

## **Let's Talk about Things that Matter (Year five/six)**

### ***Margarita Fair***

I care about what my students think. I really do. If only I could finish my sentences and thoughts without interruption or have them focus on one another's opinions instead of them thinking it's all being about 'Me, Me, Me!'

Having recently attended two conferences taken by Art Costa and George Ottero I was struck by a common theme- the importance of relationships, dialogue and listening with empathy and understanding. I decided to implement some practices that might lead to an improvement in our class culture. I wanted to explore how we could develop values education in meaningful ways.

My school was also having a major focus on improving speaking and listening skills aligned to the National Framework so the timing was perfect. My class had already done a fair bit by establishing an agreed etiquette for conversations. Using paired listening <sup>(\*)</sup> and fishbowl strategy <sup>(\*)</sup> the children had discussed given topics and had been given feedback from their peers on their behaviours. This was a powerful tool and did have some positive effects. Many were more aware of not interrupting and including others but it didn't go far enough as some children still basically didn't really care. They valued different things.

We reorganised the classroom furniture so that we could sit in a circle <sup>(\*)</sup>. I introduced 'Talking Sticks' <sup>(\*)</sup>, as I wanted to see how this would effect our conversations. I gave the children a topic - 'What if all children were micro-chipped so that parents could monitor where they were?' They loved the topic and were bursting with ideas. Some children used up their sticks quickly and then were unable to speak. Those that usually dominate discussions found this enormously difficult. They were virtually bursting but interestingly enough did not break the rules of 'the game'. They squirmed on their seats, put their hands over their mouths but said nothing.

Frustration increased if they were asked a clarifying question as they lost the chance to express one of their ideas. (Afterwards we discussed this and decided to give each person one stick of designated colour (yellow) to answer a direct clarifying question.)

Many students who were quiet had the time and space to express their opinions without fear of interruption. It was a real hit and for days afterwards they asked, "Can we 'play' sticks again?"

We have since 'played sticks' many times and they still enjoy the challenge. They have learnt: "to be more mindful about what I am going to say", "not waste my speaking by making funny comments as I don't get my real ideas in", "be clear about

what I am saying so I don't have to answer clarifying questions", "to listen more carefully to what people are saying...it helps you not to repeat what someone else has already said 'cause you want to make your stick count".

We started to explore issues involving values like, how we might show the values to people new to our community, refugee issues, and school camp. We used X charts to discuss how we would think, what it would look like, sound like, and feel like. In the beginning the children found the 'think like' part hard to do. We talked about how our thinking was where our behaviour came from. "If I think you are my equal I will treat you as my equal." "I think I should give everyone a fair go by passing to everyone in my team." Over time it became easier for children to reflect on the values and how they related to what we were going to do or to issues we discussed.

Temperature readings <sup>(5)</sup> also became part of our class routine. Sometimes it might be a raising of hands with a show of fingers from 1 to 5. The question might be as simple as, "How would you rate your weekend?", "How are you feeling today?", "How well do you think you understand X?". These may sound unimportant but the children were then able to comment or pass and I learnt things about them that would have gone unnoticed otherwise.

"I rated a 1 because my dad went back to Sydney last night and I won't see him for another two months. I hate that!"

"I rated a 2 because my grandad went to hospital and he's really sick. Mum's all upset and so am I."

"I rated a 3 because I keep getting confused about the steps and there was too much noise for me to concentrate when the others had finished and were talking."

I could then respond appropriately at a later time and I believe this made us grow closer. I also shared how I was feeling and about events in my life. I think this helps to 'humanise' us as teachers and increases trust.

In 'appreciations' we had the opportunity to feedback positive things to people. In our first session I was incredibly moved as kids gave me so many appreciations about my teaching, the things we do and who I am. It was unexpected especially with senior kids for whom it is not really seen as cool to openly like a teacher. I glowed inside for days afterwards. If something this simple could make me feel so good what was it doing for the children? I looked at their faces and they were beaming during appreciations - both the giver and receiver.

We have had class meetings in the past as a forum for students to discuss class issues, express concerns and make recommendations. We moved this into part of our circle time quite naturally. New information could be given to clarify why things may have happened the way they did or why people had done certain things. This was compared to how people may have perceived events. This was worthwhile in resolving conflicts or adjusting false impressions. We also used hopes and wishes for planning changes to our class organisation or having some special events.

