Creating Room for a Child’s Presence: Finding the Middle Ground
(alias) The Utilization of Independent Study Skills for Nine to Twelve Year Olds
An Exploratory Study of Intrinsic Motivation For Learning

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“We want E.T.! We want E.T.!”

Imagine this enthusiastic chant coming from a classroom near you. Is it a demand for the Steven Spielberg film of the same name? In this case, the students are clamouring for something more alien than you might think. They are insistent about working on their class projects, projects of their choice, we have dubbed exploratory time, or E.T. for short. The students have embraced this project wholeheartedly, and when allotted class time for this project is cut back, they are visibly disappointed and verbal in their demands for more E.T. time.

Something strange and wonderful has happened in our classrooms by allowing our students a choice in their learning, something that has positively affected their motivation to learn and has them excited and involved in the learning process. And even though each student is working on an individual project, the overall classroom environment is one of increased communication and co-operation, with meaningful conversations taking place between student and teacher, and student to student.

By asking the question, “What if students were given a choice in what they learn?” we have discovered a new way of looking at curriculum delivery that allows us to powerfully engage our students in learning. For us, E.T. has initiated an investigation of curriculum content and delivery and how it links to the intrinsic motivation of our students to learn.

Day in the Life…

Teachers of today enter into dynamic classroom environments. They engage in interactions with children from many different socio-economic backgrounds. No longer is the nuclear family the norm. The myriad of family structures has created new challenges for both educational institutions and society. “Young people live in a severely fractured world—families are less stable, divorce has become common place, neighbourhoods tend to be in flux and less community-minded, schools are less personal and more competitive, and peer groups set up conflicting loyalties” (van Manen 1991, 2).

At best, teachers will be able to utilize each student’s diversity, background knowledge, and interests to provide an enriched learning experience. At worst, an implied lack of trust by government-prescribed curriculum and standardized testing brings teachers’ accountability into question. Teachers are forced to abandon acknowledging and building upon the diversity in the classroom in order to implement prescribed objectives and performance criteria which “threatens
to turn teaching into a mechanical process of training students to pass tests, while unnecessarily restricting teachers’ freedom to open their students’ minds” (Osborne 1999, 41).

**Standardized Testing**

**What does it achieve?**

“Only extraordinary education is concerned with learning: most is concerned with achieving: and for young minds, these two are very nearly opposite. One is dedicated to experience, the other to control.” (French 1985, 388) In current education, the focus is on a results-oriented curriculum, where success is measured by achievement scores on standardized tests. Selma Wasserman (2001, 32) explores why education authorities, parents, and even some teachers feel the need for standardized testing when she says,

> It is easy to see how numbers relieve the frustration of the unknown, for nothing feels more certain or gives greater security than a number...It doesn’t seem to matter if neither the numbers nor the act of measurement can be relied on as precise and accurate; it’s just that we feel more comfortable in believing that there is something that anchors us, something we can count on with assurance, something we can cling to as we speed ahead into uncertain times...Hearing the numbers takes us from the unknown to the known.

Instead of testing, Wasserman advocates active learning experiences that provide student-generated curriculum through choice of topic, which enables motivation and self-esteem in students. (Wasserman, 1990)

Holt (2002, 268) discusses how, “Commitment to standards-led school reform means creating a system of schools geared solely to the product — test results — and not to the process of creating educative experiences.” He goes on to say that,

> Gerald Bracey has offered a few of the personal attributes that standardized tests cannot measure - attributes crucial to the cultivation of the virtues and the formation of moral agents: creativity, critical thinking, resilience, motivation, persistence, humour, reliability, enthusiasm, civic-mindedness, self-awareness, self-discipline, empathy, leadership and compassion.

Current public criticism of education insinuates that standards are not high enough and students are not prepared for the evolving global economy. The critics’ solutions to this perceived problem with education are, “first, to make the curriculum more demanding; second, to force teachers to stick to it; and third to test students to see how well it has been taught and learned” (Osborne 1999, 32).

Wasserman (2001, 33) discusses the ideas put forth by Marilyn French in the book, *Beyond Power*, regarding how our education system is structured along corporate lines as a way of “exercising power and control over students, a system that teaches students to bend to the will of authority” and “in the contention between those who uphold qualitative goals for education and
those who focus on quantitative efficiency of administration, the big guns are all on the side of the heavily concentrated controls of the managers.”

