**"Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning."**

**Henri Holec**

| Autonomy in the classroom is... | Autonomy in the classroom is not... |
| --- | --- |
| | |

## A classroom that hopes to foster learner autonomy needs to be:

**Collaborative**

**Trusting**

**Risk-taking**

**Positive**

**Safe**

## Outcomes for Learners

- methodical/disciplined
- logical/analytical
- reflective/self-aware
- motivated/curious
- flexible
- interdependent/interpersonally competent
- responsible/persistent
- venturesome/creative
- creative/have positive self-concept
- independent/self-sufficient
- skilled in seeking/retrieving information
- knowledgeable about/skilled in learning
- able to develop/use evaluation criteria

# Social & Emotional Competencies

## Cooperation

Students' ability to establish new relationships, maintain positive relationships and friendships, avoid social isolation, resolve conflicts, accept differences, be a contributing member of the classroom and school community, and work productively and collaboratively with others.

## Assertiveness

Students' ability to take initiative, stand up for their ideas without hurting or negating others, seek help, succeed at a challenging task, and recognize their individual self as separate from the circumstances or conditions they're in.

## Responsibility

Students' ability to motivate themselves to take action and follow through on expectations; to define a problem, consider the consequences, and choose a positive solution.

## Empathy

Students' ability to "see into" (recognize, understand) another's state of mind or emotions and be receptive to new ideas and perspectives; to appreciate and value differences and diversity in others; to have concern for others' welfare, even when it doesn't benefit or may come at a cost to oneself.

## Self-Control

Students' ability to recognize and regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in order to be successful in the moment and remain on a successful trajectory.

# Academic Competencies

## Academic Mindset

Four self-perceptions influence a student's academic mindset:

1. I belong in this academic community;
2. my effort improves my performance;
3. I can succeed at this work; and
4. I see the value in this work.

## Perseverance

Perseverance is a student's tendency to complete assignments in a timely and thorough manner and to the best of their ability, despite distractions, obstacles, or level of challenge.

## Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are techniques, processes, and tactics a student uses to:

1. learn, think, remember, and recall;
2. monitor their own comprehension and growth;
3. self-correct when they are confused or have an error in thinking; and
4. set and achieve goals and manage their time effectively.

## Academic Behaviors

Academic behaviors are the ways in which students conduct themselves that support their success in school, including such things as regular attendance, arriving ready to work, paying attention, participating in instructional activities and class discussions, and devoting out-of-school time to studying and completing assignments and projects.

# Exploring Autonomy Through Responsive Classroom Practices

Consider which one of these reflection questions you will use as a lens as you explore. Use the blank space on the following page to note important ideas:

1. In what ways does this practice allow a student to take charge of their learning?
2. What outcomes might students experience through the teacher's use of this practice?
3. What modifications might teachers of older/younger students make to the structure of this practice to be more developmentally responsive to students' needs?
4. What academic and social-emotional learning (A+SEL) competencies are likely strengthened through the use of this practice?

# Exploring Autonomy Through Responsive Classroom Practices

## Independent Work Time Routines

Your students will undoubtedly spend a great deal of time during the school year working independently on various assignments, projects, and tasks. You want this time to be productive for everyone, and you may also want to use some of this time to meet—uninterrupted—with a small group or an individual student. However, working independently requires that students learn and master a wide range of skills.

Think about which routines you want to model with your students so they can be successful when working independently. For example:

- Responding to the signal for quiet attention
- Working in a given spot
- Having a brief, quiet conversation
- What to do if you struggle with the assignment (and how to ask for help)
- Helping another classmate (how and when)
- What to do if someone is bothering you
- Where to put completed work (and what to do when you finish)

Independent work skills take awhile for students to master, so it's especially important to identify which skills students need to learn early in the year and which ones can wait until later.

Mrs. Kurland, a fifth grade teacher, decided to use Interactive Modeling with a "fish bowl" strategy to teach students how to stay in one's seat, focus on an assignment, and occasionally converse quietly about that assignment with tablemates. She set up a small table and four chairs in the center of the circle where she and several other students whom she'd prepped beforehand demonstrated the skills of independent work time. The other students sat in chairs around the table and observed the action in this "fish bowl." To see how Mrs. Kurland's Interactive Modeling lesson went, take a look at the example on the next page.


