Reculturing primary classrooms:

Renegotiating the four R’s (rules, roles, responsibilities and relationships)

ROSIE LE CORNU, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA
JUDY PETERS, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

This paper draws on a study of the classroom practice of four teachers who have been involved in a South Australian reform project entitled “Learning to Learn”. Teachers in the project aim to improve teaching and students’ learning opportunities through a greater focus on engagement, participation and co-construction of knowledge. The findings from the study reveal the ways that the teachers have transformed classroom learning cultures through renegotiating the rules, roles, responsibilities and relationships that construct learning opportunities for students. Two key themes of “reciprocity” and “explicitness” are found to be at the core of the renegotiation that has occurred.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade there has been a growing emphasis on improving teaching and learning opportunities through the reciprocal development of the cultures and structures of schools. According to Smyth, McInerney, Lawson and Hattam (1999) the culture of an organisation is “the symbolic and communicational elements that operate to shape the way things are done” (p. 6). Day, Harris, Hadfield, Tolley & Beresford (2000, p.10) elaborated further:

Cultures are moving mosaics of beliefs, values, understandings, attitudes, norms, symbols, rituals and ceremonies, preferred behaviours, styles and stances and power structures (Nias et al., 1989) and the relationships between the various parts will not be static.

Reculturing in schools means changing these shared attributes across those who comprise the school community, mainly teachers, students and parents/caregivers.
However, Hargreaves (1994, p. 256) argued that cultural change is inextricably linked with structural changes and so the two must be changed interdependently:

Cultures do no operate in a vacuum. They are formed within and framed by particular structures. These structures are not neutral. They can be helpful or harmful. They can bring teachers together or keep them apart. They can facilitate opportunities for interaction and learning, or present barriers to such possibilities.

He defined structures as the “rules, roles, responsibilities and relationships” within an organisation that determine the kind of culture that can evolve (p. 242). Much of the recent literature about restructuring in schools has focused on identifying and changing the structures that impede learning for teachers and their students - structures such as the use of time and space, groupings of staff and students, staff roles, organisation of curriculum and use of technology (Harradine, 1996, cited in Hattam, McInerney, Lawson & Smyth, 1999).

While a great deal of attention has been paid to restructuring and reculturing at the wider school level (see for example Hargreaves, 1994; Peters, Dobbins & Johnson, 1996; Fullan, 1999), it is less common to find depictions of how these changes occur at the classroom level. This article looks at the ways four teachers who have been participants in the Learning to Learn Project in South Australia have renegotiated classroom rules, roles, responsibilities and relationships in order to improve the learning culture for their students.

BACKGROUND: THE LEARNING TO LEARN PROJECT

Since 1999, the South Australian Department of Education and Children’s Services has provided funding for selected schools to participate in a program of education renewal through involvement in the Learning to Learn Project. In a forthcoming report the broad objectives of the Project are described as:

- Developing the knowledge base of Project sites, Curriculum Policy Directorate and the wider system by providing opportunities for the participants to connect to and analyse the latest research on learning and world’s best practice.
- Building participants’ capacities to challenge industrial constructions of schooling through developing their understandings of the underlying assumptions, worldviews and structures.
- Reconnecting teachers and leaders to their vocation to create new partnerships in policy development which prioritise their voices and experiences. (Foster, Barratt & Mellowship, Forthcoming)

Schools in the Project receive funding to send school leaders and groups of teachers to a Core Learning Program which draws on the expertise of educational theorists from Australia and overseas. These experiences provide the stimulus for site wide programs
aimed at transformation of the local learning environment for students and teachers. However, it is important to note that this program is not about telling educators what they should be doing, but rather exposes them to a range of cutting edge theories, thinking and research to support their learning and decision making at the local level. Principals and designated change leaders in each site, project managers, Departmental Curriculum officers and university colleagues attached to the project meet together regularly in Learning Circles, each encompassing between 6-8 of the sites involved in the project. The purpose of the Learning Circles is to provide the opportunity for participants to reflect on and share their insights, tensions, concerns, dilemmas and questions as leaders of the change process, and to grow their understanding of the process.

