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## **A Deconstructive Approach to Class Meetings: Managing Conflict and Building Learning Communities**

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### **Abstract**

When the quality of teacher-student and student-student relationships is undermined by conflicts, classrooms can become unwelcoming environments that are not conducive to teaching and learning. Circle conversations are widely utilized in response to such conflicts as well as for academic and community-building purposes. In this article, we introduce a form of circle conversation, which we have termed 'deconstructive class meeting'. We developed this specific meeting format in a New Zealand secondary school drawing on local, indigenous processes of community conversation, discourse theory and narrative therapy. The structure of our meeting is deliberately designed to support the simultaneous achievement of two, seemingly contradictory objectives: conflict resolution and community building. We argue that when teachers and students collaboratively examine the power of ideas or discourses of learning not only alternatives to problematic practices become available, but learning communities and relationships are strengthened also.

### **Keywords**

circle conversations, deconstruction, classroom management, conflict resolution, restorative practice

### **Authors' Note**

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A Deconstructive Approach to Class Meetings:  
Managing Conflict and Building Learning Communities

The relationship patterns that teachers and students draw on for their interactions with each other not only make a difference for how a classroom operates as a community, but also for whether it is an environment conducive to teaching and learning. In the New Zealand context, the quality of teacher-student relationships has been shown to directly correlate to students' achievement levels, especially for indigenous Māori (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2004) and students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Hill & Hawk, 2005). Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, and Teddy (2007) found that all students' assessment results had significantly improved when teachers made some minor changes to their practices, which included, among other things, showing an interest in and/or trying to better understand their students' perspectives. In contrast, when teachers did not make an effort to engage with their students on a personal level, students demonstrated fewer learning behaviours.

When teachers respond to disruptions, non-compliance and defiance, behaviours that can often be triggered by tensions in the teacher-student relationship, they have a variety of strategies to choose from. Conflict resolution and community building are two possible interventions and both are of particular interest to us. In focusing on community and conflict resolution, we do not completely dismiss behavioural approaches to conflict (see, for example, Rogers, 2002). These approaches are teacher-centred, in the sense that they rely on the external control of student behaviours by the teacher, and they can be useful in situations when there is no time for negotiation and the flow of the lesson has to be maintained. Our preference, however, is for interventions that aim to improve students' self-discipline and relationship competencies and that endorse a *working with* rather than a *doing to* philosophy of addressing conflict. Such interventions also suitably complement schools' projects of inclusion and citizenship education. Increasingly, schools in Aotearoa New Zealand are using various adaptations of restorative practice (RP) processes for preventative purposes and daily relationship

management, in addition to responding to relationship breakdowns. Many teachers draw on the work of prominent restorative practitioners who provide a wide range of examples for such adaptations (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010; Claassen & Claassen, 2008; Hopkins, 2004, 2011; The Restorative Practices Development Team, 2004; Thorsborne & Vinegrad, 2006; Winslade & Williams, 2012). We believe with the above authors that circle conversations offer a framework for collaborative problem-solving between teachers and students. In this current project we were particularly interested to investigate the potential of circle conversations as the basis for daily relationship management. We wanted to explore how they might support the establishment of a positive learning culture in a classroom.

Our particular circle conversation, which the authors of this article termed *deconstructive class meeting*, was developed with teachers at Aotea College, a multicultural secondary school in Wellington, New Zealand. The staff of the school had repeatedly expressed their concerns in staff meetings about the negative impact on the learning culture of minor, but on going, disruptions and conflicts. They were also concerned about what they called ‘unjustified meanness’ that at times negatively impacted on student-student relationships. The teachers agreed that, in addition to finding effective ways of addressing conflict, there was a need to develop more respectful relationships between students and, in some instances, between teachers and students. Strengthening relationships within classrooms was hypothesised by the majority of teachers to reduce the number of interruptions to teaching and learning. Circle conversations offered a suitable format to achieve the teachers’ main objectives of community building and conflict resolution. The first two authors managed to secure funding from the New Zealand Ministry of Education, and under their leadership, the teachers at the school embarked on an innovative three-year project that introduced to volunteering teachers specific ways of speaking, using principles adapted from narrative therapy, and a class meeting process. Over the period of the project, sixty teachers opted to participate in professional learning, which was

delivered through a two-day introductory workshop and regular, three-weekly focus group sessions led by the first two authors.