# Working Independently

## 1 Say what you will model and why:

Mrs. Kurland: "Our goal for everyone this year is to do high-quality work. To reach that goal, your job is to work hard on your assignments and let other people do the same. Watch and see how Carlos, Eliza, Eduardo, and I do that as we work on our research."

## 2 Model the behavior:

Mrs. Kurland and the three students (coached beforehand) go to a table in the center of the circle and start working intently. After a short time, to show students that some talking is OK during this time, she turns to Carlos and quietly tells him one fact she read. He responds, "Wow, that's cool," also in a quiet voice. They both return to work.

## 3 Ask students what they noticed:

Mrs. Kurland: "What did you notice about how we took care of ourselves and each other?"

Lionel: "You were all reading your books."

Maryann: "You were all quiet."

Jillisa: "You didn't get up and wander around."

Mrs. Kurland: [*smiling*] "So what did we do?"

Jillisa: "You stayed in your seat."

Mrs. Kurland: "What difference does that make?"

Jillisa: "It's hard to get anything done if you keep getting up and down."

Mrs. Kurland: [*to make sure students noticed the talking*] "What did you notice about whether we talked or not?"

Lionel: "You did talk."

Mrs. Kurland: "What did we talk about?"

Lionel: "Your research."

Mrs. Kurland: "How long and how loud was our conversation?"

Maryann: "Very short and pretty quiet."

**4 Invite one or more students to model:**

Ms. Kurland chooses four students to demonstrate and asks two of them, Aiko and Mason, to have a quick, quiet conversation about something they read.

Mrs. Kurland: "Anna, Dominique, Aiko, and Mason are going to demonstrate how to focus on independent work. Watch and see what you notice."

**5 Again, ask students what they noticed:**

After a few minutes of their demonstration, Mrs. Kurland has the students return to their seats.

Mrs. Kurland: "What did you notice about the way they made the most of their independent work time?" Students point out the key behaviors, including the quiet, quick conversation Aiko and Mason had.

**6 Have all students practice:**

To help students succeed at this practice, Mrs. Kurland uses an engaging task (a survey about themselves).

Mrs. Kurland: "At your tables, there's a personal survey for you to complete. It will help us learn more about each other and practice what independent work looks like."

## 7 Provide feedback:

Mrs. Kurland: [*to reinforce initial success*] "I'm seeing everyone already focused on the survey. Your pencils are moving, and you're staying in your seats."

After a few minutes, she sees a few students chatting quietly and briefly as demonstrated.

Mrs. Kurland: [*to reinforce positive behaviors*] "You're having brief, quiet conversations and then getting back to work. That kind of focus will help us complete our work and learn a lot this year!"

One student who struggles with control gets a little loud and calls across to someone.

Mrs. Kurland: [*moving close to student*] "Emma, keep your voice down and talk only to people at your table. We'll have time to share with everyone at the end."

After about five minutes, another student who struggles with writing is getting restless. Mrs. Kurland knows this boy needs a movement break to be successful, so she quietly goes over to him and asks him to take a brief walk around the classroom to regain focus. The work time continues with a mix of reinforcement, reminding, and redirecting.

***To adapt this lesson for younger students:***

Break it up into separate lessons. First, model what focused, independent work looks like. Then, in a separate lesson, model how to interact with those working nearby.

## Points to Remember

- ***List the routines that your students will need for success.***
- ***Reflect on why the routine is important for students.*** Connect each routine to classroom rules and learning goals.
- ***Evaluate each routine.*** Think about what may be challenging for students, identify their strengths, nd consider their developmental characteristics.
- ***Break each routine down into small steps.*** Based on students' needs and abilities, teach steps separately, in chunks, or all at once.
- ***Plan Interactive Modeling lessons for each routine.*** Prioritize the best times to teach each routine. Spread out this teaching, as needed.
- ***Be consistent.*** Once you teach a routine, stick with it. Reteach if needed.
- ***Reinforce success.*** Watch for student's successes (big and small). Use positive teacher language to reinforce these successes and to provide specific feedback.

## Transitions to Independent Work

The transition from instruction to independent work is especially challenging for children. They often have to move within a crowded space while carrying or collecting the required supplies. They must also retain the directions for the independent work assignment as they make this tricky transition.

