minimal and the probability of success is optimal.

If students are encouraged to make 'real' decisions it is likely that they will be more purposeful and motivated in the way they approach their own learning. Making 'real' decisions requires students having real and authentic choices about their work. For example using the Decision Making skill as a focus, Grade1 and 2 students early in the year were asked to decide simple things like, which hook to hang their bag on, where to sit for the day, who to sit with, and what information they needed to be able to begin work. These are simple functions, where the decision taken is almost assured of success, but are usually made by the teacher without consultation or regard to the students' ability to decide for them.

The importance of reflection again needs to be mentioned here. In order for students to develop understandings about risk-taking and the impact it has on their learning, they need to reflect on the risks they take. Students should be encouraged to articulate the impact of the decisions they could make, on their learning. For example, take the decision "What's Important?" With 'What's Important?' students need to decide what a task or instruction is asking them to do. They then must decide what the most important aspects of that task are and tackle those first. If students are asked to complete a 'labelled diagram' they would need to decide what the most important aspects of that task are, from all the possibilities available like, a title, the diagram, the labels or the colouring. If students choose to spend their time developing a fancy heading they will be short of time to complete their diagrams. It is then that they need to be encouraged to review what has happened asking themselves questions such as, What will happen if I decide to do the labels first then the diagram? How will that affect my learning? Will I complete the task on time?
It is not simply a matter of teachers intervening so that the situation doesn't arise, if the intention is to support students to develop these skills. It is most likely that these shifts of power will be difficult for teachers to make at first.

Developing a language for learning

One of the most critical components of effective teaching is the shared understanding of what is communicated in the classroom between teachers and learners. Effective communication in the classroom is more than a sharing a dialogue; it is an understanding of the purpose behind the events and learning opportunities offered in the classroom program. Strategic development of a common language for learning will enable explicit articulation of the processes involved in learning.

Words that articulate the process of learning, like linking, decision-making, questioning, reflection, need to be understood by all who share the classroom environment. Along with generic terms that reflect the content of the classroom program, such as procedures like fact-files, Venn diagrams and Deep Thinking Challenge, which may have little meaning to outsiders, will provide inclusive access to students so they can communicate their own learning. Learning words such as independence, resources, reflection, and classroom sayings such as, What do effective listeners do? Independent working morning, and share time, become important as a way of discussing learning.

The following student comments show students understanding the shared language developed in their own classroom, as well as using it to explain their thoughts.

Explaining a literary-sociogram.

"You put all the characters on it and then you look for the relationships between them - you link up every character to every other character. They help you remember what the book was about - same as pictograms. Helps you understand what the characters' parts were."

"It was hard to remember the names of all the things, like Venn Diagrams, fact files..."

"Because I looked that (fact file) up to help... to get facts out of it to put in my story and the Semantic Map I linked things up with other things."

"In the learning journal I try to put the words better so I understand how to put things."

"I think I used my time well. I had to do my profile on criminals. I had to have a couple of breaks, but all I did was talk about my work to a friend."

"What confused me was how to think of the things to write down and how to put them."

(Quotes from grade 5 learning journals.)

(Osler, Flack & Mitchell, 1996)

Developing the physical environment of the classroom as a resource for learning.

Creating a visually stimulating classroom is not a new concept for primary school teachers. A visit to any primary school would show that most teachers spend a great deal of time and energy creating an eye-catching physical environment. Classrooms are filled with a variety of charts and posters and an array of student work often adorns the walls and reveals what
has been happening in the room. This is commendable and provides an aesthetically pleasing working environment. Ideally though the physical environment of the classroom will be more than a reflection of the work done in the classroom and become a valuable resource for learners and their learning. It needs to be used in a way that will support students in their endeavours to become independent learners by supporting the development of the skills of learning. Helping students to understand that there can be invaluable assistance for solving problems of learning available to them in their immediate environment, wherever that may be, is a life-skill that all students will use.

The following vignette highlights the value of the classroom as a resource for learning when students are aware of what is available for use, how to use it and an expectation that it should be used to assist learning.