The meeting process was designed to meet two objectives: the strengthening of the classroom community, and replacing problematic relationship patterns with more respectful alternatives. Every class meeting began with a mixer or relationship-building round, which helped develop new relational dynamics. We were aware that students in secondary schools often became very busy under exam and assessment pressures. During such times, opportunities for connecting with others on a personal level could be diminished. We, therefore, wanted to make the most of the occasions when class meetings were called and space was provided to pay more than just fleeting attention to others.

The class meeting was also seen to provide opportunities to teach directly the key competencies which had been introduced in the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007). There are five key competencies, namely, participating and contributing, relating to others, thinking, use of language, text and symbols and self-management. Teachers are expected to teach these competencies across all curriculum subjects. Nickolite and Doll (2008) claim that, “strategies that promote highly effective peer interactions can be instrumental in creating a soothing and supportive social environment that makes it possible for students to stay engaged in academic learning” (p. 103). Hopkins (2011) suggests that, “Nobody feels safe if they are surrounded by strangers” (p. 49).

Using short activities that build and strengthen relationships can also increase feelings of trust and safety, which are the necessary prerequisites for addressing conflict. We have found that creating opportunities for participants to connect with and to talk to peers and teachers they would not otherwise engage with on a personal level relaxes the atmosphere. We also believe that starting with connection activities makes the meetings more inviting for our Māori and Pasifika students, whose cultural traditions of meeting protocols include a ‘mihimihi’, or introduction, at the start. Through

participants sharing something about themselves, an atmosphere of trust is created, which helps everyone ease into the more serious, conflict resolution part of the meeting (Restorative Practices Development Team, 2004).

The narrative framework helps locate problems in the relationship dynamics of the group as opposed to locating them in individuals. Like Winslade and Williams (2012), we centralise and address “the whole nexus of relationships within a classroom” (p. 111), in contrast to focusing on particular relationships or individual students or teachers. We think that when problems are considered to be “a function of the relationships among the whole group” (p. 113), rather than of individuals, more productive and constructive responses to conflict become available. For the teachers at Aotea College, addressing the “whole nexus of relationships” meant that they had to be prepared to give up their familiar ways of addressing conflict, such as dishing out consequences and withdrawing privileges. Like the students, teachers also had to be willing to replace familiar patterns of interaction with ones that repositioned everyone in relation to others.

### **Deconstruction as a Relationship Strategy of**

#### **Addressing the Power of Ideas**

Our specific, deconstructive approach to class meetings builds on an earlier project by The Restorative Practices Development Team (2004), who developed conference, class meeting and interview processes that drew on Māori hui (meeting) protocols (Macfarlane, 2004), constructionist theorizing (Burr, 2003) and narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990). Their work has been inspirational for the design of both the community and relationship-building activities and the four rounds that provide the structure of the conflict resolution part of our meeting. We will introduce the four rounds below when we describe the format of the class meeting in more detail. Kecskemeti (2011) identified some discourses of learning and notions of schooling as complicit in producing teacher-student conflict. She also found that, when teachers collectively deconstructed those

discourses, their stress levels reduced and they were able to come up with alternative relationship practices that did not produce conflict. Keckskemeti's findings encouraged us to *listen* not only to what students and teachers had to say about their conflicts but also to *listen for* discourses of learning during class meetings.

