



Grass Roots Project Report

Developing Student Agency and Learner 'Insiderness' Using Digital Tools

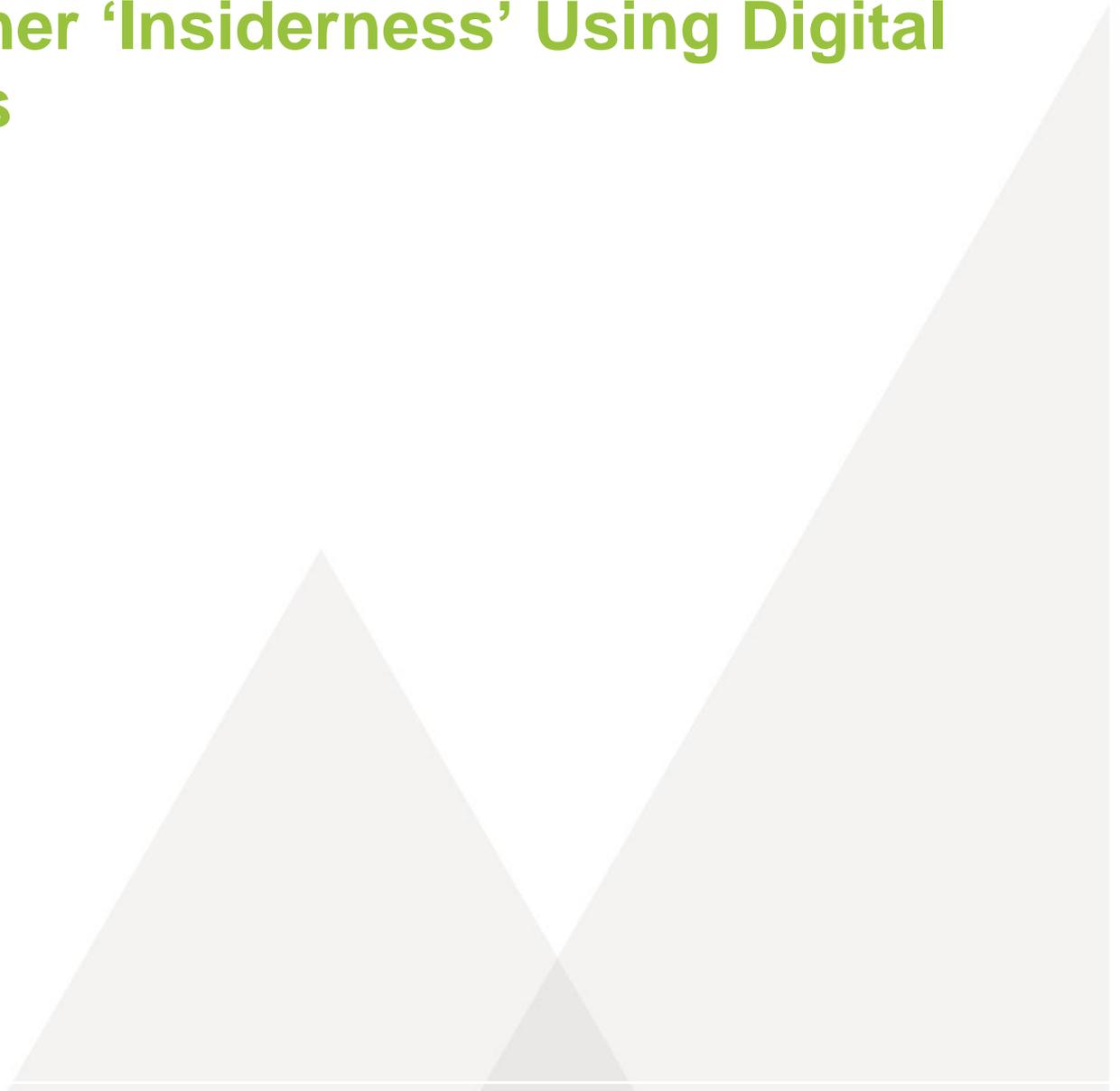


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Introduction

Background

At Amesbury School, our vision for education is for every student to experience what it means to be fully human and to continually fulfill his/her potential. Personalising learning is a major pedagogical approach to align with and enable this 21st century vision.