This quest for power and control has created a school environment that is concerned with number crunching, test taking and surveys, which has resulted in teachers having less time for establishing meaningful experiences with children. These stifling solutions do not take into account the rich diversity and uniqueness our classrooms have to offer, ignoring the middle ground where most of the learning takes place. “We live in the middle. When education forsakes the middle for the ends, or beginnings it is deadly” (Grumet 1996, 17).

**Curricular Tug of War**

On the surface, today’s typical classroom may look homogeneous, but in reality students have a wide range of abilities and needs, which the prescribed curriculum does not allow for or recognize. Aoki (1993, 261) believes that one of the dangers of adhering only to the curriculum-as-planned is that

> [the students’] uniqueness disappears into the shadow when they are spoken of in prosaic abstract language of the external curriculum planners who are in a sense, condemned to plan for faceless people, students shorn of their uniqueness or teachers who become generalized entities often defined in terms of performance roles.

Palmer (1999, 23) agrees that, “one of the greatest sins in education is reductionism, the destruction of otherness that occurs when we try to cram everything we study into categories that we are comfortable with, ignoring data, or writers, or voices, or simple facts that don’t fit into our box.”

In the classroom, we must work “outside the box” and make space in the curriculum for each student’s unique experiences, qualities and talents. When we, as teachers, are able to see children in a variety of different situations, this opens the door for a number of possibilities. “In terms of pedagogy we must learn to discern those moments when children in subtle, quiet ways are ‘opening’ their gifts in front of us because how we receive them will determine whether or not the child will learn to find herself in the world creatively” (Smith 1999, 146).

The struggles classroom teachers face delivering the curriculum is addressed by Aoki (1993, 260-261) when he discusses the difficulty the practicing teacher has with the multiplicity of curricula, living in the middle of balancing the curriculum-as-planned which is the required curriculum, geared towards the end-means, and the curriculum-as-lived, the other curriculum which varies from student to student, depending upon their experiences and the reality of their own lives. Grumet (1996, 16), supports Aoki’s argument by stating, “What is basic to education is neither the system that surrounds us nor the situation of each individual’s lived experience. What is basic to education is the relation between the two.”

Unfortunately, today this relationship seems to be heavily weighted toward the system (curriculum-as-planned) rather than the individual’s own experience (curriculum-as-lived). “When teachers and children talk of meaningful educational experiences, these experiences often seem to occur on the margin or outside of the daily curriculum experiences of the classroom.” (van Manen 1991, 4)

What seems to matter to children are their learning experiences outside of the prescribed curriculum. This idea that the most meaningful learning experiences happen outside the classroom is indicated through the words of a student in a graduate teacher education class who stated, “If I had to choose between keeping all of my school learning or keeping all of my outside of school learning, I would not hesitate a moment: goodbye, school learning” (Wolk 2001, 56).

**The Student Voice in Curriculum**

“To learn in meaningful ways, students need to be fully and emotionally invested in their work” (Sylwester 1994, 60-65). Steven Wolk (2001, 56) talks of “owning my learning” which for him means that “This learning has a personal connection to who I am: my interests, cultures, life experiences, opinions, ideas, questions and curiosities.” This has led him to propose providing one hour of classroom time a day for students to explore their interests in a way that will both complement the curriculum and help create lifelong learners.

Grace (1999, 49), working on a project with preservice teachers to design courses of study on students’ interests with elementary school children, has given up “teacher’s manuals, the mandates, the curriculum guides, the list of state-approved learning outcomes, and a nebulous factory mentality in favor of engaging students in the simple process of learning how to learn.” She observes that “[t]he results are remarkable learning experiences only because the students themselves made important decisions about what to study, how to study it, and how to demonstrate to others what they had learned; they were engaged in a student-generated curriculum” (1999,49).

In our review of the literature, we found few empirical studies on exploration or choice outside of the science and mathematics disciplines. Secondly, “there is virtually no research base on either the effects of choice on learning or how teachers implement it” (Flowerday and Schraw 2000, 2). However, there is much research on intrinsic motivation, which provides insight into the link between learning, motivation and engaging students in meaningful curricular content.