We have been in involved in the Project as university colleagues and facilitators of three of the Learning Circles since its inception. It was through our contact with school leaders struggling with transforming school structures and cultures that we decided to look more closely at what was happening in some of the classrooms in their schools.

SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

The study was located in two primary schools in Adelaide, involving two teachers in each school. Both schools are considered to be “disadvantaged” because of their high proportion of students who require government assistance. A year 6/7 (ages 11-13) teacher and a Years 1/2 (ages 5-7) teacher were involved at one of the school, while at the other, two teachers who team teach two classes of Years 1/2 (ages 6-7) were involved.

We used a qualitative research approach, as our aim was to achieve a rich and detailed representation of the “what, how, when and where” (Berg, 2001, p.3) of participatory learning cultures as they are experienced in four South Australian classrooms. Data collection procedures included initial interviews with each teacher, weekly/fortnightly classroom observations (of 1 –2 hours duration) throughout the first two terms of the school year (in conjunction with an interview with the teacher/s concerned), individual interviews with the school leaders and on-going document analysis. We used a collaborative approach to the research which involved the teachers as much as possible, both in analysis and interpretations. Transcripts were returned to teachers regularly for annotation and further elaboration and meetings were convened once a term to allow researchers and teachers to scrutinise the data and to compare and contrast emerging interpretations. In the remainder of the paper we present some of the insights that have emerged from our data analysis, followed by a discussion of the paradoxical themes of “reciprocity” and “explicitness” which have emerged as central to the renegotiation of classroom culture by all four teachers.

RENEGOTIATING CLASSROOM STRUCTURES AND CULTURES

The teachers in this study were committed to the idea of developing learning cultures where learning, and those involved in it, are valued. They were also committed to the notion of student participation, engagement and co-construction of knowledge.
Developing a learning culture that reflected these priorities involved them and their students in a renegotiation of classroom:

- rules;
- roles and responsibilities and
- relationships.

According to Hargreaves’ (1994) definition cited earlier, each of these aspects is a classroom “structure”, but it will be evident in the discussion that follows that the process of changing these structures involved challenging and changing the assumptions, expectations, attitudes and beliefs that underpin traditional interpretations. Therefore it could be argued that it is a reculturing process. It will also be evident that although each of these aspects is discussed separately, there is considerable overlap between them.

Renegotiating rules

The teachers in this study appreciated that the students in their classrooms came to school with a variety of different attitudes, expectations and commitments to learning. These had been shaped by their previous experiences of teaching and learning and the attitudes of their parents/caregivers towards school. As well as having diverse dispositions towards schooling, the students had a diverse range of emotional, social and academic needs. Given these factors, the teachers realised that they needed to try to develop positive attitudes in children, towards themselves, each other, teachers and learning. To do this, they and their students negotiated particular rules, or norms, for their classrooms, which were based on their values and beliefs about what they considered to be important for effective learning to occur. They did not interpret rules or norms in the narrow sense of a limited number of guidelines for classroom behaviour, but rather as “shared expectations about ways of doing things” in all aspects of classroom life. In particular, they placed emphasis on negotiating high expectations of mutual respect, thinking and talking about learning and risk taking.

Expecting mutual respect

The teachers in the study all expressed the belief that the relationships they have with each student, and that the students have with each other, are integral to a classroom culture that optimises learning. One teacher put it this way:

I think relationships are really important. I really put a lot of time into talking through relationships and talking through the effects and consequences of behaviour. That is a real focus in my classroom. And I believe that if that isn’t right then other learning doesn’t happen.

The teachers also understood that to engage in learning their students needed to feel safe. One of the ways that the teachers developed a safe and secure learning environment was to establish clear expectations regarding behaviour in the classroom.
Teachers spent much of their time in the first few weeks establishing *mutual respect* as a mode of interacting in the classroom. This involved talking about relationships and talking through the effects and consequences of behaviour. They introduced the term "respect" to the students early in the year, unpacked it with them and then followed through to ensure that it was evident in the classroom. This included naming behaviours that indicated respect as they occurred so that children learnt about the term. The teachers did not assume that the children shared a common understanding of what it meant but rather spent time making it explicit.