What distinguishes deconstructive class meetings from other forms of circle is the attention paid to discourses and the frequent, strategic use of deconstructive questioning at various points in the meeting. We have drawn on Foucault's work and his notions of power (Foucault, 1980; Ransom, 1997) to support our argument for giving such a significant role to deconstruction. In addition to oppressive power, which involves the use of hostile forces in order to regulate the conduct of others (Rabinow, 2000), Foucault described another type of power, which he termed productive and constitutive of identities (Davies, 2006; Foucault, 2000a, 2000b). This notion of power is particularly relevant to us.

Unlike oppressive power, which is visible because it is exercised through the use of force or some form of coercion, productive power operates through the use of knowledge or discourse, according to which persons shape their own conduct in order to take up a particular type of identity. While oppressive power might be easy to spot, productive power is harder to notice, as it operates in hidden ways. Consequently, it requires a different intervention from trying to change the visible conduct of persons. What we do instead is to look for and expose the discourses or rationalities, which make a particular practice or behaviour seem reasonable and inevitable (Davies, Edwards, Gannon, & Laws, 2007). We believe that the ideas of schooling that teachers and students might use to take up their identities can at times work to undermine their collaboration, against their best intentions. Therefore, we wanted to develop a form of classroom conversation that consciously set out to, 'identify and name the ideas that shape teacher-student, teacher-parent and other relationships in schools, including the ideas that produce antagonistic and disrespectful relationships' (Drewery & Keckskemeti, 2010, p.110).

So how can such conceptualization of power be used in a class meeting and how can the power of discourses be deconstructed or unsettled? When we observe teacher-student interactions in a classroom, it is the behaviours of both teachers and students that are obvious. It is more difficult to identify what discourses or knowledges of schooling inform the practices they engage in and shape the meanings they make of their respective roles. We might see a teacher who clearly defines the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and corrects students who cross those boundaries. We might see students who respond to these corrections without resistance and would do what their teacher asks. In this instance both teacher and students may follow the same unwritten rules of interaction, which could be described with a statement such as, “Teachers decide what happens in the classroom and students have to follow their instructions”. The teacher-student interaction goes well, because neither of them questions these rules. We could say that both teacher and students take up their identities from the same discourse of schooling and they both accept the structure of rights and responsibilities that this discourse or rationality prescribes for both.

However, when students question and resist the tasks set by their teacher – with back-chatting, calling out or swearing - and they might say things like, “I talk because it is boring”, or, “It is your job to teach us”, then their behaviours are likely to be informed by ideas of schooling that enable resistance to repetitious practice and disable acceptance of either the teacher’s leadership role, or the learner’s responsibilities (or both), in the teaching and learning interaction. These behaviours are authorised by different beliefs about schooling, such as, “Learning should be fun”, and, “Good teachers make all learning activities entertaining”, or, “Learning is the teacher’s responsibility”. These ideas can also set up a problematic power relationship between teacher and student. If a student enters their interactions with teachers with the expectation that they will be entertained, then it is very likely that they will be disappointed. It is unreasonable to expect that all learning activities can be turned into fun and that learners do not have to do anything in order to learn a new skill. So this idea enables

students to resist hard work, as well as constant negative critique of a teacher if she or he does not provide entertainment.

Such discourses or views of schooling have the power to produce particular student and teacher identities, with their concomitant behaviours, while suppressing others. We use deconstructive questioning to dis-cover and unsettle the *power* of a strongly held but unhelpful idea, through drawing attention to its opposite (Davies, 1996). In the case of “fun”, discussions can be invited about the usefulness of work or effort. In the case of the idea that, “learning is the teacher’s responsibility”, a conversation can be started about the respective roles and responsibilities of both teachers and students. A teacher skilled in this type of deconstructive questioning can ask students to reflect on the usefulness or otherwise of particular ideas of learning as opposed to arguing which idea should be accepted as “the truth.” The focus is not on the behaviours of students or teachers but on how specific notions of learning might shape those behaviours.