Although many transition skills can be taught early in the year, transitions often become much more complex as the year progresses. In particular, assignments that require many kinds of materials, or multiple work partners, will also likely require additional Interactive Modeling lessons to teach how these elements should go together.

What do you need to model with your students to ensure smooth transitions to independent work? For example:

- Moving from circle/instructional area to seats, including traffic paths and noise level
- Getting materials (how, where, when)
- Finding a place to work with a partner or group
- Getting started on the assignment
- Knowing what to do if they forget directions or need something
- Handing out materials (for students who are helpers; see page 79)

To see how Mr. Lee, a fourth grade teacher, uses Interactive Modeling to teach a complicated transition from his mini-lesson to having partners play a game, take a look at the Interactive Modeling in Action example that follows.

INTERACTIVE MODELING IN ACTION ✳ 4th GRADE


# Transition From Group Instruction to Working With a Partner

## 1 Say what you will model and why:

After teaching students a fraction game, Mr. Lee knows that they also need to learn how to efficiently find partners, get materials, and start playing the game.

Mr. Lee: "Our classroom rules say that we should do our best learning and take care of ourselves and our supplies. Pretend that Shawna is the teacher and Victor is my partner. Watch how Victor and I get started quickly, so we can spend more time playing the game and learning."

## 2 Model the behavior:

Mr. Lee has Shawna announce that Victor and Mr. Lee are partners. Mr. Lee audibly whispers to Victor, "You get the cards and two recording sheets. I'll get pencils and clipboards. Then, meet back here." After completing these tasks, Mr. Lee audibly whispers to Victor, "Where can we work?" Victor replies, "No one is in that corner. Let's go there." The two walk quietly to the corner, sit facing each other, place the cards between them, and get clipboards and pencils ready. Mr. Lee says, "Your first name comes first in the alphabet, so you're first." The two start playing the game.

## 3 Ask students what they noticed:

Mr. Lee: "What did Victor and I do to get quickly started on the game?"

Jack: "You divided up the jobs."

Mr. Lee: [*following up*] "How did we divide up those jobs?"

Bella: "Victor got the cards and recording sheets; you got the pencils and clipboards."

Mr. Lee: "What did we do next?"

Sydney: "You met back together and decided to work in an empty corner."

Mr. Lee: "Then what did we do?"

Jorge: "You walked calmly, sat down, and started playing."

Mr. Lee: [*following up*] "How did we sit?"

Amy: "Facing each other, with the cards in the middle."

Mr. Lee: "How did we decide who went first?"

Jack: "Quickly."

Bella: "You went by alphabetical order of your first names."

Mr. Lee: [*wrapping up*] "How long did it take Victor and me to get started? Show me with your fingers." [*most students hold up two fingers*] "Yes. This should take only two minutes."

**4 Invite one or more students to model:**

Mr. Lee: [*looking at his list of partners*] "Sonia and John, show us how to get started just like Victor and I did. Dani, time them. Everyone else, watch and see what they do."

**5 Again, ask students what they noticed:**

The class points out what Sonia and John did (as in Step 3); Dani notes that this transition took "exactly" one minute and forty-seven seconds.

**6 Have all students practice:**

Mr. Lee: "Find your partner on the list I posted. Then get started as quickly and carefully as Sonia and John did."

### 7 Provide feedback:

Two students immediately come over to ask Mr. Lee a question. Mr. Lee needs to observe the class, so he holds up his hand and tells them he'll check in with them after everyone is playing.

Mr. Lee: [*reinforcing initial successes*] "I see partners dividing up the jobs and getting what they need. I see some people setting up their playing spot."

Mr. Lee: [*to a pair taking too long to gather materials*] "Get what you need now. You need to start playing in one minute." He stands nearby to make sure they follow through.

When the other students are engaged in the game, he gives his attention to the students with the question. Then Mr. Lee reinforces the class's successes with this transition.

***To adapt this lesson for younger children:***

Make baggies of all supplies they'll need for a game and model only finding a good place to work with one's partner.

***To adapt this lesson for older children:***

Combine the teaching of the game rules, the recording of results, and the transition of getting started into one Interactive Modeling lesson. If students are generally skilled in transitions, you could do an abbreviated Interactive Modeling lesson that focuses just on the transition (see Chapter 7, pages 153–165, to learn more about abbreviated Interactive Modeling).