The focus on mutual respect was evident in the teachers’ interactions with the students and in their expectations of students’ interactions with teachers and other students. Teachers listened and responded to children in ways that aimed to make them feel valued and that their ideas were taken seriously. They were conscious of what they said, how they said it and to whom. They were very aware of the importance of the teacher modelling the behaviours they expected from students and appreciated that it was the nuances, the subtleties of practices, which convey various messages. As one teacher said, "My manner is important...the way I speak...keeping it calm...not raising our voices. Little subtle things like that" and another explained: "Actions speak louder than words. So they see me model that...they see that I take them seriously and act upon the things they do and say...."

As well as modelling appropriate ways of relating, and talking about what the term "respect" meant, the teachers used a variety of structures and strategies to support this commitment, as can be seen in this teacher’s comment:

I really do try to spend a lot of time setting up systems, protocols, codes of practice, expectations, all sorts of things to develop a classroom atmosphere where relationships are good relationships.

**Expecting thinking and talking about learning**

The teachers held high expectations that learning would occur and conveyed these to the children. They showed that they valued learning by showing enthusiasm for "building knowledge", using children’s interests as a catalyst and encouraging intellectual engagement. Thinking and talking are two processes that are privileged in these classrooms. The teachers supported students to get to know themselves as learners and to develop as learners. The children came to know what thinking is, what learning is and the different processes involved in learning. The teachers talked to the children about how the brain works, helped them identify different kinds of thinking such as "thinking mathematically, scientifically, creatively" and taught them about emotional intelligences.

The children were encouraged to get in touch with their own thinking, and share what they were thinking and why, by using talk in an exploratory and tentative way. One teacher explained that it is about "changing the mindset from one which says, we don’t speak until we know the answer, to using talk to help us make sense of what we’re thinking". In these classrooms, there is an emphasis on using, and helping students to
use, explicit language that supports their learning. Teachers named behaviours, virtues, processes, and so on and used these constantly with the children in order to develop a shared language for learning. For example, terms such as “decision-making” and “negotiating” were introduced to the children and then used constantly in different situations. The teachers explicitly taught skills such as how to rephrase, question and clarify and then provided opportunities for the students to practise these skills with their peers.

The children were encouraged to explain their thinking, share their personal opinions with others and elaborate on their responses and they were also expected to listen to and make sense of their peers’ explanations about things. So as well as displaying respectful social behaviours, the students were also expected to show respect for each other’s thinking behaviours. This included valuing each other’s ideas and contributions and accepting that people understand things differently. As one of the teachers said, “Something that I try and emphasise is that people don’t always think the same way”. This was an important understanding for children to develop given the emphases in these classrooms on thinking and collaborating.

**Expecting risk-taking**

The teachers know that students’ confidence levels affect the way that they participate in learning. As one teacher explained:

> One boy finds it very hard to do anything - English, maths, science, whatever - without me sitting down beside him and doing it for him effectively. Somehow I’ve got to work on that so that he’s got the confidence to have a go himself, take that risk and be brave.

So, risk taking is another expectation that is developed in these classrooms. The teachers understand that getting students to talk more about what they are thinking and why, and working more with others, is increasing the risk for many students. One explained that even expressing yourself could be risky: “It’s going from self-talk to getting it out from your brain and actually saying it out loud”. The teachers deliberately use a lot of partner and small group work as a way of increasing confidence, for as one said, “It is risky to say what you want to say without at least rehearsing it with a good friend or within a small group.”