Questions such as, “How much practice do you think you might need to invest in learning this skill?” or, “Do you think it is possible to learn a new skill or concept with only your teacher demonstrating it but without any input from you?” problematize these commonly held ideas that, we believe, produce conflict between teachers and students. Such questions are not about creating binaries by deciding which notion of schooling or successful learning is better than the other. Rather, deconstructive questions unsettle the dominance of an idea by introducing a plurality of meanings (Davies, 1998). Michael White (1992) used deconstruction in therapy in a similar manner. He suggested that, when discourses or knowledges are not problematized, they can acquire a truth status. The practices that these “truths” promote then become “a taken-for-granted mode of life” that comes to be seen as “the natural order of things” (p. 142).

The deconstructive questions posed in our class meetings invite both students and teachers to evaluate the relational effects of different ideas of learning. They help both students and teachers to



clarify their positions on particular views of schooling and the roles of teacher and student. Such evaluation is necessary for deciding which notions of schooling to accept or to reject. It is only after clarifying their own stance that it becomes easier for teachers and students to negotiate which ideas will produce the kinds of relationship that are productive of respect and conducive to teaching and learning in a particular situation. Deconstruction used in class meetings thus supports a critical examination of the advantages and disadvantages of the various discourses that influence teacher-student interactions in a particular class.

### **The Format of Class Meetings Used at Aotea College**

#### **Pre-meeting Tasks**

**Organisation.** Class meetings are commonly called when a class is struggling with learning and/or teacher-student or student-student relationships and other methods, such as behaviour management, have been ineffective in achieving positive relational outcomes for those concerned. Usually several teachers of the same class, or in some instances a group of students, suggest that a class meeting should be called to discuss the concerns and to find a way forward. In the lead-up to a class meeting, the teachers of a particular class share their concerns and discuss their hopes for a meeting. If students want to call a meeting, they will first talk to their form teacher or dean. (Form teachers and deans are teachers who are designated to provide pastoral care for a whole class or for all students of the same year level respectively.)

When a number of teachers experience difficulties with the same group, or a significant number of students are unhappy with how things are in their class, usually most subject teachers, the form teacher and the dean of that year level will all attend one or more consecutive meetings with the same class. When a series of meetings is deemed necessary, each subject teacher of the class gives up a lesson to ensure that students do not miss more than one lesson in any one subject. Substitute teachers are organized, where possible, but teachers often give up their non-contact time or exchange

relief to support each other. They do this in the belief that the time invested in strengthening a classroom community will be compensated for by the increase of caring attitudes and on task behaviours.

**Roles.** Participating teachers agree on their various roles in the meeting. There are two major roles, facilitator and reflector, which require fluency in the conversational moves the teachers have learned previously through professional development, which included learning about the notions of discourse and deconstruction. Teachers can choose to be contributors, participants or observers, gradually easing into the facilitator and reflector roles as they practice to become more competent in the use of the conversational moves necessary for those roles. The facilitator and reflector roles are pivotal. The facilitator is responsible for setting behavioural expectations, maintaining the structure and flow of the meeting, and asking appropriate questions throughout. The reflector role requires competence in discursive reflection and deconstruction, in order to identify and to unpack the un/helpful ideas that are affecting relationships in the classroom. Participant teachers are encouraged to ask curious or deconstructive questions as they see appropriate, using externalizing language and avoiding totalizing language throughout the meeting.

**Setting up a circle.** Before the meeting one of the teachers rearranges the seats in the classroom into a circle format with help from students. Sitting in a circle has both practical and philosophical applications. The circle is an ancient symbol of unity, healing and power (Tew, 1998), which is used by many indigenous cultures. The circle format provides a structure that requires students and teachers to act and think differently from their usual ways of interacting with each other. Practically a circle allows all participants to see and hear each other – therefore, no one can hide. Teachers and influential and vocal students have to become listeners, while quiet students can speak without interruption. Participation is equalized as the contributions of students who might otherwise be silenced are brought forward and the dominance of teachers and/or powerful students is reduced.

Initially, some students and teachers might find this shift difficult and it takes some time before they become comfortable with the process.