## Points to Remember

- ***List the transitions that your students need to do efficiently.***
- ***Reflect on what makes these transitions challenging for students.***
- ***Know why the transition is important.*** Connect transitions to classroom rules and learning goals.
- ***Evaluate each transition.*** Break it down into small steps. Depending upon students' needs and abilities, teach steps separately, in chunks, or all at once.
- ***Plan Interactive Modeling lessons for each transition.*** Think about the best time to teach each one. Spread out this teaching as needed.
- ***Be consistent.*** Once you teach a transition, stick with it. If needed, adjust as the year goes on and reteach.
- ***Reinforce success.*** Watch for big *and* small successes. Use positive teacher language to reinforce these and provide specific feedback.

# Envisioning Language: Naming Positive Identities

*(from www.responsiveclassroom.org)*

Learning and growth require hard work, and to do that hard work, students need to see themselves as capable people who can behave and achieve in ways beyond their current reality. Helping students form, own, and become excited about this kind of vision of themselves is a fundamental job of teachers, and a key tool for doing this job is envisioning language.

Strong envisioning statements are ones that engage students by speaking to issues they care about, with ideas and words that matter to them. In this post, we share one way to craft such statements: naming positive identities that help all students see (and become) their best selves.

Naming positive identities for students helps them see their potential as learners and motivates them to fulfill that potential. Suppose that on the first day of school, you tell your eager but somewhat anxious first graders, "I see that our classroom is full of good thinkers who are ready to learn. This year, I expect that all of you will find some schoolwork that you'll be able to do easily and some that will require hard work. But we're all good thinkers, so we're all going to learn a lot!"

Naming the students as "good thinkers who are ready to learn" adds power to your vision because it gives students an important, enticing identity. "Yes," they repeat in their heads. "We are good thinkers." Thus primed, they are indeed ready to learn.

Here are some tips to help you name positive identities in a way that recognizes where students are and where, with their effort and your support, they can go.

## Believe your own words

Naming students as good thinkers, or offering them any other positive identity, works only if your words are backed by deep conviction—if, in the preceding example, you truly believe that all children are good thinkers in different ways and begin school eager to succeed as learners.

For another example, suppose your sixth grade students have formed their project teams and are raring to go on their DNA extraction projects. "Teams that collaborate well," you remind them, "will be able to make the most of our work time. Talk in your groups for a minute about what you'll do to be effective collaborators." You've set a clear and positive goal for the class by identifying them as potential "effective collaborators," but they'll want to live up to this positive image of themselves only if they sense that you truly believe they can.

## Avoid naming negative identities

Sometimes, without thinking, we name a negative identity along with a positive one, like this: "I'm hoping for hard workers instead of lazy workers." That statement could imply that we currently see students as lazy. And once students hear a negative identity, they may have a hard time imagining themselves with the positive one. Or they may become resentful and unwilling to work toward the positive vision.

A straightforward positive statement works much better: "I know that you can all work hard and learn a lot, and I'm here to help you do that."

## Be inclusive

Imagine a fifth grade teacher who shares a vision of gym class as "Boys and girls, skaters and jocks, all being friendly to each other." The intention—to reassure students that everyone has an equal place in the school community—is positive, but the words reinforce the very divisions and stereotypes the teacher wants to overcome.

Far more effective is a simple sentence such as "In this class and in this school, everybody will feel welcomed and included by everybody else."

## Keep trying

Learning how to name positive identities for students takes time and practice. Be patient with yourself and persist, even when you make mistakes—just as you encourage students to do. You'll soon find yourself using these envisioning statements fluently and frequently.