The teachers also shared some of their own learning experiences with the children to develop the notion of taking risks. One example was when two of the teachers reported back on a professional development session they had attended on The Arts. One of the teachers had found it particularly difficult and she shared with the children how she had made lots of mistakes. Through her disclosure the students also received other messages about learning such as “working outside of your comfort zone, it’s okay to make mistakes, sticking with it even if it’s tough”. The messages were conveyed that learning is challenging and that perseverance is important.
The teachers gave clear, consistent messages to the students about what they valued, in the way they responded to classroom incidents, both planned and unplanned. The teachers in the double classroom, for example, wanted students to take responsibility for their level of understanding, so when they introduced something new they asked “who understands what they need to do and who doesn’t?” They then congratulated those children who indicated that they did not know for being honest and they did this publicly to send a clear message.

It can be seen that in these classrooms that the rules, or shared expectations, were very much focussed on developing learning behaviours that enhanced student participation, engagement and construction of knowledge. The children knew what was expected of them, how to conduct themselves and what they needed to do. They did not have to “guess what’s in the teacher’s head”. The initial emphasis of each of the teachers was on developing rules that contributed to a safe, trusting and positive environment in which effective learning could occur.

Renegotiating roles and responsibilities

As has been mentioned, the teachers in this study were very aware that their students came to school with varying dispositions towards learning. They knew that this meant that both the students and their parents/caregivers also had different expectations of the roles of teachers and learners. The principals reinforced this point in their interviews too, noting that many of their families held traditional views of schooling. As one of them said, “Lots of children come to school with the notion of what is work and what is the teacher’s job and what is my job...”. The teachers therefore talked to the students openly about their perceptions of the roles of teachers and students in the teaching-learning process. They then renegotiated roles and responsibilities, based on the notion of shared control of the learning process.

Renegotiating students’ roles and responsibilities

The teachers encouraged the students to take an active role in their own learning and also contribute to the learning of others. In negotiating new responsibilities, they deliberately asked questions such as What do you need to help you learn? How can we help you learn? How can you help others learn? They aimed to empower the students. As one of the principals commented on what he saw happening in the classes of the teachers involved in the study: “I see those teachers giving more and more power to students who are not powerful. They don’t come with confidence”.

One of the ways that the teachers developed the notion of “shared ownership of learning” was in providing students with choices. In all of the classrooms students were encouraged to take an active role in making decisions about their learning and to what degree this occurred depended on many factors, not the least being the skill and age level of the students. For example, in the Year 1/2 class, each day began with a “student managed curriculum” in which students chose, from a selection, which tasks they
wanted to complete and in which order. In the Year R/1/2 classroom, students were encouraged to share their interests and ideas with her and others. In the Year 6/7 class, students were given the freedom to plan and organise what they wanted to learn, where this learning might take place, how they should present their learning and the criteria against which their learning should be judged. On occasions, the teachers also provided choice around how students might engage with a task such as in choosing to work individually or in pairs.

The teachers clarified new responsibilities that came with the students’ increased involvement in their learning, including time management and personal management and they ensured that the students experienced the consequences of their choices by holding them accountable for the decisions they made. For example, a child in one class had to explain his choice to “muck around” rather than finish his work to his mother after school. In another classroom the approach to conflict resolution required “children to talk to each other about what happened and how it happened and what they could do next time”. The students were thus encouraged to take responsibility for their behaviour and were involved in making choices about more appropriate behaviour.

The teachers were very clear that they wanted to increase students’ responsibility for their learning and hence increase their engagement and participation in the learning process. But they were also clear that it was a “shared ownership” of the teaching-learning process as they were mindful of balancing student interests with system curriculum requirements and balancing the choice of one child with the needs of the group. Therefore they set boundaries around the choices they provided for both work and behaviour. With regard to work one said: “There is not choice in that work will be done” and another commented: “We put some non-negotiables in”. With regard to behaviour, students were provided with more and more limited choices, until the point when teacher choice sometimes took over from student choice.

Renegotiating teachers’ roles and responsibilities

As for the student role, there was a need for the teachers to clarify and renegotiate their roles. This required them to adopt a variety of roles, including the roles of facilitator, manager, explicit teacher, coach and counsellor. But whichever role they adopted, the teachers realised that they needed to be consistent with their students in how they supported them in their learning. For example, one said: “They know by now that I won’t solve it for them. I’ll help them solve it but I won’t do the work”. Here again, the messages they sent about students being responsible for their learning needed to be clear and consistent.