Over the last four years we have been focused on developing robust systems, structures, processes and practices to help the implementation of personalised learning. However, we have largely been focused on personalisation **for** the learner – in which teachers provide targeted teaching and learning programmes to meet the needs of students. In this form of personalisation, teachers do need detailed knowledge of their students and they do need to know just where students are at in their learning; and learning opportunities do need to be carefully designed to meet the needs of students. However, power and control remain largely in the hands of the teacher. What we want to develop more is personalisation **with** the learner and personalization **by** the learner. Achieving this will require the development of students' agency and 'insiderness'.

To assist with personalisation of learning, we have designed, built, are currently using, and continually revising, a piece of cloud-based software (Amesbury Learning Framework – ALF). For some while, we had been using ALF to better personalise learning for all students. However, we are tending to use it more for personalisation **for** the learner rather than **by** the learner. The purpose of this project was to explore the ways in which ALF could be used more effectively to enable student agency and 'insiderness'.

Objectives / Inquiry questions

- How can we foster student agency and 'insiderness' more effectively with our students?
- What do agency and 'insiderness' look like? And how can we help students realise their agency and 'insiderness' in reality?
- In what ways can digital technologies assist students to realise their agency and 'insiderness'?
- How does this need to look different for different groups of students e.g. hard to shift boys in writing? ESOL students in literacy? Students of varying ethnicities?
- How can we engage parents to support the realisation of their child's agency and 'insiderness' while also developing their own sense of being 'insiders' in their child's learning?
- What are the skills, attitudes and dispositions that teachers need to enable them to effectively foster student agency and 'insiderness'?

Background reading / Literature review

Personalisation of learning

The idea of the education system being built around the learner, rather than the learner being required to fit the system, is a central principle that has emerged in response to the changing landscape of the 21st century (Bolstad & Gilbert, 2012). This is often known as 'personalisation of learning' and signals a move away from the 'one-size-fits-all' model of the Industrial Age education

system. It rests on the idea that if we now require all students to be successful in our school system, with increased skills and capacities, as Wylie (2012) suggested, and all students are unique and have diverse capabilities, interests and needs; then we MUST provide something other than a one-size-fits-all system which will inevitably marginalise some students and ensure their failure in the system (Robinson, 2009).

What is required is flexible organisation that enables differentiated provision for diverse students with diverse needs to support every person to develop their full potential (Leadbeater, 2004). However, personalised learning is not just a matter of tailoring curriculum and assessment to fit the individual, “but is a question of developing social practices that enable people to become all that they are capable of becoming” (Pollard & James, 2004, p. 6). It has been suggested that there are two aspects to personalisation of learning, *personalisation for the learner*, in which teachers tailor the learning to the needs of the students, and, *personalisation by the learner*, in which the learner develops the skills and capacities to design and construct their own learning (Hargreaves, 2005). A further dimension of personalisation which sits between these two ideas is teachers and students co-constructing the learning pathway of the student or bespoke curricula together (Bolstad & Gilbert, 2012). In this dimension, the construction of learning is modelled for students and made explicit thereby assisting students towards personalising their own learning.

Student agency

Integral to the personalising of learning, is the dimension of students being involved in making decisions about their own learning, and becoming agents of their learning. This thinking is based on several premises. Firstly, students will be more motivated to learn when they are at the centre of their learning and involved in making decisions about that learning (Hargreaves, 2005). Secondly, recognising that all students are unique, diverse human beings leads to the understanding that it is not possible for any one of us to fully know another person’s needs, wants and desires; therefore, each student’s voice becomes central to the provision of personalised learning programmes. Finally, in the context of the 21st century, students need to increasingly understand learning, understand themselves as learners and be genuinely involved in shaping their own learning in order to be the ongoing, creative, critical, innovative, continuous learner required for their future (Wylie, 2012). Therefore, learner agency and students as ‘insiders’ in their learning are central to the 21st century purpose and vision for education.