Another part of our time was using 'circle of voices' (\*6). Sometimes this is part of temperature readings but we also use this to discuss issues. At the beginning children needed to have a prop that they passed around to stop others from interrupting. Only those with the 'ball of power' had the right to speak. Gradually this prop has been able to be removed and children wait. If someone interrupts the others are very quick to tell them "It's not your turn" or "Excuse me, I haven't finished speaking."

So now I have the perfect classroom where I am never interrupted and we all treat each other with total respect. That would be nice wouldn't it?

Tom and Emma\* are still learning to manage their impulsiveness and beginning to wait their turn and some still chat when they should be listening. Sometimes I still get very frustrated by their behaviour. So what has changed?

Tom, Emma (and others) are aware they should be waiting and not interrupting. They apologise to whomever they have interrupted. They wait more often and raise their hand more often. We all know it is something they are working on and encourage them when they have been doing well.

The side chats have lessened and almost never happen in circle time. If they do, they are promptly reminded by the others of what's expected. It is no longer just me calling for this way of respecting each other.

Our discussions are richer and more inclusive. I regularly hear from everyone in the class, even the quietest of the girls.

Most significantly though I think our relationships have deepened. We know each other far better. We deal with each other honestly and openly. There is a greater sense of trust and safety within our class.

An unexpected spin from this has been their heightened sense of "expected behaviour' not just in our room. They put everyone under the same scrutiny and have come back with complaints about the way they perceive they are being treated by other students or staff. It was put to one of the boys that I tell them off too and the reply that came back was "Yes, but it's different when you do it 'cause you understand me." That blew me away a bit but made me realise how important the relational side of everything we have been doing has been.

Our journey is far from over. After all, we are imperfect people who don't always get it right. From the core of valuing our relationships have come acceptance and a willingness to forgive within our room. One challenge is how to help the kids take these values out beyond our class without being destructive, i.e. using this knowledge to try to bring other people down. It can also be counterproductive if they try to lay these standards and values on others or sit in judgement. This will be a focus in our circle in the next few weeks.

I continue to care about what my students think but I am now far more aware of how they feel. I have come to understand how important our relationships are and how they impact in all of our interactions. My class is already expressing how much closer they have grown and how they will miss being together, and yes I will miss them too.

**Future plans.**

I will most certainly make circle time a part of my class next year and look forward to watching how it unfolds. The improvement in relationships and improvement in listening has improved our interactions. This flows over to all our time together and makes the time we spend in circles even more worthwhile. Our awareness of values and what they look like, sound like and feel like has increased. In our circle dialogues is where the real thinking like has been happening.

A team of teachers has been trialling these strategies at my school. We all have seen it as valuable. We have put forward a proposal to take this across the entire school. We believe it will make a positive contribution to our culture as a learning community.

I would encourage teachers to trial these strategies with their students. The same principles and activities can be applied in any subject. Take the time to get to get to know your students.

\*names of students have been changed

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ottero, George, *Skills for Democracy: Promoting Dialogue in Schools*, Hawker Brownlow, Cheltenham 2000.

Ottero, George, *Relational Learning: Education for mind Body and Spirit*, Hawker Brownlow, Cheltenham 2001.

### \*1 PAIRED LISTENING

Practise conversational skills

This is an effective starting point for interactive speaking skills. We had peers assessing how well they used the skills and feeding back to the individual.

### \*2 FISHBOWL STRATEGY

Students sit in a two concentric circles. The inner circle students have the dialogue.

The outer circle are observers only. They are not allowed to comment. They provide feedback at the end of the session on specific skills.

### \*3 CIRCLES

Circles have become a fundamental part of our dialogue process. The circle is a symbol of unity, equality and cooperation. It promotes working together to support one another and taking equal responsibility.

### \*4 TALKING STICKS

Students are given a collection of coloured sticks, (i.e. 3 sticks). In order to take part in the conversation they must throw in one of their sticks. Once all of their sticks are used they cannot say anything further.

### \*5 TEMPERATURE READING

The purpose of temperature reading is for people to get a chance to say what is on their mind and in their heart.

**The categories are:** appreciations, new information, puzzlements, concerns and recommendations, and hopes.

### \*6 CIRCLE OF VOICES

Move around the circle allowing everyone to comment without interruption. No one is to comment on what is said until everyone has had his or her chance to speak.