# Sample Questions for Different Purposes

| Purpose | Classroom Situation: Introducing a lesson or activity | Classroom Situation: During and at the close of a lesson or activity | Classroom Situation: Solving behavioral problems |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Increasing awareness of knowledge** | "What do you know about [birds, fairy tales, folk songs, basketball, rivers]?"<br>"Where have you heard or read about this topic before?" | "What have you learned so far?"<br>"How does this [map, letter, phrase] compare to that one?"<br>"How could you put that into your own words?" | "What happened?"<br>"What did you notice?"<br>"How might an observer describe what happened?"<br>"What would be an example?" |
| **Generating interest** | "What do you notice about this [poem, ball, book]?"<br>"What do you wonder about when it comes to this topic?" | "What part of this do you find most interesting?"<br>"What else might you want to try?"<br>"What more would you like to know about this?" | "What questions do you have?"<br>"What surprised you?"<br>"What do you notice that's new to you?" |
| **Making personal connections** | "How do you feel when you [hear a fairy tale, try a new sport]?"<br>"When have you used [a dictionary, rules, comparisons] before?"<br>"When might you use [a song, this game, journal writing] to help you learn something?" | "What about this is especially interesting to you?"<br>"How might this information help you [when you need to find a book, when we visit the nature center]?"<br>"What part would you especially want to remember?" | "What does this remind you of?"<br>"How have you seen people use this skill?" |
| **Hearing classmates' ideas** | "How might we use [the computer, the microscope] to help us learn about [minerals, adjectives, great paintings]?"<br>"What could you do if you forget the directions?" | "What are some ways you all figured that out?"<br>"What are some questions you might ask when you do your interviews? Let's see how many ideas we can come up with as a class." | "What are some possible reasons why people [call names, tease, don't finish work]?"<br>"How does this compare to your experience? Let's hear from all of you." |

| Purpose | Classroom Situation: Introducing a lesson or activity | Classroom Situation: During and at the close of a lesson or activity | Classroom Situation: Solving behavioral problems |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Identifying or clarifying problems** | "What problems could possibly come up when you do this?"<br>"What might be hard for some people?" | "How's it going?"<br>"Where are you stuck?"<br>"How would you describe the problem?"<br>"How could you possibly find out?" | "What's an example of this kind of problem?"<br>"Where else do you see this problem happening?" |
| **Generating possible solutions** | "What could you do if [you think you're running out of time, you're stuck for ideas]?"<br>"When would be good times to ask for help?" | "Which [book, color, eraser, block] do you think might work better for you?"<br>"What might help?"<br>"Where could you look for ideas?" | "How might someone solve that problem?"<br>"Who could help?"<br>"What else might work?" |
| **Planning next steps** | "How will you make sure to [finish on time, do every step, take care of each other]?"<br>"What materials do you need to gather before you start?" | "What's your plan?"<br>"What might someone's next move be?"<br>"What's one thing you might do first?" | "What might a kid in that situation do differently next time?"<br>"What might you do next?"<br>"Which step feels like the right one to try first?" |
| **Evaluating a plan or process** | "How long do you think you will need?"<br>"How will you decide whom to work with?" | "Why might some students choose this [strategy, object, tool] over the others?"<br>"What's working for you?"<br>"What's hard for you?" | "What might be a good way to know if your plan is working?"<br>"How could someone know if this is their best work?"<br>"What helped you concentrate well today?" |

## Envisioning Language

### Setting a Positive Tone for Future Work

"Good morning, scientists! I'm looking forward this year to helping you discover answers to some of the mysteries about the way our world works."

"This year I hope our classroom will be a safe and caring place to learn and that everyone will be able to do their best work."

"We've been sharing with each other about animals we like, sports we play, and our other interests. I expect all of you will choose something you're interested in and do such great research on it that you become the class expert on your topic. You'll be able to answer questions about your topic or have a good idea how to find the answer."

### Engaging Children in Problem-Solving

"So what can you do to figure out who will be flag guard in such a way that Capture the Flag can be fun for everybody and you can run fast, try to outsmart the other team, and help teammates?"

"You're tired of the word 'respectful.' Seems like the teachers use it a lot just to make you listen to them. What if 'respectful' really did mean something important to you? What would be happening for you at school if you genuinely felt respected by each other?"

"We can do our best learning when we are careful listeners. What do careful listeners do?"

### Naming Positive Identities for Children

"I'm so excited to be your reading teacher this year. My hope is that by the end of this year you will all be book lovers! I hope each of you discovers at least one book that you love so much you don't want to put it down. You want to keep reading and reading and reading!"

"Good writers write about what they're interested in and know well. I'm looking forward to learning more about what is important to you as you write today."

"I see that our classroom is full of good thinkers who are ready to learn! This year, I expect that all of you will find some schoolwork that you'll be able to do easily and some that will require hard work. But we're all good thinkers, so we're all going to learn a lot!"