**Intrinsic Motivation and Learning**

When looking at the research on giving students choice in what they learn, Flowerday and Schraw (2000, 2) believe that although “there is little research on choice, there is an extensive literature that examines the role of controlling environments.” They cite a number of scholars (Flink, Boggiano, & Barrett, 1990; Grolnick & Ryan, 1987; Miserandino, 1996; Ryan, Connell, & Grolnick, 1992) who suggest that “controlling environments reduce a sense of personal autonomy and intrinsic motivation and result in decreased learning and poorer attitudes about
school. Teachers indicated that choice resulted in increased student engagement, sense of control and motivation."

“When our learning is driven through intrinsic motivation, we own that learning. It comes from within us and is deeply purposeful” (Wolk 2001, 57) There is an overwhelming wealth of research material on intrinsic motivation and its connection to children and learning. Ryan and Connell (1989) found “Results supported the view that the orientation of motivation in school can markedly affect the quality of experience, learning and adjustment of children and young adults within the academic domain” (Boggiano and Pittman 1992, 185).

In looking at schools, motivation, and development, Ryan, Connell and Grolnick (1992) have looked at the factors that influence internalizing intrinsic behaviour and “first and foremost is the degree of autonomy afforded the child” (Boggiano and Pittman 1992, 180). Zuckerman, Porac, Lathin, Smith and Deci (1978) found that if children had the opportunity to make choices it would enhance intrinsic motivation.

Evidence from studies on intrinsic motivation and learning indicates that intrinsically motivated activity tends to be associated with greater creativity and cognitive flexibility (Amabile 1983; Koestner et al. 1984; McGraw and McCullers 1979) and increased emotional tone and self esteem (Garbarino 1975; Ryan 1982). Intrinsic motivation leads to “an interest in learning, a valuing of education and a confidence in their (students’) own capacities and attributes” and contributes to a theory of self determination put forth by Deci and Ryan (1985, 1991).

**Self Determination Theory**

Education researchers Deci and Ryan propose that,

> Motivated actions are self-determined to the extent that they are engaged in wholly volitionally and endorsed by one’s sense of self, whereas actions are controlled if they are compelled by some interpersonal or intrapsychic force. When a behaviour is self-determined, the regulatory process is choice, but when it is controlled, the regulatory process is compliance. (1991, 326)

With respect to education, self-determination’s “key elements are autonomy support and interpersonal involvement and the specific supports include offering choice, minimizing controls, acknowledging feelings and making available information that is needed for decision making and for performing the target task” (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, Ryan 1991, 342).

Studies looking at students and self-determined motivation indicate students are more likely to stay in school (Daoust, Vallerand & Blais, 1988; Vallerand 1991); have a positive academic performance (Grolnick, Ryan & Deci 1991; Pintrich & De Groot 1990) and more positive emotions in the classroom (Vallerand et al. 1989).

Studies looking at “teachers’ behaviour with respect to autonomy supportive or controlling found teachers who had been pressured (by being reminded that it was their responsibility to be sure
that their students performed up to high standards) were dramatically more controlling with their students than those who had not been pressured" (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, Ryan 1991, 340)

Self determination theory suggests how each part of the education community is interrelated and impacts on important educational outcomes; outcomes that affect intrinsic motivation, self esteem and lifelong learning and are “beneficial both to individuals and society” (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, Ryan 1991, 342).

How Student Choice Affects the Classroom Teacher

So what happens when teachers allow students a voice in developing curriculum? Do the benefits of allowing our students to pursue their own interests outweigh the risks? Staying within the boundaries of the prescribed curriculum puts us, as teachers, at the risk of becoming cynical or entering into a state of “gloominess” (Bollnow 1989, 21). Hong suggests that teachers can slip too easily into

maintenance teaching when school days are fragmented and move at the pace of fast-food eateries rather than four-star restaurants, teachers have no time in which to build the provocative experiences that nurture richly layered learning-experiences that provide teachers with the continuing intellectual and creative challenges that allow them to be professional educators rather than short-order cooks. (2001, 1)

In contrast, when we decided to allow students to develop their own interests, and slowed our own curriculum-driven pace to engage as teacher-researchers, we learned that the rewards are great, not only for our students, but for ourselves as well.

Our School Community

The participants for this study were nine to twelve year old students in our Grade Five, Six and Seven classrooms, roughly half of them boys, half of them girls. They come from a culturally diverse population, with a wide range of socio-economic situations. There are approximately 310 students attending this elementary school, located on the eastern boundary of Vancouver. Skytrain expansion provides the area with high density, rapid growth, including a Neighbourhood House and a retail and residential development. The school grounds include two adventure playgrounds, a black top with two basketball courts, and two playing fields (all-weather and grass).

