



VOLUME TWO

STUDENTS DRIVING LEARNING

**IMPROVING STUDENT
OUTCOMES *SERIES***

Bern Nicholls & Annelies Hoogland

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INTRODUCTION

This second publication from our Improving Student Outcomes series shines the spotlight on our students – the reason why schools exist. We are seemingly at a crossroads in education, evident in the public discourse scrutinising the effectiveness of our school system in providing students with the knowledge, skills and understandings that will equip them for a future largely unknown. Teachers and school leaders alike are literally swamped by the plethora of research and practical ideas touted as ‘the’ road map for schools of the future. Yet, so often we unwittingly forget to include our students in this discourse. This volume is about amplifying student voice and exploring ways to empower our students to genuinely become navigators and authors of their own learning journey.

Students Driving Learning provides pathways for teachers and leaders to think about pedagogies and practices that place students centre-stage and in the driver’s seat of their learning. Similar to the analogy of driving a car, when students are empowered in their learning they are given control, planning the routes they will take on the journey, learning from the experiences of getting lost or making wrong turns, and devising different strategies that lead to new discoveries. Currently, the education system tends to place students in the passenger seat with teachers firmly belted into the driver’s seat, choosing the destination and how to get there, taking full responsibility for all the planning details, as well as ensuring there are few detours that could disrupt the tight learning time line. The passengers, our students, are in effect disempowered through a lack of choice and agency in their learning. Wilson and Conyers (2014) propose that if students are to sit in the driver’s seat of their learning, then teachers must become their driving instructors – riding alongside them, monitoring their individual progress, teaching and modelling effective learning. Some students will need more instructional support than others, but all students gain when teachers know their individual learning needs and provide effective support so they can learn.

Practical and research-based ways that enable students to drive their learning are included in this volume. Four lenses further provide the structure for this anthology to ensure students have a voice that empowers them to take charge of their learning journey.

1. The Visible Learner

Making students visible in schools requires leaders and teachers to actively seek out student voice, a critical strategy for genuinely understanding their experience of learning. The student data authentically informs school leadership teams, teacher practice and identifies students requiring extra support or extension in their learning. The strategic facilitation of these data rich dialogues, impacts on the capacity of teachers and leaders to provide high-quality learning for every student. Educators do this by nurturing authentic student relationships and actively seeking feedback through learning-focused conversations that refine practice and ensure all students are actually learning day-by-day.

LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

What does it mean for learners and learning to drive a school? This chapter attempts to explore ways to address this key question from the perspective of a principal who chose to make the transformation from principal to a *leader for learning*. Through my lived experience as a principal of primary and middle schools internationally, I will present relevant research alongside some practical strategies and tools that I have used as a *leader for learning* to enact an authentic, student-centred and learning-focused school. Critically, my journey as a *leader for learning* was ignited when I realised students were missing from the learning equation. I had sought out teachers' thoughts and views whilst navigating my leadership responsibilities but had neglected to actively seek out students' opinions and ideas. At that point in my leadership journey students became my learning partners and their voice was included in all aspects of daily life at school.

Becoming a *leader for learning* demanded an intentional listening to students' perspectives and experiences of learning – in classrooms, co-curricula activities, excursions and assemblies to name but a few ways student views were sought and included when making decisions that would impact on their learning. This was a huge paradigm shift that moved me away from a focus on the teacher and teaching to the learner and learning. I chose to become a visible leader who had a finger on the pulse of learning, evident in my daily learning walks both inside and outside classrooms talking with students and teachers about their learning. This relentless focus on learning helped me understand the 'right things' on which to focus my energies on as a leader.

THE LEARNING-FOCUSED SCHOOL: Research Foundations

Learning is at the heart of what schools are about ... Ultimately, the goal must be to ensure that every student's learning, development and experience is of the highest quality, to enable all young people to flourish, both in today's society and in an uncertain future. That is the moral purpose. (Stoll, 2004:3)

There is a common agreement among researchers that effective school leadership is unequivocally focused on the improvement of student learning and outcomes. Studies have been conducted that suggest "school leadership is second only to classroom teaching in terms of influence and impact on student learning outcomes" (Leithwood et al. 2006:6-7). With a clear focus on improving learning it must be noted however that "the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers" (Barber and Mourshed 2007:16). Therefore leadership that is connected to learning not only improves learning for students but also develops teachers' pedagogical practice and capacity. A learning-focused school has a leadership team that understands their responsibility is to influence both directly and indirectly teacher practice and student learning.