The teachers worked with students in ways that supported and challenged them as learners. One of these ways was by explicit teaching, as has already been identified. Explicit teaching was also used, when deemed appropriate, when learning tasks were first introduced. Teachers used explanation, demonstration and the use of models and scaffolds to assist them. However, when students were engaged in learning experiences,
the teachers promoted their sense of ownership and responsibility by taking on a facilitative/responsive role, rather than a directive one. As students worked at tasks the teachers circulated talking to individuals and groups. They closely monitored students’ performance on tasks and supported them through individual or group discussion. One teacher highlighted the difficulty she has at times in trying to decide which role to play:

I’m torn between wanting to interact with the children and talking to them and questioning them and moving around and having a piece of paper and a pencil in my hand trying to write it all down...to keep track of what they’re doing.

The teachers viewed one of their roles as engaging students in meaningful dialogue about their learning such that it had the potential for extending and challenging their thinking. In other words, they co-constructed knowledge with the children. To do this, they needed to know each of their students very well. The teachers took advantage of opportunities where students were working on open-ended, collaborative tasks, to observe their students at work, to gain knowledge about each child. As one explained:

I found the lesson intriguing. The observations I made were fascinating. I learned a lot about various people’s understanding of space and three dimensions. I now have to think about where that leads us and how we can move people along from where they are currently, to a better understanding of using space.

Sometimes when children were not engaging with the task, the teachers found that they needed to be more directive. For example, in a task which required students to work in groups of fours, with each child allocated a particular group role, the teacher noticed that a child was not doing anything and the other three children in the group were. He directed a question to the Manager of the group “Alex is here without a job. You need to give Alex a job. What could he be doing while you are cutting that out?”. Here, the teacher supported the student to make the ultimate decision and at the same time, supported the allocation of group roles.

Overall, it was clear that in these four classrooms the roles and responsibilities of teachers and learners were negotiated in ways that enabled students to take more responsibility for learning and teaching, while teachers supported them in myriad ways, and at times were learners too.

Renegotiating relationships

In these classrooms the focus on respectful relationships, intellectual risk taking and shared responsibility for learning form the basis for a more holistic focus on building a learning community of students and teacher/s working in interdependent learning relationships. Such a community is rich in social support and involves a renegotiation of both teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships.

The teachers provided support for students in ways that acknowledged that children were being asked to participate more actively in the learning process, than they might have been used to or expected. They provided a lot of encouragement and often used a
“coaching” style, rather than a “telling” one. For example, they encouraged students to elaborate on answers by asking: “Why do you think that? How do you know?” They then coached students to do this for each other. The teachers also adopted this coaching style to support students interacting assertively with their peers. The teachers understood that their responses needed to be consistent with the “rules” of their classrooms. For example, to support the notion of risk-taking, they often gave feedback on a student’s good thinking rather than the right answer. Similarly, they were patient and provided time for students to develop their thoughts, with responses such as “I’m not sure what you mean. Take a minute to think it through.”

In these classrooms, the students were encouraged to see themselves as part of a team, making a contribution to each others’ learning as well as their own. The teachers spent considerable time on explicitly teaching the skills and processes that enabled each student to participate in learning with others. This involved an emphasis on students developing the skills of speaking clearly, listening, asking questions, responding, negotiating, co-operating and so on. The students were then provided with many opportunities to practise these skills, as for most activities they were encouraged to work closely with one or more of their peers, and to pool their expertise and questions as they tried to solve the problems they encountered as learners. The teachers also worked with the students to develop their understandings of what it means to work in a pair or in a group. As one said:

I think group work needs to be explicitly taught so that the children know that it’s not one person doing all of the work or one person having more of the input but that it is two, three, or four people working together for a group outcome.

The students then were able to work in new ways with each other, providing emotional, social and intellectual support for their peers. For example when they were struggling with a particular learning task, helping to resolve an argument amongst group members or asking questions to help the other person share what they were thinking, or elaborating on an argument or explanation. Sometimes a range of support was needed, as indicated in the following acknowledgement: “Whoever was working with Justin would have had to work hard just to keep him on track, as he’s easily distracted.”