## Using Concrete Images and Words That Children Use

"Everyone here has a right to feel okay about themselves. When you're in this class, each of you should be able to feel okay about what you wear, the work you do, and what you look like. What needs to happen so everyone can feel okay when they're here?"

"The most important reason we're doing this is to have fun. When we sing and clap in a happy way, and when we let each other sing and clap in their happy way, we'll all have fun—and look like stars to boot!"

## Using Metaphors

"Let's pretend we're looking through magic spyglasses at our classroom. We're looking at our classroom when it's a safe and welcoming place for everybody and we're all doing our best learning. What kinds of things do you see? What are you doing?"

"You are ready to take another step up the mountain. We're going on a field trip tomorrow. You're going to show you can take care of yourselves and each other in unfamiliar surroundings. What are some ways you'll do that?"

## Letting Children Fill in the Details

"What does being a class expert look and sound like? What would I be doing if I were an expert on my topic?"

"Imagine a book that you could love so much that you want to read and read and read. What might you find in such a book?"

"What would a math group that helps you learn be like? What would you see and hear? How would you feel?"

# Open-Ended Questions

by Paul Denton, EdD

*(Adapted from The Power of Our Words by Paula Denton, 2014, Center for Responsive Schools)*

Language is one of the most powerful tools available to teachers. We can use language to stretch children's curiosity, reasoning ability, creativity, and independence. One effective way to do this is by asking open-ended questions—those with no single right or wrong answer. Instead of predictable answers, open-ended questions elicit fresh and sometimes even startling insights and ideas, opening minds and enabling teachers and students to build knowledge together.

In this article, I give examples of open-ended questions, explain what makes them so powerful, and offer some tips on how to use these questions to bolster children's learning.

## Open-Ended Questions in Action

Ms. Nunn's class is about to read a new story, and the children have opened their books to the first page. To spark their curiosity about the story, she asks a series of open-ended questions (shown here in italics) that draw out their thoughts, knowledge, and feelings.

"Before we start," Ms. Nunn says, "take a look at just this page. What interesting words do you see?" After a few quiet moments, hands go up.

"Castle!" shouts Raymond. "Castles are cool! I have a model castle."

"I can tell that's an important word for you, Raymond. What clues does this word give you as to what the story might be about?"

"Knights? Usually castles have kings and knights."

"Maybe it's a fairy tale," Keira adds.

"Hmm. Interesting," Ms. Nunn muses. "What makes you think it might be a fairy tale?"

After the children have shared some thoughts on the nature of fairy tales, Ms. Nunn brings them back to her original question. "What are some other interesting words on this page?" she asks.

"Milkmaid," offers Arnie. "What's a milkmaid?"

"Hmm, what might a milkmaid be? Any guesses?"

"My grammy tells me a story about a milkmaid. It's a girl and she works hard and she's poor."

"Oh, those might be some clues," says the teacher. "What other clues could help us understand this word?"

The conversation continues with the children deeply engaged. Fifteen minutes later, the group has discussed context clues, compound words, historical jobs, fairy tales versus historical fiction, gender roles, and more. The students have been prompted to think, share their knowledge, analyze information, and connect ideas. Their interest in the story has grown, and their teacher has learned a great deal about what they know. Much of this richness derived from Ms. Nunn's use of open-ended questions.

## What Makes Open-Ended Questions So Powerful?

Children's learning naturally loops through a cycle of wonder, exploration, discovery, reflection, and more wonder, leading them on to increasingly complex knowledge and sophisticated thinking. The power of open-ended questions comes from the way these questions tap into that natural cycle, inviting children to pursue their own curiosity about how the world works.

Open-ended questions show children that their teachers trust them to have good ideas, think for themselves, and contribute in valuable ways. The resulting sense of autonomy, belonging, and competence leads to engagement and deep investment in classroom activities.

## Tips for Crafting Open-Ended Questions

Learning any new language habit takes reflection, time, and much practice. The Power of Our Words: Teacher Language That Helps Children Learn offers comprehensive guidelines on how to frame open-ended questions and make them a regular part of your classroom vocabulary. Here you'll find just a taste of these guidelines.

## Genuinely open up your curiosity about students' thinking.

For open-ended questions to be effective, it's critical that we ask them with real curiosity about children's thinking. Once I asked some fourth graders, "How might you use the colored pencils to show what you know about butterflies?"