Leading with moral purpose in a school implies a deep concern for the necessity of all in the school community to continually learn. This includes students receiving outstanding learning experiences, teachers receiving excellent opportunities to continually improve their pedagogical practices and leaders actively leading and monitoring the quality of learning (Southwell, 2013). Fullan (2001) and MacBeath (2005) have written extensively on the moral imperative of learning and refer to moral purpose as a commitment to making a difference by constantly improving student achievement.

Improving learning then is the moral purpose that guides a learning-focused school. Leaders, teachers, parents and school boards maintain a sharp focus on student learning, alongside a deep understanding and belief that everyone can learn and is a learner in the school community. Reflecting on my own experiences, I realised that leadership teams need to dedicate time to discuss and develop a common understanding of learning within their school community. In my early days as a principal I thought I knew what it meant to be focused on student learning but I must confess that I did not really know how to identify or improve learning on a day-to-day basis. This realisation drove me to find practical answers to this question, "How do I enact moral purpose on a daily basis?" Over the years I developed more clarity and understanding through a combination of collaborative professional learning communities, targeted leadership coaching and reading research that supported an understanding of what it practically meant to lead a learning-focused school.

Even though current educational research supports the belief that a school's core business is the identification and improvement of all students' learning, my experiences both as a principal and leadership consultant tell a different story, a story where school leaders find it challenging to keep learning as the focus of their school. Experiencing the demands and potential distractions of leading a school, leaders subsequently struggle to put learning first (MacBeath and Dempster, 2009). What I now understand is that with so many non-learning focused demands placed on leaders, our students miss out and this is morally at odds with the purpose of schools. For this reason, leaders need to actively and consistently promote a learning-focused school by enhancing the learning for every student and teacher every day, regardless of the distractions that seduce our attention away from the core business – learning. The day I understood that my role was to protect the learning in my school was the day I had a clear leadership vision. I was empowered, resolute and unwavering in my protection of the students and their learning and possessed a clear vision on 'how' to ensure learning improvement in our school. It was at this point in my leadership journey that I experienced what Starratt (2004) calls, the reclaiming and strengthening of my moral purpose, as I moved towards an ethical leadership that focused on developing learning partnerships.

A LEARNING-FOCUSED LEADERSHIP TEAM: Our Questions

Leaders of schools today understand that it takes a team to effectively lead the learning. MacBeath and Dempster (2009) view the relationship between leadership and learning as natural bedfellows and define leadership for learning in the following way:

FEEDBACK FOR LEARNING

Feedback infuses all interactions. But much of the communication that takes place in a classroom is unreliable. It is still true that feedback is about timely, explicit and relevant information that aids in learning. However, if most of the feedback is, in fact, happening between peers, then we need to think deeper about how to harness the strategies and tools that will help them give better feedback that drives learning. Feedback becomes the threads that bring together all of our classroom interactions that influence student learning.

The reality is that we are obtaining feedback about others and our environment on a regular basis in our classrooms. How we facilitate these interactions to support higher-quality feedback will ultimately determine the richness of learning that can take place in a classroom. When we can make meaningful changes to the social interactions within a classroom, we can improve the feedback that is already occurring in our classrooms, enhancing daily social interactions so that they are supportive of feedback for learning.

Feedback is ultimately more than merely knowing the results to improve future learning. Students also need to understand how to, when to, and when not to use information. This is largely accomplished through feedback gleaned through interpersonal relationships within the classroom. This kind of learning occurs in real-time conversations within a classroom. Key evidence from our social interactions will show us the kinds of feedback students are already sharing with each other every day. We can surmise that the effectiveness of the feedback will be determined by the social contexts of the classroom.

The feedback-friendly classroom is based on the assumption that learning is inherently social. It is a paradigm we can harness to help students take their social interactions to new levels to promote meaningful relationships, deep thinking and collaboration; to help them think about learning goals, their personal strengths and weaknesses; to show how they can help others and how to ask effective questions. All of this goes towards building safe and effective learning relationships.

High-quality relationships are the cornerstone of the feedback-friendly classroom. They promote effective feedback processes that help us scaffold learning towards appropriate learning goals. This scaffolding often necessitates the use of differentiated strategies; i.e. learning will look different depending on the relationships of students and where students are at in their learning. Many of our overall expectations within the curriculum are basically the same from year level to year level, providing the opportunity to think more deeply about the expectations and concepts with only slight variations; however, feedback allows learning to be structured in flexible ways, using rich learning tasks that provide multiple points of entry to reach the learning goals. For example, one student might be on an IEP (Individual Education Plan) for vision impairment, another might not be working at year level, and yet another could be on an IEP for giftedness and require acceleration. With rich tasks that incorporate interaction and feedback throughout the entire process, we provide opportunities for students to take risks, work towards their strengths and meet the learning goals in ways that are appropriate for them. The strategies to interact with the tasks are not simple, nor are they closed and exclusive to certain

individuals. They are open-ended, and allow students to follow their inquiries, interests and learning needs, to attack the problems and learning tasks from different points of entry. The learning goals we create from the feedback we get from our students can be met by each because the rich task allows that student to express learning in appropriate ways.