‘Insiderness’

The concept of ‘insiderness’ is an area little explored in education. The term is most commonly used in the contexts of research and more recently nursing. The current literature explores ‘insiderness’ in two ways. First it talks about what it means to be an insider and makes a distinction between the insider and the outsider. The literature suggests that to be an insider is to fully understand the inner workings of a group or a person (Dobson, 2009; Katyal & King, 2011; Todres, Galvin & Dahlberg, 2014). This is based upon the idea that particular groups have ‘monolithic’ or, at least, ‘privileged’ access to particular kinds of knowledge (Dobson, 2009).

Secondly, ‘insiderness’ is referred to as a way of being fully human. “What makes each of us intimately human is that we carry a view of living life from the inside. To be human is to live in a personal world that carries a sense of how things are for the person” (Todres, Galvin & Holloway, 2009, p.70). “We experience the world through mood, feeling and emotion” (Hemingway, Scammell & Heaslip, 2012; Todres, Galvin & Holloway, 2009). According to Todres, Galvin and Dahlberg (2014), understanding the insider perspective is pivotal for any area where the human activity of caring is important. Acknowledging people’s ‘insiderness’ enables carers to see people as fully human, rather than objects (Hemingway, Scammell & Heaslip, 2012a; Hemingway, Scammell & Heaslip, 2012b).

Developing agency through digital tools

Technology provides new opportunities for drawing out and leveraging student agency by engaging students, enabling them to work at their own pace and being responsive and responsible to their own individual needs (Corbett, Koedinger, & Anderson, 1997, in Lindgren, R., & McDaniel, R. (2012). Technology can be used not as a prescriptive learning tool, but as one that enables students and teachers to gather material, manipulate and alter resources to design environments that are suitable and appropriate for the learners (Magni, 1995). Further, Chia-Jung Lee (2011) suggested that digital tools can connect people's feelings to enhance emotional learning. They can support students' emotional connection to content or other people which helps them learn better. They can provide personal spaces for students to explore difficult issues and the flexibility of digital tools enables students to learn based on the way that they feel most comfortable (which is directly related to agency).

Assumptions/theories/definitions

1. The purpose of education is to ensure that students experience what it means to be fully human and gain practical wisdom that will help them to live better in and for the world.
2. Fostering student agency and 'insiderness' is essential to the personalisation of learning and to fulfilling our vision as a school of ensuring students continually fulfil their potential.
3. We currently only have a superficial understanding of what student agency means in practice.
4. Personalisation of learning consists of three aspects: Personalisation **for** the learner, personalisation **with** the learner and personalisation **by** the learner. Student agency and 'insiderness' are central to the two aspects of **with** and **by**. Without the student's voice, learning will never be able to be fully personalised.
5. Teacher Inquiry is an effective vehicle for transformative change.
6. Experiential learning (Kolb, 1982) underpins effective teacher Inquiry and will be transformative as long as the teacher moves through all the stages of the cycle especially 'Abstract Conceptualisation'. This learning will be strengthened by multiple iterations of the cycle.
7. Coaching is a useful tool for supporting teacher inquiries.
8. Digital Tools provide new opportunities for drawing out and leveraging student agency.

Methodology & Design

Methodology

The study was qualitative in methodology.

Project Design

Exploring the use of ALF – a digital portfolio – to foster agency and ‘insiderness’

We began this project by exploring the research literature to strengthen and extend our understandings of the concepts. We then used peer-to-peer coaching to assist individuals to explore how well they felt they were fostering agency and ‘insiderness’ with their students. The coaching session covered two main questions: What do you feel you are doing well? And, what is of concern/what would you like to improve? The coach asked reflective questions to assist the ‘coachee’ to narrow down possible focuses for a teacher inquiry.