### **The Actual Meeting**

**Karakia and starter activity.** The Aotea College class meeting always begins with a reflection or a *karakia*, which is the Māori term for prayer. However, starting with a *karakia* is not to be misunderstood as imposing religious practices on students. Rather, the inclusion of this step is seen as showing respect for the meeting protocols of the indigenous people of the country, which are frequently observed during public meetings in New Zealand. This formal opening of the meeting is followed by a starter or mixer activity, discussed previously. The starter activity is designed to get students and teachers speaking to each other and getting to know more about the classroom community. Activities to get students mixing their seating arrangements are used to encourage a supportive environment.

**Introducing people and process.** The meeting continues with the participating teachers introducing themselves (if unknown to the class) and their roles in the meeting. The facilitator explains (or reviews) the process and the rounds that will be followed. There is an explanation of the relevant key competencies, and examples of what would constitute a display of such competence during the class meeting. For example, explaining the messages consciously and unconsciously sent with the body and the various power relationships that body language can call into being has been a distinguishing feature of the meetings, which provide a good opportunity to help students understand how their body language sends messages of respect (or not), as well as learning to read non-verbal cues (Frey & Davis Doyle, 2001; Marshall, 2001).

**Giving the context.** The facilitator or one of the teachers provides a rationale for the meeting. In the following, fictitious example of a Year 10 class meeting, Ms Smith, the form teacher, addressed the class using externalizing language and avoided blaming particular students like this:

I have called this meeting for two reasons. First, I want to acknowledge how much better the class has been working since our last meeting a month ago. I and the other teachers have all noticed the help that you give to each other and the longer periods of on-task behaviour. However, during the last week or so I noticed that learning had stopped being a priority and there is a general lack of interest to complete assignments. I have also found out, talking to some students, that several of you are finding the social environment uncomfortable, if not threatening. There seems to be a bit of meanness creeping into relationships. As you can see all your subject teachers and your deans are here to find out what you think might be happening and how we could go back to the calm working atmosphere that we had a week or so ago and to stop things from deteriorating.

**The four rounds.** The facilitator then leads the discussion structured by four rounds. She or he ensures that each and every student and teacher contributes to each round. With additional clarifying and deconstructive questions (asked by the reflector, the facilitator, participating teachers and sometimes students), there is not always time to complete all four rounds. In those instances remaining rounds will be covered in a subsequent meeting, usually the following day. This is not considered a problem as Māori meeting protocols require participants to devote as much time as it takes to resolving an issue. It is not clock time that dictates what happens but honoring every part of the process and the contributions of the participants. The four rounds are an adaptation and simplification (given the number of participants) of a meeting format suggested by The Restorative Practices Development Team (2004). The rounds also loosely follow the process that is employed in narrative therapy. First the problem's influence is discussed on the class community followed by the group's influence on the problem (Morgan, 2000).

**Round one.** The issues affecting teaching/ learning in the classroom are named and everyone's views on what might be the problems are listened to. Questions that might be asked include;

“What do you think are the issues / problems that need addressing in this classroom?”

or:

“What issues or problems undermine learning in this classroom?”

Students are encouraged to speak in full sentences and sentence starters are provided when students are new to the process and/or they do not feel comfortable to speak in front of others (I think an issue that needs addressing is...; I think the problem is...).

The students in Ms Smith’s Year 10 class responded along the following lines:

“I think there is a general lack of respect in our class for both students and teachers.”

“I think there is too much talking and distractions. When the teacher talks, some people talk over her and others lose focus and they start talking, too. We get very little work done.”

“There are people who are not interested in learning and they are consistently off-task and defiant.”

“They make it difficult for those who want to learn.”

“People bring their social dramas into the classroom and they tease and bully others.”

Students also commented on teachers’ practices.

“I find it difficult to listen when Mr. Green talks too quietly.”

“I lose interest when Ms Brown gets impatient and doesn’t wait for us to complete the task.”

Teachers also share their take on the problem, when it is their turn to speak. When there are several teachers in the meeting, they sit at different points of the circle.