LEARNER VARIABLES

It is important to teach our students to recognise that everyone's knowledge and experience are essential parts of the learning processes.

Feedback can become the conversational medium by which students give, receive and seek feedback. How students perceive the feedback and how teachers communicate it is ultimately affected by different learner variables. These variables include self-esteem, agency, culture and past experiences. They are influenced by the language we use and ultimately affected by the feedback shared within a classroom.

Self-Esteem

Giving and receiving feedback greatly affects self-esteem. How someone feels about learning cannot be separated from the act of learning itself; therefore, our strategies need to work to preserve students' self-esteem. Strategies that promote self-esteem include

- feedback framed in positive ways to ensure that as a class we are not causing harm to anyone
- strategies that focus on the task vs. the person
- explicitly taught language for use in conversations.

Deliberate practice of our vocabulary, sentences and questions are essential to ensure we are preserving self-worth and self-esteem, and are promoting learner agency and values. We need to pay close attention to the conversations among our students.

Agency

Learner agency is closely linked to personal choice, self-control and autonomy within the classroom. The language we use while giving, receiving and facilitating feedback is crucial to promoting learner agency in our students.

Culture

Feedback is the key to recognising other cultures, experiences, norms, knowledges and skills. Appropriate feedback that students feel safe enough to bring forth, along with feedback that students have learned to give and receive in appropriate ways, has the power to transform. The feedback evenly

AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS: THE WILLINGNESS TO LEARN

(Edited Version of Chapter 4 – Illuminating Truths: The Student Interviews – 2017)

Bern Nicholls PhD

SEEN AND NOT HEARD

I remember very little about what I learned in secondary school during the late 70s and early 80s, however I do recall the teachers who really mattered to me as a student. There were enough who pushed me out of my comfort zone through encouragement and helpful feedback. What was their magic? It was their genuine regard for me as a young person. Feeling respected, cared for, known and challenged, all at the same time, was empowering and meant the world to me.

School in those days was mostly a passive experience with students expected to be seen and not heard. The teacher was the keeper and holder of all the information, endlessly dishing it out to be absorbed into our supposedly empty minds. Most of us found it difficult to sit still, and listening to the teacher holding court for most of the lesson resulted in disengagement, evident in our disruptive behaviour. Sitting passively all day in hot, airless classrooms was a mind numbing experience. Yet there were teachers who seemed to understand our need to be actively engaged in our learning and provided us with opportunities to experience learning activities that did not leave us literally chained to our desks.

POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS AND CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

During my early days at university I experienced the impact of feedback on my self-confidence as a learner. I entered university just after my seventeenth birthday, immature intellectually, socially and emotionally. The fact I survived and thrived during those four years was a minor miracle, considering what happened after the submission of my first essay for Education 101, *Education is a means to an end. Discuss*. I don't remember the finer details of how I constructed the essay or made sense of the question but what I do remember is receiving the mark, a pass minus, which meant resubmission. I had no idea what I needed to do to improve the essay to a pass level as the essay was devoid of constructive comments from the lecturer. However, being young and confident I naively turned up to the lecturer's office without an appointment and asked him what I had done 'wrong'. His response, "Bernadette, I don't know why you bother, you would be better off being a checkout chick!" My emotional response to this interaction was hurt and anger, which negatively influenced my relationship with him and the willingness to take risks with my learning.

Fortunately I did not heed the lecturer's advice. Looking back now and with the benefit of hindsight, my family's value system had strongly influenced this willingness to persevere in spite of the less than constructive feedback received. I was the first in my family to go to university and felt proud and determined to embrace the opportunity. The second possible reason for ignoring his career advice could have been the very different response received from my history lecturer during the same week. Once again I received a pass minus for my first history essay but rather than respond in a deleterious manner, he quietly requested I stay behind at the end of the tutorial. He then proceeded to deconstruct the essay with such patience and in the process uncovered the skills required to write a well-structured History essay. The constructive feedback led to a sense of empowerment and at that point I realised that mistakes were simply part of the learning process. The lecturer's caring approach and willingness to demonstrate how to improve my essay had a profound impact on me as a learner. I subsequently worked hard and remained motivated throughout this yearlong subject.

