

Empowering students to be agents of change in their learning spaces

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Together with my co-teacher, Naomi Paxton, I teach a class of P2 students, who are 6 and 7 years old; their experiences of school to date have been largely impacted by COVID, which forced school closures and at-home learning. One lingering effect of this, as we quickly realised at the start of P2 in 2023, is that many of them returned to in-person learning unsure of what they should do without explicit guidance from a teacher. They undertake tasks and routines with constant checks on whether they are doing things right, or what they should do next. Students are also more passive in discussions, with ideas and suggestions they offer tending more towards what they think you want to hear rather than what they want to know. For this picture of practice, we will focus on the start of our unit of inquiry on *Sharing the Planet: Our choices have an impact on our environment*.

The set up

It's Monday morning, and the students are coming in from their cubbies and starting to get ready... but the classroom is a mess! There are vast amounts of felt clippings, paper scraps, cardboard boxes, glue sticks, scissors and string all over the room.

Camilla, Head of School, also notices the mess as she pops by doing her morning rounds. With a smile and chuckle, she departs with a comment about the party we've evidently had. However, the students, whilst visually acknowledging the mess, just carry on with their normal routine and then go and check the schedule that Naomi is writing up on the board.

As more students arrive, we notice some interesting interactions between different children. Some immediately say a variant of 'it wasn't me!' or coordinate with each other to pass the mess off to someone else. They minimally interact with the materials around the room—one even steps into a box and back out the other side—but nobody cleans anything up.



We call the class to the morning meeting, and still no one suggests that the mess is bothersome or inconvenient. We discuss our schedule for the day and send them off to their desks to write in their journals. They begin moving the mess around so that they can sit and write at their desks. Still, no cleaning up happens. Anticipating a specialist teacher coming in after morning break, Naomi and I eventually decide we must initiate the cleaning up. Whilst our specialist teachers are happy to roll with any number of re-configurations of desks and tables we make, we thought actual mess everywhere might be pushing our luck a bit too far.

The reaction

The next day, Naomi and I showed the students the videos we had taken of their reactions to the mess. We had filmed them to capture not only their comments, but also the body language and interactions between them. We formed small watch parties with the students and asked them to focus on what they could see in the videos, what it made them think about, and any wonders they then had. There were two main groups of ideas that surfaced from students: *What am I doing? What are my friends doing?* There was also a recurring theme within the different watch parties—students saying that it was my (Jenna's) fault, either because I didn't tell them to tidy up or because I didn't do the tidying up myself before Monday. Interestingly, they didn't seem to take issue with me telling them to do the tidying up, as they willingly did it once they'd gotten assigned a task.



A selection of the comments from the I see, I think, I wonder

Following the watch parties, we reorganized so students could review other groups' videos and comments. Again, the conversation immediately jumped to fault.

Jenna: Why is it my fault?
A: You didn't tell us to clean up.
Jenna: So you guys don't do anything unless we tell you to?
What would happen if I never told you to clean up? Would it be ok?
What would happen?
D: No! We would trip and fall. It would be a very messy classroom. Wouldn't be enough space for activities.
B: So things don't get lost, you don't get hurt, don't get burnt (like glue guns on the floor)

However, the conversation quickly moved on to other people impacted by their mess, namely the cleaning staff. The Friday before we had had some project time, and unbeknownst to the students Naomi and I had intentionally not given students time to clean up. We also coordinated with the caretaking and cleaning staff and asked them not to touch our classroom. Naomi and I put the lids on glue sticks and pens so as not to be wasteful, but otherwise left everything exactly as the students had left it. We discussed how this impacted staff.

N: I think the cleaners felt, we're not cleaning it up, we'll leave it for them.
At first they felt surprised at how messy it was.
Jenna: Is it the cleaners' job to clean or to tidy?
A: Clean
N: It's not their job to tidy.
D: They can't clean the floor when it's messy
Jenna: What's the difference between cleaning and tidying?
H: Tidying means you put something somewhere else, you're picking stuff up.
B: Yes. When you're cleaning, you have tools. When you're tidying, you don't have tools.
Jenna: So, at school, who does the tidying?

M: If it's your stuff, then you do it. And if it was someone else, then the person that did it should do it. Of course, if you want to, you could help.

H: Genadij [our caretaking assistant] cleans everything up, because last time I went outside, he was cleaning the leaves.

M: And the cleaning ladies.

Jenna: Ah, but do they tidy or do they clean?

M: They... clean?

A: Both?

Jenna: You know what, they don't do both. [points to M] They clean.

M: They sweep the floor.

Jenna: Yes, they sweep the floor, they clean the tables...

M: But they don't pick up the stuff and put it away.

Jenna: Because that's not their job. [gestures to all] That's our job. They clean, we tidy.

B: It's not my job. I'm the King [In a silly affected posh accent]

Jenna: I don't remember electing you!

[All laugh]

Whilst it is evident that the students understand the roles of different adults they interact with at school, they don't seem to see themselves as agents of change when it comes to their environment. Do they know that they have a say in what the classroom looks like? Or how it's set up? Do they know they can help us adjust the routines and structures of the day? How do we encourage them to be active in this process? So, this became our focus for the unit, and also beyond.