It is during the summarizing of the major themes in the contributions to the first round that deconstructive questions can be posed by the reflector or any of the teachers. The reflector’s summary is meant to identify and expose some of those unarticulated but inferred ideas of schooling and/or

relationship conduct that are likely to produce disruptive or unsupportive behaviours. In Ms Smith's class, different understandings of the leadership role of the teacher might be highlighted, along with what it might mean to be considerate towards others. Questions like these might be asked:

“Is it reasonable to expect that you can do whatever you like or talk when you are finished and others are not?”

or:

“How much waiting time would be fair? How would teachers know the difference between someone struggling and wasting time?”

Such questions invite students to reflect on the effects of both student and teacher behaviours on others.

**Round two.** The effects of the issue(s) are explored, with questions such as:

“What are the effects of the problems discussed on you or on others or on learning?”

Ms Smith's class identified the following effects that the occasional absence of learning behaviours brought about:

“We don't get any work done.”

“People who want to learn don't get anywhere.”

“It is hard for teachers to teach us and they get angry.”

“The social dramas waste a lot of time. I don't want to do any groupwork because I am expected to get involved in the dramas and take sides.”

“You get attacked if you don't get involved in the dramas.”

Teachers might contribute along the following lines:

“I am really disappointed when I prepare lots of interesting activities but get constantly interrupted when I try to explain them. “

**Round three.** Exceptions to the problem are sought (the alternative story) using questions like:

“Can you think of a time when these problems do not affect this class or when teaching and learning is going well?”

In this round, useful information can be collected about the strategies and circumstances that are more conducive to teaching and learning. Further ideas can be identified that are worth problematizing and critiquing. This is another phase of the class meeting, in which deconstructive questions can be asked. Ms Smith’s students thought that there were fewer disruptions and greater respect between people when:

“There is a seating plan and I do not sit next to my friends.”

“We have practical lessons, when there is no theory.”

“I like the teacher or I like the subject.”

“The teacher makes the learning fun.”

We all possibly learn better when we are interested in a subject and/or we like the person who delivers the teaching. However, the idea that, “I will only collaborate with people I like or during subjects I prefer”, is problematic for a learning community – for any community for that matter. This idea enables care for self only without supporting a notion of care that considers the interests of others also. Deconstructive questions can invite reflection on such ideas and their implications for the various relationships within a classroom community.

**Round four.** Participants are asked to make a commitment to something that they believe would help address the problem and/or change the learning environment in positive ways. Both students and teachers are invited to give answers to the question:

“What are you personally prepared to do or what do you think you need to commit to in order to improve relationships and/or learning in this classroom?”

Both teachers and students commit to change their practices and these commitments are recorded in writing. Everyone writes down what they are prepared to do differently on a small card or post-it. These commitments are collated on a large sheet of paper, which is usually laminated and displayed in the classroom. Such a public display of personal, signed commitments makes it easier to remind people of their promises if they forget to honor them. The meeting finishes with feedback and participants - teachers and students alike - are invited to acknowledge individuals they thought showed competence in any areas of the key competencies. Ideas for future discussions and tasks for follow up are recorded.

**Teacher de-briefing after the meeting.** Participating teachers allocate follow-up tasks, agree on the date of the next meeting and they decide what ideas (discourses) warrant further discussion, either with students or with colleagues. Collegial discussions of the various discourses exposed in class meetings often produce possible teacher responses for future conflict situations.

### **Results of Investigations into These Practices**

Research on these practices is ongoing. Two small projects and two masters dissertations have been completed and published. The findings of these studies suggest the following:

1. Teachers reported an improved sense of wellbeing, though this was hard won:

If you are going to go to a class meeting, especially if it requires you having to give up some of your free time or it requires someone having to relieve [substitute] for you then you need to have thought about those things, why am I there and what am I contributing, what do I hope to get out of it.



They felt that class meetings had made the job of teaching the class easier. They felt more positive about their class, and that the meetings had made them easier to manage.