These two contrasting learning experiences highlight the impact a teacher can have on student motivation and their willingness to engage in learning, as well as the vital need for effective feedback that is task rather than ego involving (Wiliam, 2011). Even more critical and evident in Hattie's (2013) research, is the connection between a caring, respectful relationship between student and teacher and improved learning outcomes.

A CURIOUS QUESTION

A curious mind together with these early educational experiences strongly influenced my belief that all students must be known and positioned centre-stage, with the teacher back-stage carefully orchestrating, supporting, encouraging and celebrating the learning achievements of every student. As a consequence, the students I have had the privilege of learning with over the years have actively influenced and informed my learning journey to this day. This journey more formally began with the commencement of my doctoral studies. The importance of genuinely listening to, analysing and acting upon learning data collected from students has been the red thread informing both my teaching and research career. This belief in the power of student voice was intentionally enacted through my doctoral thesis, which sought only students' thoughts, opinions and critical reflections on what helped and hindered their learning through focus group interviews.

The idea for my doctoral thesis occurred whilst watching a National Geographic documentary titled, *Bingo – Service Dog in Training* (Kalina, 2002). This documentary captured the story of Noah, a fourteen-year-old troubled adolescent and Bingo, an energetic Golden Retriever dog. The story of Noah and Bingo revolved around the *Kids and Canines Program*, which started in 1998 as an anti-truancy initiative at the Dorothy Thomas School in Hillsborough County, Florida. The program was designed by educators to help troubled and truant students return to school, through pairing them with a dog. The two-year program resulted in Noah forming a strong relationship with Bingo that afforded him a reason to attend school. During the school day Bingo remained by Noah's side in all classes. In the afternoon it was Noah's responsibility to teach Bingo obedience and the skills required to assist a person with a disability. Noah and Bingo successfully completed the assistance-training program and at a formal graduation ceremony, Noah confidently presented Bingo to Nick, a young man confined to a wheelchair. Noah's life had been transformed and his mother captured the magnitude of his transformation:

I couldn't be more proud of him and more touched and more grateful for everything he's learnt through the program. Before the program Noah had no goals and tonight I know he's going up onto that stage with goals, which I never anticipated he would have before. I didn't think he had much of a future to be honest (cries). People used to say to me that Noah would one day end up in gaol, or worse, and now I know it's not true, as he now has a future and he does care about what happens to him and others. It's amazing that a dog can change someone's life the way Bingo has changed Noah's life. (Kalina 2002)

After watching the episode, I was profoundly challenged to think about the impact an unconditional relationship may have on a student's willingness to learn. The personal story of Year 8 student Noah and Golden Retriever dog Bingo was the catalyst that informed the research question for my doctoral thesis, "What would happen if a dog came into my classes?"

Even though Noah and Bingo's story was the catalyst for the study, it was the remarkable progress made by Noah at school through his relationship with Bingo that led to my professional transformation. At the time of watching the documentary I was the Year 10 Coordinator responsible for 320 students in a catholic co-educational secondary school in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. Noah's transformation from troubled to focused student, led me to deeply question the effectiveness of my approach with students experiencing personal and social difficulties.

Paradoxically as Year 10 Coordinator I was responsible for attending to both student wellbeing and discipline issues. In carrying out the role, I experienced the complexity of the students' problems and was often caught in the middle of family conflict while attempting to resolve behavioural or wellbeing concerns. Mediating bullying among peers or working with the school psychologist to develop strategies to help a student return to school were but some of the daily demands. My identification with the story of Noah and Bingo reflected the serious concerns I held for the troubled students under my care. Noah's story reminded me that what really matters is the development of authentic, respectful and empathic relationships with all students. The impetus for my research was grounded in a need to uncover more innovative ways to motivate students to engage in meaningful learning experiences through genuine learning partnerships. This then begins a story about a gentle dog named Gus and his impact on students, teacher, learning and the classroom environment.

INTRODUCING GUS: EDUCATIONAL THERAPY DOG

Gus was a 12-month old English springer spaniel when first introduced to the school and had been specifically trained as an educational therapy dog. The data was collected directly from students over a 4-year time frame through focus group interviews. The student data was analysed through the phenomenological lens, which focused on the students' direct, lived experience. The students responded to the open-ended research question, "What has been your experience of Gus in class this year?"

Bringing Gus into my classes was an unconventional way to investigate motivation and engagement from a student perspective. Through Gus' presence in class I was able to identify what mattered to students through their voice. The essential themes that emerged from the student data collected,