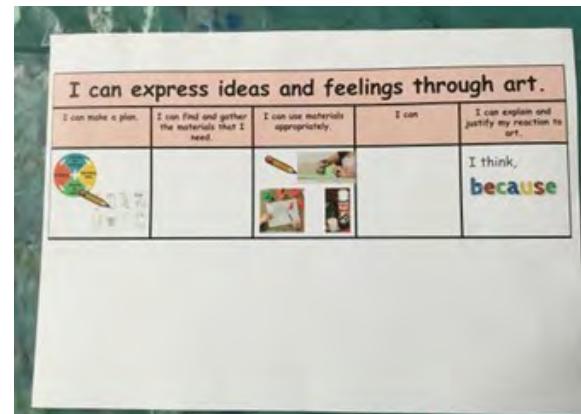
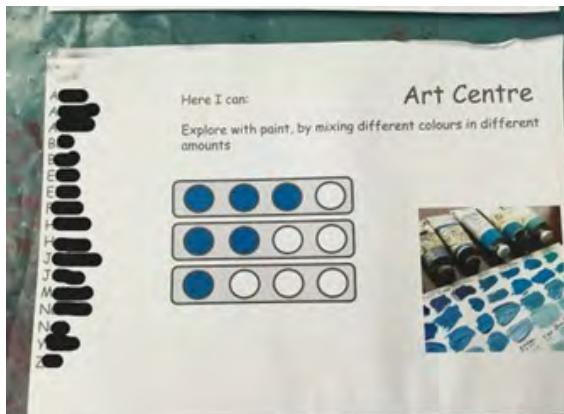
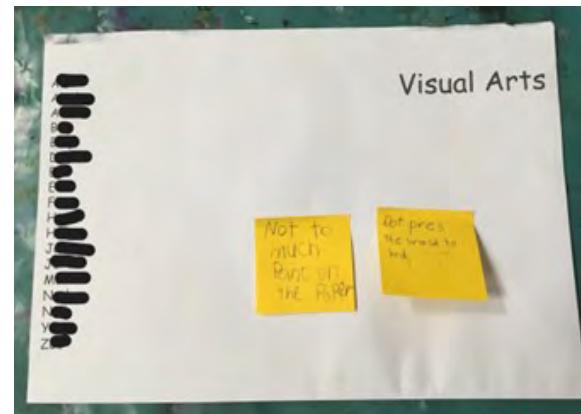
The follow up

In the following days, Naomi and I spent time reflecting on the class setup with our students. What choices could they make about the classroom as a learning space to make it more successful for them, but also a space they had more ownership of? How could we move it from being a classroom, to being our classroom? Students surveyed different locations around the school, moved tables and chairs, and discussed elements of space and set-up amongst themselves and with their parents during our Parent Playdate. They settled on reconfiguring the room, and a need for more plants. So together with Laura, the Visual Art teacher, they made some recycled paper pot plants to decorate the classroom.



We had up to this point re-organised the classroom a couple of times as we got to know the students and their needs, using their input into what had or had not been working for them.

Following the surveys and feedback about the class set-up as a whole, we also implemented a centres-based approach, whereby they could move around the room more, work with different people and pace their own learning. They added the stipulations of only 4 students per station, a checking in/out system, the must-do and the nice-to-do, success criteria for each centre with clear descriptors, a timer... and a subsequent removal of the timer. They had mentioned feeling frustrated at having to keep pace with others, or not being able to move on when they were ready. That some centres felt like they needed longer to get into and feel successful at (frequently the art centre was mentioned here). But others then lamented the lack of timer to help them pace themselves and manage their time to meet the success criteria of the must-do centres.



Progression of the Art Centre signage: Student made attention grabbing; addition of student made rules; addition of teacher guidance; then clarified success criteria

This adjusting of the classroom and routines is a continuing project with frequent reflections and modifications. The students are becoming much better at articulating what is or isn't working for them and what information they need to be successful at each centre, and they're spending less time comparing and competing and instead are focusing on their own individual learning. Their reflections show they're thinking about how to work effectively in their space and advocating for what they need. In our end of day reflection recently, one student mentioned that it would be good to add an optional centre timer to use if they needed it, though they didn't have to follow it. Others then commented that the timer would need to be noticeably different from the whole class end-of-session timer we use for tidying up and regrouping.

It's not every day as a teacher that you sit back at the end of the day and think, *Isn't it great that we've gotten to the point where the students have valid, meaningful, and useful feedback ideas to improve their learning?* Now, not only do our students consider their academic success criteria, but they're also far more tuned-in to the space: they tell each other to tidy up resources, and they make sure that the chairs are put away in stacks at the end of the day and the bread crumbs are swept up at the end of snack time. A far cry from the beginning of the Sharing the Planet unit where they blamed each other for the mess, and nobody took any responsibility or initiative to clean it up.

Discussion Prompts:

- **How might educators empower students to be agents of change in their learning spaces and processes?**
- **What do students have control over in their learning spaces, and how can they effect change on their environment?**
- **What language and competences do children need to effectively express their educational needs?**