It was clear in these classrooms that learning relationships were valued as well as social relationships, and that both were negotiated in ways that optimised opportunities for participation, engagement and co-construction of knowledge.

DISCUSSION: RECULTURING PRIMARY CLASSROOMS

This study has provided some insights into how four teachers, and their students, changed traditional interpretations of classroom rules, roles and responsibilities and relationships to ones that were learning and learner centred. In doing so they changed the learning cultures in their classrooms to ones that maximised student participation, engagement and co-construction of knowledge. Windschitl (2002, p. 150) explained why this is such a challenging task:
For teachers, creating patterns of beliefs and practices consonant with a constructivist philosophy is especially difficult when one considers the entrenched school culture that it must usurp. The predominant images of "being students and teacher" are some of the most persistent known in the social and behavioural sciences (Sirotnik, 1983; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

The findings have highlighted two themes that were common across the four emergent classroom cultures – reciprocity and explicitness. The teachers were involved in deliberately "blurring the boundaries" around the roles, responsibilities and relationships of teachers and students in attempting to establish a learning community – one based on reciprocity between learners. At the same time, they needed to be very explicit in what they said and did and have very clear rules to enable different participation patterns to be enacted. It is interesting to note that these themes reveal the paradoxical nature of the role of a teacher who is committed to developing such a learning culture in their classroom. On the one hand these teachers are empowering students to be leaders of their own and each other’s learning, while on the other they need to be strong leaders who use a great deal of explicit explanation, modelling and demonstration to show students how to manage learning.

**Reciprocity**

The teachers in this study deliberately changed how students were positioned in regard to the teaching and learning processes and how teachers and students participated in these processes. There was an emphasis on the reciprocal nature of the learning process and the development of reciprocal ways of working. Rather than being seen as something that was done to students, with all of the power invested in someone else, there was an acknowledgement that students had a role to play in their own learning and indeed, that of others as well. Students were given a voice in regard to their learning and encouraged to be involved in the process of learning with others.

The move to a reciprocal way of working in the classroom had implications for how the rules, roles, responsibilities, relationships were played out. Both teachers and students took the roles of educators and learners as they worked together to develop greater autonomy in the learner. Teachers and students, and students and students, related much more in partnership with one another than in traditional, more hierarchical relationships. Such a move, as we have seen, is crucial to the establishment of a classroom culture more conducive to learning. This is in keeping with Fried (2001, p. 136) who wrote:

> The opposite of command and control is a genuine learning partnership, one that requires of students and teachers a level of shared responsiveness that goes against the traditional hierarchy of school. Such mutuality will be critical to the emergence of learner-centred schools in the future.
The teachers in this study were mindful that classroom learning is mediated through the reciprocal interplay of social interactions between all of the members of the class, so their first priority was to develop rules that promoted a climate of trust based on mutual respect for all participants in the learning community. Taylor (2002) emphasised that such a “culture of trust” is needed for successful collaboration and that a reciprocation of trust needs to be built between peers or between peers and leaders. The teachers in this study clearly worked on this. It was obvious that whatever the teachers expected of the children, they reciprocated. For example, the teachers expected the students to listen to them and each other, so they made sure they listened to the student and when students initiated ideas for learning, the teachers took these up.

The teachers knew that in order for students to be more active in the learning process, they needed to feel more powerful. They also knew that in order for them to feel more powerful, they needed to be immersed in an environment that helped them to feel this way. That is, the relationships, processes and structures all played a part in determining whether students felt empowered or disempowered. The teachers in this study worked hard to ensure that the myriad relationships that existed within their classrooms were ones that maximised participation for all students. This meant taking account of “the multiplicity of the positions that operate within a classroom” (Allard & Cooper, 2001, p. 154) and understanding how the inevitable power relationships that exist in any classroom affected the level of participation. With the “blurring of boundaries” that occurred in these classrooms, came a redistribution of power. This occurred in the establishment of more democratic relationships – teachers used a “power with” mode of relating with students rather than a “power over” (Downing, 1995) and expected students to do the same.