As a school, we have designed, built, are currently using, and continually revising a piece of cloud-based software (ie the Amesbury Learning Framework - ALF) which assists personalisation of learning. ALF is a digital learning tool which helps with the personalisation of learning, a planning tool for teachers, an e-Portfolio to which students upload evidence of their learning, a receptacle for targeted learning resources (available to teachers, parents and students), and, a living report for parents.

Over the last year we have had an opportunity to explore how ALF can be used to ensure more personalised and targeted teaching and learning. We immediately saw the benefits of this tool in our teaching practice. We were able to use it to better know our students, personalise working goals for all students, as well as personalising teaching and learning activities. However, ALF has also been designed with student agency and ‘insiderness’ in mind. At that point in time, we felt we were just beginning to scratch the surface, and further research/teacher inquiry was necessary to understand how ALF could be used with a range of students to more effectively foster their agency and ‘insiderness’.

A group focus interview with students in 2015, had revealed that some students, particularly capable boys and many girls, successfully use ALF to personalise learning for themselves. We are interested in exploring the extent to which ALF assists the development of students in becoming insiders in, and agents of, their own learning.

Teachers identified new ways of using ALF with students to foster their agency and ‘insiderness’. Each teacher then chose students who would benefit from being a participant in their particular inquiry. Frequently, the way we use ALF with students favours those individuals who are highly organised. We needed to explore ways to use ALF effectively with a wider range of students.

We used a rapid-iteration model, with a 5-6 week turnover of inquiries in which the next iteration was influenced by the outcomes of the just completed inquiry cycle. Having implemented the first initiative, teachers examined outcomes, and refined their inquiry as a result. This sharpening of focus included a coaching session with the principal who helped troubleshoot and clarify the way forward.

Data was collected in several ways:

1. Teachers recorded their inquiry journey, collected field notes and wrote reflections.
2. Student voice was collected several times via individual interviews-as-conversations and focus group interviews.
3. Teachers were interviewed by the school principal mid inquiry.

At the end of whole project:

4. Inquiry reports were written and the school principal analysed them for themes and findings.

Data generation/collection/analysis

As noted above, teachers analysed their data and the student voice to assist with refining their inquiries and determining outcomes for their inquiry reports. The school principal used thematic analysis and educational connoisseurship and criticism of the final teacher inquiry reports to test and identify the main findings of the study.