The school site consists of seven enclosed classrooms, two open area settings, library, computer lab, activity room, and full gym facility. Parents are involved in a variety of volunteer activities in our school and, as part of an elected executive and attending monthly parent advisory committee (P.A.C.) meetings, have a voice in the school’s activities.

Setting the Scene for Exploratory Time

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The Grade Five, Six and Seven students in both of our classes were involved in individually researching a topic of their choice and then presenting what they had learned to the rest of the class. We called this project Exploratory Time, or E.T. Data for this study was collected in three ways. Verbal responses were written down from interviews conducted with six students from each class, roughly half of them boys, half of them girls, who were selected based on first term report card results: two students exceeding expectations, two students meeting expectations, two students not yet meeting expectations.

Other methods of data collection included exit slips from all fifty eight students throughout the independent study process, as well as field notes taken by the co-investigators during this time. A number of steps were taken to triangulate the data. First, the interview data was coded. Exit slips were then analyzed and compared to the interview data and themes emerged. Finally, field notes were reviewed to substantiate themes and interpretations.

**What happens when children are given a choice in what they learn?**

For this research project we assumed teacher directed activities as geared more to the curriculum-as-planned, whereas we surmised student choice ties more closely into the curriculum-as-lived. We wanted to look at what happens when teachers allow students a voice in developing curriculum.

At the start of our study, the Grade Five, Six and Seven participants were asked whether they would rather choose their own topic to learn or have the teacher choose it. An overwhelming number of students said they would prefer to pick their own topic to study. When the twelve selected participants were later interviewed about their classroom experiences, some stated that they were required to learn subject matter in which they had little interest or control. The following are some student responses when asked how they feel when teachers choose what students have to learn:

“*When teachers choose, I feel caged in.*”
“*Teachers talking the entire time, [when I am] copying down everything that the teacher writes, I feel invisible.*”
“*When learning, I have more ideas and I don’t get a chance to say a thing.*”

Feelings of detachment from the learning process, negativity, and frustration seem to emerge from these student statements. In contrast, the majority of students during the interviews suggested that having a choice was a preferred way to learn, as indicated by the following responses:

“*Kids know what’s cool, they know what they like...teachers have different ideas.*”
“*Before, I never wanted to come to school because it was boring, but now I feel like coming to school.*”
“*I learn best when I get to choose.*”

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When students were involved in making decisions about what they were learning, they seemed more motivated and positive about the learning experience.

Interview responses, exit slips and field notes were categorized into four themes, which emerged when students chose their own topics of study. These were motivation, class environment, learning and barriers to choice.

**Motivation**

Did choice affect motivation? Being allowed to choose their own topic seemed to positively affect most students’ desire to learn. There was evidence of intrinsic motivation when a number of students said they became more interested in what they were doing at school when given a choice in learning, as indicated by the comment, “I want to come to school 24-7!” Another student who was genuinely interested in the topic of study and wanted to learn for personal reasons said, “My motivation was just learning about what I wanted to learn.” When asked if there was any time they didn’t want to work on the project, most students stated no, that it was fun to have a choice. Comments included:

“It was fun and exciting.”
“I wanted to work on it all the time because it was fun to finally learn what I want to learn.”
“It kepted my interest.”
“This was a fun project and I said to myself I can do this.”

Other students were motivated extrinsically by stating that they wanted to please their teacher, peers, and parents. Also, getting a good mark was another important factor that affected their motivation. As one student explained, “My motivation for good marks was the greatest.” Generally speaking, these extrinsic motivation comments came from the female Grade Seven students who were exceeding expectations, and this may show some insight into how pleasing adult expectations over time plays a role in motivation.

**Classroom Environment**

When students were asked what made them unhappy at school, a large number expressed various examples of bullying, such as exclusion, teasing, name calling, and being picked on, all contributing to a negative experience at school. Therefore, it was very gratifying to observe the development of an inclusive, friendly classroom environment during our research, which eventually permeated the classroom, even when not doing Exploratory Time.