There was also a more subtle aspect that emerged, which highlights a point made by Schrage (1990) in writing about the “new technologies of collaboration” (p. 1). He argued that successful collaboration requires a high level of cognitive involvement by participants, as well as a preparedness by them to contribute to the creation of a shared understanding. The level of collaboration for which teachers aim in a learning community can only be attained if students are willing to reciprocate. They can choose to adopt a particular attitude that relinquishes personal responsibility. Therefore, in establishing a learning culture, it is not just a question of “How much will the teachers let go”, but also, how much will the students “take on”?

Thus, understanding the establishment of a learning culture is to appreciate the interplay between teacher and student and students and students. Understanding power relationships in classrooms has gained increasing recognition in the last decades and builds on the work of Foucault (1980) and Giddens (1984), to name just a few. These theorists examined power relations as “ongoing, dynamic interactions played out among all participants” (Allard & Cooper, 2001, p. 155). There is a general acknowledgement that classroom cultures are actively constructed by all concerned (Allard & Cooper, 2001; McNaughton, 2001). That is, they are underpinned by the notion of reciprocity.
Explicitness

Given that what they were trying to do was very different to that with which most students (and parents/caregivers) were familiar, the teachers needed to be explicit in everything they did. The teachers therefore had to play a leading role in the reculturing process. A common feature amongst the teachers in this study was the level of explicitness. They did not make assumptions about what teaching and learning would look like in their classrooms, and the rules that would govern those processes, but rather they attempted to make it all very clear to their students. They held high expectations for learning and intellectual engagement and conveyed these to the students in the early weeks of working with them. They introduced new participation structures by providing clear expectations for how students would participate in lessons. This is important because:

   Being a competent member of the classroom involves learning when, with whom, and in what ways to talk and knowing when and where to act in certain ways. (Mehan; Nguyen, 2002 cited in Windschitl, 2002, p. 150)

The teachers also developed, with students, shared understandings of various learning processes and provided support for students’ engagement with them. What was notable is that they were also very explicit about the nature of that support and gave clear, consistent messages about who was ultimately responsible for the learning. They also promoted diversity by acknowledging the individual ways that children think and learn. Recent studies have affirmed the importance of “high support” cultures for learning (Marks, Doane & Secada, 1996; Newman & associates, 1996; Lingard et al, 1998). Marks et al (1996), for example, found that students felt most positive about classroom environments in which they assisted each other and where they felt encouraged to take intellectual risks. A similar finding was reported in the Lingard et al (1998) study, which highlighted four interconnected dimensions (or productive pedagogies) of classroom practice: intellectual quality, connectedness, supportive classroom environments and recognition of difference.

The teachers in this study explicitly taught students how to relate to each other – both socially and intellectually. This is important because a number of recent studies have highlighted some problems with collaborative activities (Windschitl, 2002). These include students not wanting to work with their peers (Slavin, 1995, cited in Windschitl, 2002), interpersonal dynamics working against group sense-making and the negotiation of meaning (Taylor & Cox, 1997 cited in Windschitl, 2002) and students discounting or dismissing the individual contributions of others (Anderson, Holland & Palincsar, 1997 cited in Windschitl, 2002). Windschitl (2002) concluded that teachers “must develop strategies for socializing students into new ways of dealing with peers as intellectual partners (Hatano & Inagaki, 1991) and be vigilant about students’ influences on one another’s thinking” (p.147).
CONCLUSION

This study has provided some insights into the reculturing process that is needed in primary classrooms, if teachers are to optimise opportunities for student participation, engagement and co-construction of knowledge. By closely examining the ways the rules, roles, responsibilities and relationships were renegotiated by four teachers and their students, we have been able to identify at least some of the structural and cultural changes that appear to contribute to this outcome. In particular, it seems that when teachers place reciprocity and explicitness at the core of reculturing, they and their students can develop patterns of interaction that optimise learning opportunities.

REFERENCES