Findings

Objective/inquiry question	Findings
<p>How can we foster student agency and ‘insiderness’ more effectively with our students?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers felt they developed a deeper understanding of what student agency is and what it looks like. They recognised it more in their practice and noticed themselves fostering it when they weren’t expressly meaning to. It became more embedded in their general practice not just in relation to ALF. • Teachers realised that though there were many environmental characteristics, processes and systems that had deliberately been set up over time to foster student agency and ‘insiderness’, in terms of content delivery and teacher instruction, students had previously had very little or no say. Teachers often made all the decisions about what students would learn and how it would happen. Letting go some of the control over content and content delivery was more challenging than giving control over timing, or where students worked, for example. The latter was already embedded into practice. • Teachers realised that truly listening to what students have to say about their learning (student voice) and being responsive is central to enabling agency. This included receiving feedback from students about their teaching. • Though it is growing, we still have further to go to deeply understand student agency and ‘insiderness’.
<p>In what ways can digital technologies assist students to realise their agency and ‘insiderness’?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of the digital tool really excited and engaged children. But this engagement did not lead to better outcomes on its own. Its use needed to be personalised to each child’s needs and scaffolded. <p>Children needed varying amounts of support from teachers to access the benefits. Digital technology will not simply enable student agency because it is digital technology and it cannot simply be assumed that engagement will lead to agency.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young students in particular found that they had so much to hold in their heads, so having information, such as working goals, stored on ALF, was very useful when they knew how to access it. Practising putting in passwords and understanding pathways to information was an important aspect of the scaffolding that needed to take place. • At times, the use of the digital tool pointed away from the tool itself to other areas of teacher practice that needed to be addressed. Teachers could not only focus on the digital tool, they had to look at their own teaching practices.
<p>What are the skills, attitudes and dispositions that teachers need to enable them to effectively foster student agency and ‘insiderness’?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absolutely central to the effective fostering of student agency is teachers developing the belief that students are capable and knowledgeable about their learning and have a great deal to contribute to it. • Teachers being open, reflective, asking for feedback from students about their teaching, and being responsive to it are essential skills and attributes.
<p>Efficacy of teacher inquiry</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A project like this has to be carried out at the right time for the school and the teacher. If it is not the right time, it will be done superficially and/or only partially. • The teacher inquiry needs to be the only professional development focus. • Time is so short in schools, but if we want genuine inquiry, we have to allow teachers time to play around with the ideas not just do the business. • Teacher inquiry is a transformational tool. • Just like students, teachers needed to be scaffolded to carry out teacher inquiries. It cannot be assumed that teachers can just go for it. They needed to be supported through the process. • Linked to above, providing coaching sessions with teachers to support the inquiry were seen as very helpful in assisting teachers to stay on track. An outside perspective was helpful to sharpen the focus of the inquiry and assist teachers when they got lost in the inquiry or stuck. It was also essential to assisting the transformation process through high level reflective questioning

Discussion

As a school, one of our central tenets has been to develop student agency and ‘insiderness’. We developed our physical environment to enable student choice about where and how to work. We encourage students to understand how they learn best so that they can make informed decisions. We have timetabling that gives students (even five year olds) some choice about when they will do certain learning activities. However, this project brought to the teachers’ attention that though there are elements of choice given to students, teachers have been holding quite tight control over the content of what students learn and have not included them sufficiently in conversations about this. Interestingly, back in 2006, writing for the OECD, Paludin suggested that personalisation of timing is likely to be relatively easy to achieve but personalisation of content, much more difficult.

One of the repeated refrains from teachers as they carried out their teacher inquiries was that learners were much more knowledgeable and articulate about their learning and what they needed to help them than they had realised. Here is an examples of what a Year 6 student said:

“My learning map helps me to know who or what is around me to help me in my learning....I am constantly changing and developing as a learner, so creating a map each term helps me to see how I am developing and what I need to focus on now. ...My map helps teachers to know me as a person – they won’t treat everyone and judge everyone the same. It helps us all to know me properly. That helps my learning.”

From the mouth of a year 1 student:

“We look on ALF to see our goals. All goals are behind the thumbs. The thumb means you have done it. It shows you what you have to do and what you need to work on. It shows my writing. ALF makes me feel happy because it has all our good writing and it makes me feel proud of my learning. ALF helps us by learning our writing. It tells us how good we are at our writing and how much we have learnt.”

As teachers moved through the experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1982, for example), which is inherent in the teacher inquiry process, teachers realised the huge value of giving students opportunities to talk about their learning. As teachers reflected on their experiences (assisted by coaching), and then began to recognize patterns and links to theories (abstract conceptualisation), they went through transformative change. Their thinking shifted from believing that, as teachers they were the experts about learning, to also believing that each student is an expert about his/her own learning. As a result, all students had valuable contributions to make to the thinking about their learning. It wasn’t just that having a voice made students feel good about themselves as learners, but that they actually had a contribution to make that was different from the teachers’ contribution and very necessary. In particular, as the Year 6 student above said, it helped each person involved in the learning of the child know the child better. This was a significant discovery for some teachers.