Both teacher-researchers noted relationships developing between participants who normally would not interact with each other and this was confirmed with comments such as, “M. and A. were not really friends before, but they were sharing information on the Internet” and “you get to know your classmates.” There was much social learning taking place during Exploratory Time, with participants showing a genuine interest in what their peers were studying. Comments included, “T. gave me ideas about reptiles,” and “classmates help out, listen when you are presenting.”

This contrasts with what one participant believes is what normally happens, “during usual projects, they [students] don’t ask everyone to help.” Most final presentations included not only the presenter but also a number of classmates who helped. Final presentations included a mock trial, game shows, dances, role plays, and sports tournaments which involved the whole group.

During the interviews, “supportive” was a term used frequently by the students to describe the classroom environment and how it changed during Exploratory Time. As the following comments indicate, the classroom environment became more collaborative:

“Friends were sitting together, talking, not giving answers, just supporting them.”
“Kids support, oh that’s cool! I should have picked that topic.”
“Some of them [classmates] will encourage you, they try to help.”

While participants were encouraged to make decisions on how to use their time, what to research, and how to organize it into a presentation with minimum teacher intervention, a final observation was the strong relationships that developed between student and teacher, as more one-on-one time was used to discuss each project. Both teacher-researchers found they had the time to talk with each participant about their individual project. This created a more in-depth level of communication and awareness, allowing both students and teachers to develop a stronger understanding of each other. Relationships changed in the classroom as teachers sat and listened to what was really important to students.

Outside the classroom, family relationships also evolved. B. is a student who has always struggled with schoolwork, rarely submitting an assignment on time. At home, the relationship with his father has been strained because of his learning difficulties. The first weekend after the project was assigned, he went home and discussed it with his family. They proceeded to find a topic, crocodiles, and knew that they had an extended family member living in Australia near a crocodile farm. B. used the Internet, the local library, and family resources to complete his project.

On Monday morning, (four days after the project was assigned) B. returned from his weekend smiling. When asked how his weekend had been, he said, “Great!” He has finished his project after working with his family. He proceeded to show me his notes, pictures, display board, and edited video with music. B.’s whole family had helped, including his dad.

Learning

Our research indicated choice affected our students’ learning in several ways. Participants’ responses and field notes created three subcategories: skill acquisition, varied content, and social learning.

Participants reported when they were able to choose their own topic, it reinforced skill development, as the following quotes indicate:
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“When I read books [on my own] I want to search deeper.”
“I learned I have to be organized to learn best.”
“I learned how to research and present clearly.”

Participants also chose a learning style best suited to their individual needs. Choice can help students identify ways in which they learn best, as one participant stated, “I learned hands-on things make you learn more,” while another participant agreed, “The experience of actually running the tournament, I learned more than just writing it down.”

The curriculum content became varied with many different topics, presented in many ways. They included such things as role-plays on urban legends, a game show on the Philippines, and a video on visiting a crocodile farm in Australia. Students learned more than they thought they would. “I know so much more about government and court systems” stated a student who wants to be a lawyer and so researched and presented a mock trial.

When participants were asked specifically about the effects of choice on student learning, nearly all indicated that being with their friends was an important element in the learning process. Various participants reported, “I learn by talking out to others,” “Funner to work with classmates, makes you want to learn more,” and “I prefer to work with people and get everyone’s ideas.” Some chose topics that they thought their peers would enjoy. As one participant said, “I thought about how my project would affect the class, as well as how it would affect me.”

Barriers to Choice—the Shadow

Participants described a number of factors that affected their ability to explore a topic. Technology was a barrier, with slow computers, or computers unavailable, either through break down or time constraints, making it difficult for students to complete their research.

Secondly, time became a factor that affected the participants’ ability to explore their learning. Although students were to be given one hour of exploratory time each day, this was sometimes hard to provide. The school is on a 40-minute timetable, which created problems when trying to schedule the school library or computer lab for a one hour time slot, and it was difficult to get extra time in the lab outside of assigned class times. This led to frustration, as one participant indicated, “I don’t have enough time to go on the Internet. The only way to get more time is if I had Internet at home but I don’t.”

Interruptions to the regular timetable, both planned and unplanned, such as performances, picture day, and earthquake drills, contributed to the erosion of one hour of exploratory time each day, provoking many participants to complain, “What, no E.T. time?” while others chanted “We want E.T. We want E.T!”

