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A Process for Collaborative Teacher-Student Planning

The planning process described here has been used in various forms by teachers interested in curriculum integration, democratic curriculum, thematic teaching, and other forms. With relatively minor variations, it has worked well with groups of varying numbers and ages at all school levels.

We begin by asking the students to do some self-reflection in anticipation identifying self questions and concerns: “We would like you to begin by thinking about yourself. Who are you? What are you like? What are your interests, aspirations? Please make a list of words or phrases you would use if asked to tell about yourself.”

Next we raise the first of the two major questions: “Still thinking about yourself and looking at the list you have made, now please list questions or concerns you have about yourself. What questions or concerns do you have about yourself?”

After sufficient time for the students to list questions individually, we form small groups of five or six people each and ask them to search for shared questions which are recorded on newsprint: “Are there questions or concerns that were expressed by several or all members of your group? If so, what are they? No one is required to show their personal list or to share anything from it unless they choose to do so.”

Once the group self questions and concerns are recorded, we turn to the second of the two major questions: “Now we would like you to look outside yourself at the world you live in, from the close parts (family, friends, school, cultures, our community, and so on) to the more distant parts (your state, your nation, the global world). We would like you to think about that world- both near and far- and list questions or concerns you have about that world. What questions do you have about the world you live in?”

Again, after sufficient time to record individual questions and concerns, the students are placed in their small groups and asked to find shared “world” questions and concerns (with the same right to remain silent).

Next we ask the small groups to look at their self and world questions to identify themes for curriculum: Are there any cases where there are connections between self and world questions (such as questions about conflict in school and conflict in the larger world)? If so, what are some words or phrases you might name that connects (such as “conflict”)? (In groups of 60 or less we have also done this by posting all questions from small groups in a central location and asking the larger group to find themes.)

Next, the lists of themes from the small groups are posted and the large group reaches consensus on a single list. A vote is then taken to select the first theme for the year (with the rest of the themes to be addressed later). Having selected an opening theme, the small groups are re-convened to identify questions and concerns from their lists that they would include within the first theme: What are specific self and world questions and concerns we might want to answer within this theme?

Finally, we ask the students to identify possible activities the group might do and resources they might use to answer the questions for the theme. To do this we use one of several ways: small groups rotating through stations where one or two questions are posted, large group discussion, etc.