**A desire to learn emerges!**

Jade, a 6-year-old reluctant learner, had shown very little interest in reading and writing in the first six months of the year. He had openly stated that ‘reading was dumb’ and that he was happy to draw, but ‘I don’t want to write.’ One morning, while enjoying the peace and quiet of my time-release I was rudely interrupted when the door to the classroom slammed open. A bright-eyed student, who had raced out of his library session and sprinted down the corridor, was now looking expectantly around the classroom. "I know it’s here...It’s on the Literary Sociogram!" he shouted, more to himself, than to me. All of that to locate the word blue on a chart (procedure) that was displayed in the classroom. He knew the word was there and wanted to spell it correctly in his writing. For Jade, an important moment in his learning had arrived!

*(Jo Osler, 1995)*

**Why is this story so significant?** For Jade it was a turning point in his learning. At this stage Jade wanted to become involved in his learning. He took responsibility for his own learning need and from that day on Jade became a more interested and effective learner, drawing on the classroom environment regularly to find answers to issues of learning that he could solve for himself.

Implications for teaching and for teachers.

Let us return to the question of the “G-rated” classroom and whether it is in fact possible to provide a classroom program that is appropriate for all students.

Essentially what we have discussed in this paper is the need for students to have access to knowledge of the kind that is relevant to their circumstances and their own particular learning needs. This has been identified in part in this paper as the development of the skills of questioning, linking, decision-making and reflection. The way that students are presented with information can actually be exclusive if it does not acknowledge the prior knowledge, experiences, and skills that the learner actually brings to the learning. What this paper is suggesting is that teachers, who develop strategic and explicit programs that cater for the students’ need to understand how to learn, will have a greater likelihood of providing an inclusive curriculum thus satisfying those learning needs. At no time has it been suggested that factual and more traditional content of school programs be overlooked, rather it is suggested that developing the skills of learning, as a priority of the classroom program, will empower students and lead to even more effective learning of traditional content.
What does it mean for teachers?

Clearly teachers who want students to take more responsibility for their own learning, need to allow a shift in responsibility from themselves to the students. This may require a major personal pedagogical review and could challenge long-held views about their role as teacher and their beliefs about how children learn. It is essential for teachers to adjust their teaching programs to allow for maximum student participation. This can be unsettling and cause feelings of anxiety at first until teachers observe improvements in the areas of student learning that they consider to be most important, usually it is reflected in a more positive attitude to work and learning, an ability to articulate the students' own role in the learning process and a desire and ability to evaluate their own performance. In short the students will have become more metacognitive.

Two other critical aspects of personal development required by the teacher is the need to be a keen observer of their students and a continual desire and ability to reflect critically on the events of the classroom, most especially their own practice. Teachers also will have become more metacognitive.

Maybe aiming for the 'G-rated" classroom so that it is not a myth or a mere possibility but a requirement of all teachers and a challenge that Education systems need to support.

Classrooms that are great for children and great for teachers...what a GREAT idea!

REFERENCES


APPENDIX I: PEEL List - Good Learning Behaviours.

(Baird & Northfield, 1992)

1. Tell teacher when they don't understand.
3. Tells teacher what they don't understand.

4. Checks work against instruction, correcting errors and omissions.
5. When stuck, refers to earlier work before asking teacher
6. Checks personal comprehension of instruction and Progress Material. Requests further information if needed.
7. Seeks reasons for aspects of the work at hand.
8. Anticipates and predicts possible outcomes
9. Plans a general strategy before starting.
10. Explains purposes and results.
11. Checks teacher's work for errors; offers corrections.
12. Seeks links between adjacent activities and ideas.
13. Seeks links between non-adjacent activities, ideas work and between different topics.
14. Independently seeks further information, following up ideas raised in class.
15. Seeks links between different subjects.
16. Asks inquisitive but general questions.
17. Offers personal examples which are generally Links to relevant. Beliefs and Experiences.
18. Seeks specific links between schoolwork and personal life.
19. Searches for weaknesses in their own AND understandings; checks the consistency of their RECONSTRUCTING explanations across different situations.
20. Suggests new activities and alternative procedures.
22. Offers ideas, new insights and alternative explanations.
23. Justifies opinions Assumes a Position
24. Reacts and refers to comments of other students.
25. Challenges the text or an answer the teacher