Finally, parents’ expectations were an important variable as well. Many of the participants and their families have newly immigrated to Canada. Often their approach to educational instruction is traditional. They view the teacher as solely responsible for dispensing what is to be learned,

and student choice is not considered. The participants had to alter their traditional views of learning, which parents often articulated as, “You listen to your teacher.”

Providing the Bridge

Our research on choice has allowed us to look at the delivery of student-led curriculum and to assess the benefits of Exploratory Time, with implications for how we deliver curriculum in our classrooms. Too often students talked about being bored in the classroom during teacher-assigned activities.

In contrast, Exploratory Time invited students to answer questions that were meaningful for them. Fun was a word used consistently throughout to describe the research project. “I learn best when I am interested in the subject” and “It’s fun, not boring, I wanted to learn” were feelings consistently stated throughout the process.

A love of learning started to develop. The most apparent implication is that students seem to benefit greatly when given time to explore their own learning. Motivation to learn, learning, classroom environment, social interactions and relationships seem to be affected positively when students are allowed to shape and develop their own curriculum.

In our future practice, we see the inclusion of a project similar to Exploratory Time into the regular curriculum, as it offers skill acquisition and core content, while making learning meaningful because it is student driven. We support offering students the opportunity to make decisions in their learning through providing choices through a project like Exploratory Time. We see this as a way to work in the middle, providing the bridge between the curriculum-as-planned and the curriculum-as-lived.

In addition to an exploratory time project, how student choice is encouraged within the required curriculum on a daily basis needs to be addressed. For example, if the Grade Seven Socials curriculum requires the study of Egypt, we need to look at how to involve students so that they are able to have a voice regarding what they want to learn about Egypt, and to be aware that students will have differing interests. As teachers, our presentation of prescribed curriculum will aim to involve more choice and input from students.

Controlling Motivation, Evaluating Choice

Initially, when we outlined the E.T. project to our students we included for them a timeline, goals to meet, specific learning outcomes, and evaluation criteria in the form of a rubric. But after looking at the literature on motivation, we realized that if we wanted participants to be intrinsically motivated to learn, we would have to de-emphasize extrinsic motivational factors, such as working to a deadline and letter grades.

As we moved from the role of teacher to researcher, we had to give up control by letting go of our traditional evaluation procedures. Control, through evaluation rubrics and testing, encourages students, like obedient trained seals, to work only for the extrinsic reward of marks. We noted [Available: http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v10n01/articles/purdy.html]
that after we de-emphasized the rubric and evaluation, conversations were more meaningful, focused on content and how to present, rather than on how to get a good mark.

How do controlling factors affect intrinsic motivation? When looking at things that control behaviour such as rewards, (Deci 1971; Yoshimura 1979; Ryan, Mims and Koestner 1983) it was found that the motivation they induce is extrinsic. Some rewards even decreased intrinsic motivation (Ross 1975; Harackiewicz et al. 1984; Deci & Cascio 1972; Greene et al 1976). Another controlling factor is evaluation and studies looking at evaluation and intrinsic motivation found that intrinsic motivation decreased when students were evaluated, even when subjects received positive feedback. (Smith 1974; Amabile 1979; Benware & Deci 1984)) It would seem that control factors, such as rewards and evaluation, are tied into extrinsic motivation. These controlling techniques to increase achievement can cause a decrease in a child’s desire to learn.

When developing curriculum in the classroom we will need to be aware of the importance we place on evaluation, knowing that it can adversely affect intrinsic motivation, and in turn, lifelong learning. Most teachers have probably faced the dilemma of how to assign a grade to the bright student who does not produce assignments, even though this student knows the work. Or the students who have difficulty with written text, but can strongly articulate what they know. Rather than providing evaluation criteria that asks for the same performance from each student, we need to look at how our evaluation methods address each student’s strengths and ways of learning. One of our future objectives will be to provide different ways for students to show what they have learned.

Through this research process, we realized if we truly want our students to be intrinsically motivated to learn, we need to emphasize the process of learning rather than the end product. Next year, we would like to shift the focus away from evaluating absolutely everything to try to develop students’ intrinsic motivation to learn. At the same time, we recognize we work within a system, and acknowledge the reality of prescribed curriculum, testing, letter grades, report cards, and parent and public expectations. Our professional challenge will be to balance the system requirements for testing and marks, with creating opportunities in the classroom for the learning process to take place without the constant pressure of evaluation.