"You could draw a butterfly and show the different parts," one child said. Others suggested, "You could make a map of Monarch butterflies' migration paths," and "You could make a chart showing the butterfly's life cycle." Then another student offered, "You could write a story about a butterfly's life and use different colors for different times in its life."

Truly surprised by this last suggestion, I realized that if I hadn't felt and conveyed genuine curiosity in all reasoned and relevant answers, that child probably wouldn't have done the creative thinking that led to such a great idea. Because of it, students' learning was stretched and our butterfly projects were richer.

Children can tell when their teachers are genuinely interested in their ideas. If we're truly interested, over time children learn to trust that we really do want to know what and how they think. When they know this, they're more willing to reason and reflect, they gain more practice in thinking for themselves, and they gradually become more skillful, creative thinkers.

## Clarify the boundaries.

Suppose when I asked, "How might you use the colored pencils to show what you know about butterflies?" a child had answered, "You could pretend that the colored pencils are butterflies and make a play about them." Making such a play would have met the goals of this lesson, and in terms of the question I asked, this response is just as valid as the others. But because of the potential chaos and safety issues, having students "fly" colored pencils around the room was more than I wanted to deal with.

Fortunately, no student really gave such an answer. But the way to prevent such a response would have been first to clarify to myself the boundaries of what I wanted the children to think about, and then articulate these boundaries to the children. The resulting wording might have been "How could you use these colored pencils to draw or write something that shows what you know

about butterflies?" This is still an open-ended question; it just has boundaries based on what I might see as appropriate options for a particular group of students.

## Use words that encourage cooperation, not competition.

Sometimes an open-ended question leads to competition to see who can give the best answer. Although well-managed competition has a place in certain school arenas, teachers usually use open-ended questions when the goal is for students to collaborate, to learn from and with each other, not to compete.

To keep discussions from turning into competitions, phrase your questions carefully. Competition often arises from questions beginning with "who" or "whose" ("Who knows a good way to use clay?"); using words such as "better," "best," or "most" ("How can we make this graph the most beautiful?"); or somehow elevating some students above others ("Kerry, what strategies for writing neatly can you show the class?"). These natural-seeming ways of talking assume some answers will be better than others, which encourages competition.

A simple rephrasing helps. Instead of "Who can tell me a good way to use the clay?" try "What are some good ways we could use the clay?" Replace "How can we make this graph the most beautiful?" with "What are some different ways to make this graph beautiful?"

## Watch out for pseudo open-ended questions.

These sound open-ended but have behind them the teacher's desire for a certain answer. I once had a student who loved magenta. Everything she colored, painted, or modeled in clay prominently featured magenta. Perhaps because I'm not crazy about magenta, or because I wanted her to buck the "girls are pink, boys are blue" stereotype, one day, seeing another magenta-infused drawing, I asked, "What do you think would happen if you used a different color?" Only when she replied, "I think I wouldn't like it as much" did I realize I had wanted her to say, "I think it would look better." It took me a moment to resist the urge to explain my thinking and to become genuinely curious about hers. "Hmm. Why do you say that?" I managed to ask.

"This color stands out," she replied. "You can see it from far away, not like pink or yellow."

"Not like pink," I repeated to myself. I was so wrong, thinking this student was going for "girly" pink when she was going for standing out. Her explanation gave me real insight into her thinking.

Fortunately, in this instance, I caught myself after the student said "I think I wouldn't like it as much." But what if a teacher doesn't catch herself? When we fish for specific answers, children soon realize we're not really asking for their thoughts, knowledge, or perceptions, but for them to articulate our own. Many then stop thinking and become less engaged. Or they respond by guessing wildly at the answer the teacher wants. Except for the child who guesses correctly, the children—and their teacher—will likely feel discouraged after such an interaction. Not much will have been learned, or taught. All would have turned out differently if the question had been truly open-ended and the teacher's intention truly to hear what the children thought.

## Leading the Way to True Learning

Open-ended questions power academic and social learning. Such questions encourage children's natural curiosity, challenging them to think for themselves, and inviting them to share their view of the world. The result: engaged learners who are motivated to learn and whose responses enlighten their classmates and their teacher.

# Video for Academic Choice and Autonomy:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8CJ17Bvq-4

# Video for Interactive Learning Structures and Autonomy:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=toz1WhEe0qY