You know to me that was one of the most positive things to come out of it, the kids in general were more polite and so I could be more polite. They still had their bad days, because they're teenagers and, you know, we still did have some difficult times but the improvement could be seen.

The teachers reported that students sometimes expressed reluctance:

Even though, if you mentioned class meetings, they might groan and get all upset that they were having a class meeting, because I think you put them on the spot; I think they would begrudgingly say they have been good for them, too.

However, there was an improved learning environment in their class, which was reflected in an improvement in attitude to learning for some individual students (Kaveney & Drewery, 2011). Initial reluctance to participate in circle conversations is also noted by Costello, Wachtel, and Wachtel (2010). They suggest that such reluctance can be explained by feelings of discomfort that students might experience due to their lack of familiarity with the process.

The fact that the professional learning program was voluntary, ran for three years, and involved around twenty teachers each year, with ongoing participation of those from previous years, also suggests that teachers found the program well worth the effort.

2. In the early stages of the project, as the class meeting structure was being developed, meetings were regularly video-recorded. Ethical permission was subsequently sought and granted to study a series of video recordings from one class. This study showed significant shifts in behaviour of the class from the first meeting to the last. In particular, we found that students expressed themselves better, were more considerate of others, and made longer and more appropriate contributions in the last recorded meeting than they had done initially. We believe that these data suggest that students learned to manage themselves, to relate better to others, and to participate in their class community. They also

learned to use language more effectively in situations where interpersonal conflict threatened the functioning of the classroom as a learning environment. In short, we believe that the classroom meetings helped students to learn, and to demonstrate, key competencies (Gray & Drewery, 2011).

Informal feedback from students and teachers, who had become familiar with the class meeting process, surfaced similar themes, including a better understanding of others' points of view and an increased sense of connectedness with others within the same community. Students noted:

“Though the meeting was difficult and challenging, it was nice to learn about others and to develop empathy and understanding. It brought closeness to the group.”

“The meeting helped us create a sense of community and belonging in the group.”

“It helped me understand others, and highlight what their strengths are.”

Teachers also appreciated the changes in relational dynamics.

“The interactions are better within the class as a whole. Disenfranchised students really do get a voice.”

“All students and staff have their say and we get a chance to understand where students are coming from.”

They noticed improvements in skill and confidence levels.

I am surprised how mature the students can be in a new setting. It is interesting to see how the students have become familiar with the process and how they are becoming more confident to speak when it is their turn, whereas, at the beginning, they were reluctant.

### **Commentary**

A key feature of the Aotea project is the focus on students' learning in classrooms.

Deconstructive questions focus on discourses around learning, and in the meetings students are helped individually to develop positive attitudes to learning and success at school. Whilst dysfunctional

relationships, among students or between students and teacher, are the precipitating motives for calling a meeting, we do not set out to address problem behaviors as such. Students' behaviors are addressed in relation to their effects on the learning environment of the classroom. We do, however, expect that the project will help to keep students at school who might otherwise have lost their way. A recent study (Gray, 2012) of students who may have become disengaged with school showed that the positive relationships with their peers and teachers helped them to continue in the schooling system. The climate of care and acceptance cultivated by some teachers and some classrooms allowed for these relationships to flourish over years, allowing these students to feel valued and encouraged. Teacher satisfaction has also been a focus from the outset. And we have heard many of our colleagues say that the approach has shown them how they can relate better with students, which, in turn, affects their teaching every day. A colleague described the shifts in her approach this way:

“I am a lot more accepting of people, because now I just see them operating through different discourses.”

We believe in the power of ideas to change lives, and we think the results so far suggest that it is worth pursuing our examination of the power of the dominating discourses which affect the learning culture of a school. And finally, a word about the cost: the ideas presented here may seem sophisticated, but teachers grasped them readily and took them up enthusiastically, once they understood how easily they could change their ways of speaking, and how effective this was. Though it does take personal commitment to acknowledge the potentially destructive effects of 'power over' relationships by teachers, it does not cost much to speak differently.

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