Developing Community Through Communication

In a majority of schools, issues of bullying are a constant concern, affecting students dramatically in subtle and not so subtle ways. With Exploratory Time, the classroom atmosphere in our classrooms became more inclusive and welcoming because students got to know each other by engaging in conversations, becoming more familiar with their peers and their teacher. As one participant stated, “I got more related to my peers, trusted them, got to know them.” Peer conflicts and misbehaviour were reduced. An implication here is that a form of Exploratory Time could be an effective way to address some of the underlying causes of bullying: lack of understanding, exclusion, and boredom.


With a positive classroom environment, students who trust one another are more willing to take risks, make mistakes, and learn without inhibition. “The project got us together, because they were helping each other.” The participants’ responses indicated that it was a positive experience because students felt comfortable and supported. Many comments from the participants during the interviews showed that they “felt good and were happy.” As teachers who believe in a democratic approach to learning, we can use these findings to support student-led activities in our classrooms.

This research reaffirmed that, as educators, we need to trust that students want to learn and are capable of making decisions about learning choices. Wolk (2001, 59) believes, “students have endless interests that they would love to pursue. But giving them those opportunities in school requires a tremendous amount of trust in students, something most adults lack.” Bollnow (1989, 14) strongly agrees that, “This trust is truly a foundation that must exist if the child is to develop properly.” Flowerday and Schraw (2000, 2) found “classroom management styles affected the use of choice. Teachers who valued student autonomy were most likely to support the use of choice.”

This link between trust, choice and teacher control was illustrated through a situation observed during Exploratory Time, when a usually boisterous group of students was sharing scary stories. The group was listening with focused intensity, hanging on every word as D., in a hushed voice, vividly recounted a hair raising urban legend, and at the end of her story, students commented, “D. tells the best stories, she knows how to tell a story so that you really want to listen.” My initial reaction when this group caught my attention was that they were all off task and as the teacher, I needed to make a comment to that affect. However, as the researcher, I said nothing and just observed, and in the process realized that there was a lot of positive learning taking place. Students were learning about ways of communicating through storytelling, and I was learning what kinds of stories were appealing to my students.

This situation made us analyze how the teacher decides what behaviour is deemed on or off task, controlling what is important to be learned. It also taught us a lesson about control and being reactive to a situation and cutting off the learning experience, rather than allowing students the chance to find their learning in their own way. Wolk (2001, 59) cites Carl Rogers who wrote,

“If I distrust the human being then I must cram him with information of my own choosing, lest he go his own mistaken way. But if I trust the capacity of the human individual for developing his own potentiality, then I can provide him with many opportunities and permit him to choose his own way and his own direction for learning.”

Creating Time for Meaningful Conversations...

Reflecting back on the process and looking at our classroom through a researcher’s lens has been a valuable experience. The most salient lesson learned from this project has been to rethink how we use our time so that we can engage in conversations with children and find out together what
really matters. It is easy to get caught up in the regular day-to-day grind that includes report cards, meetings, IRPs, Foundation Skills Assessment and the pressure of increased class sizes. More than ever, we need to forge meaningful relationships with the students in our classrooms.

Teachers must promote the dignity of the child through thoughtfulness outside of the traditional prescribed curriculum. Exploratory Time is one way to connect significantly with children. As teachers we are reminded to slow down. “We must give them time to own their own learning. The next step is ours” (Wolk, 2001, 59).

References


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Educational Insights, 10(1).


**About the Authors**

**David Lafond** has been an elementary school teacher in Vancouver, British Columbia since 1989. He has degrees from Simon Fraser University (B. Ed.) and the University of British Columbia (M. Ed.). His teaching philosophy is based on a caring, collaborative team approach that incorporates humour and promotes active learning. When David is not teaching, he enjoys the outdoors and restoring his Victorian home in the “Royal City,” New Westminster, with his wife Alison and two children, Emily and Joshua.

**Mary Anne Purdy** has always been involved with young people and leadership development, previously as a YMCA youth programme director, and now as a grade 6/7 teacher in Vancouver. Providing opportunities for her students to develop their leadership skills is a constant focus, with student run programmes for recycling, lunch monitors, sports day, and peer educators. When Mary Anne is not teaching, you can usually find her in her ocean kayak on the west coast of Vancouver Island or hiking, running, and cycling the trails and roads of British Columbia and beyond.