

Children as (learning) Expert

Helping each other to succeed

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Experts are people who have vast knowledge in a specific area. That means: basically everybody. Because most people have special knowledge and skills about something, that differentiates them from others. That being said, every day uncountable experts go to school somewhere.

Thus, the role distribution in common school settings doesn't reflect life. Because teachers are the experts. They know what has to be done. And how it has to be done. This determines the behavior of student - to 'act' student like. One consequence: the phenomenon of six hours inertia. This is what many children suffer in school situations. Outside of school though they show amazing performances and abilities.

In other words, children have the ability to be experts. A teacher in a class of 20 therefore has either twenty students or twenty experienced staff. It is a question of role distribution and culture.

No child gets up in the morning and says: 'today I'm going to let my marks slide'. All want to be 'good', accepted, successful. The task of the school is to support them. In the words of Darren Cahill, the coach of Andre Agassi: "I help him succeed, that's what I'm here for". If the teacher has twenty experienced staff members, the likelihood of success increases immensely. And not only in a linear way. Because in a culture of learning from each other, diverse potentials are used, this generates some sort of positive feedback process.

People learn by what they do and children do something in school all day long. By doing so they generate knowledge and they have experiences. Amongst other things, they experience what gets them further in a particular case or what hinders them. All this knowledge and experience forms an immense reserve of resources. To not use it is a waste.

Therefore, the motto is learning from each other. This demands an exchange of knowledge and skills as well as exchanging experience in dealing with difficulties or about the good feeling of success. The school becomes a place of exchange among experts.

Such a culture of mutual learning is built on enabling structures. The beneficial exchange of diverse expertise needs room and spaces. It can happen informally, with children having the possibility to talk, to examine things, to ask questions and to add inputs. Learning from each other needs interaction as an understood part of the learning culture. That's how the activity focal points shift from the teacher to the students.

Naturally arrangements can be made that lend a structure to the exchange of knowledge and experience.

Example 1: Tree of Knowledge

In the classroom, in the seminar or work room is a tree, made from Styrofoam, hanging on the wall or standing in the room, and the artistic abilities in the design have no boundaries. It is a tree of knowledge that is constructed in a way that things can be attached.

In the course of a week the students as well as the teachers attach two or three things to this tree. It can be work, a symbol, a painting, a drawing or practically anything. These things represent new and important perceptions the participants have gained.

On the basis of frequently meeting, maybe around the end of the week, these perceptions are presented to each other. By connecting perceptions and an emotional orientation is shared with each other. Following that, the fruit can be harvest and filed in the learning portfolio.

Of course, real fruit or fruit salad can supplement the event. The ambiance contributes its part that people and their work experience is appreciated. To formulate it with Heinrich von Kleist: 'How much pleasure gets granted is only through the right appreciation of things.'

Example 2: Top of the Week

In weekly intervals students present their 'top of the week' to their peers. Everybody selects two or three 'big points' they have experienced as a success of the week. They present each other their success stories and experiences in versatile ways. It is not enough to say 'I know how to calculate a circular area', but rather demonstrating the knowledge. By doing so the feeling of success is repeated. This strengthens the belief in our own abilities, and the experience of presenting encourages a self-confident appearance, and last, but not least, the audience gets a lot of practical information in regards to solving school problems. Because the content of the presentations is not only the WHAT, but also the HOW. Not only learning outcomes should be presented, but also the way to get there. The students show each other, which methods they chose, how they approached the problem and how they dealt with difficulties. They show each other what worked, and what didn't. This wealth of experience gives them the possibility to permanently expand their very own strategy repertoire.

The socialization backgrounds of children increasingly differs from each other. There is more and more diversity in the classroom. This diversity is to be exploited as a resource. It is called Diversity Management, and it means to see heterogeneity as an opportunity. Because the children's different backgrounds increase the likelihood that they also have a different access and approach to things. Differing perspectives lead to different solutions. Differing solutions create different opportunities. Provided that what the children experience is valued. In other words: the only place where diversity is a problem, is where simplicity reigns.

This means: It is about giving the students the opportunity to be an expert in a small area. To be able to do something. To know something. And being able to share this insight with others. This form of continuous mastery experience also contributes to the belief in one's own skills and possibilities. When you think of possibilities you think of opportunities. Thinking of opportunities focuses solutions and creates something.

Students need to perceive school as successful and sensible. If children (are allowed) as experts to help each other to be successful, it creates a double benefit. The possibility to benefit from others experiences serves the benefit of the collective. And the experience to have had success serves the individual benefit. Etymologically 'benefit' is closely related to 'enjoying'. Sure, to see oneself as able is enjoyable. Mainly fun.