A second really important related realisation is that though student agency has been touted as being important to our vision for teaching and learning, to date it has largely been controlled and enacted by teachers. Teachers have created the systems and the processes that give agency to students. The power to act has, in reality, remained with the teachers. We have to ask ourselves whether that is in fact agency or rather the appearance of agency and ‘insiderness’. Transformation has taken place, but we really are only just beginning on the journey of fostering deep agency.

The power of teacher inquiry to be transformative for teachers was affirmed through this project. However, providing support to teachers as they moved through the inquiry process was essential. At times, teachers got lost in the inquiry. There needed to be opportunities and even set times for the teacher to come out of the inquiry and look back to the inquiry “with different (outsider) eyes”. One-on-one coaching with an experienced researcher was particularly useful in assisting this. A number of teachers commented that the short coaching sessions helped them to readjust their focus and get back on track. However, peer-to-peer coaching with another teacher was also helpful along with facilitated reflective/trouble shooting sessions with all teachers present.

The learnings from this project were more about student agency/‘insiderness’ than they were about the efficacy of digital tools. In fact, as suggested in the findings, using the digital tool with students continually sent teachers back to thinking about their teacher practice in general, not so much in relation to ALF. This is not surprising given that there are significant ways of thinking (as discussed above) that teachers need to develop before student agency/‘insiderness’ will become deeply embedded in their practice. However, what did become clear is that ALF can and did enable the agency of students – students acknowledged this themselves. However, students needed to be scaffolded, sometimes through direct instruction and tutorials, to be able to use the tool effectively for this to happen. It is often assumed that as ‘digital natives’ students will just be able to use digital tools. However, careful, consistent instruction about how to use the tool to maximise effectiveness and continually revisiting that learning was important if it was to develop student agency. Difficulty in putting in the password, for example, could be a big barrier to agency.

This project was very confronting and revealing. We now have a much clearer picture of where we are at as a school in relation to fostering student agency. Although there is a great deal to be celebrated as a result of this project, there is even more still to be done. It is important for us to continue to focus on fostering student agency and the part ALF can play in this, or the understandings teachers have developed may get lost in all the busyness that is a teacher’s world.

Limitations

The back end role of teachers has grown dramatically over the years. Time spent planning, analysing data and personalising learning etc. now means that more work is being required of teachers outside of teaching hours than they actually spend teaching. This makes adding a further expectation of carrying out projects such as this one almost too much to ask. Receiving funding to enable release was incredibly helpful. However, in reality, it was never enough to mean the project did not add to an already huge workload. The impact on the project was that few teachers were able to carry out the project to the standard they would have like. It always felt rushed and hurried and the potential of the project was not fully realised.

Though the project threw up some very valuable findings in terms of student agency and teacher voice, these findings did not end up being linked back to student achievement outcomes. Further iterations of the project would want to see links to student achievement outcomes.

The project is not scalable because ALF is a bespoke software platform built by the school for the school. However, the notable findings are ubiquitous and, as such, are relevant for all schools. Given the small sample size, however, these findings would need to be tested further to ensure wide applicability. However, from a perspective of educational connoisseurship and criticism, it is the contention of this report that the findings resonate.

Implications / Recommendations

As a school, we need to continue providing opportunities for teachers to explore student agency in authentic contexts, such as through teacher inquiries. It is important for their newly awakened understanding that children do have valuable insights into themselves as learners and their learning to be continually strengthened and become embedded in their practice. This does not happen with just one or two experiences, but with multiple reflected upon experiences across a range of contexts. Therefore, this project must not be seen as an end but as just another part of an ongoing journey.

Student agency challenges many teachers' deeply held beliefs of what it means to be a teacher. Changing those beliefs will take carefully designed and orchestrated transformative learning experiences. Teacher inquiry seems to be one such tool. However, to maximise the learning that can be derived from a teacher inquiry, movement through the inquiry needs to be facilitated and scaffolded to ensure a robust inquiry. Of even greater importance, however, if the process is to be transformative, is to provide coaching, or something similar, to assist the inquirer to reflect deeply on their current beliefs and how those beliefs might conflict with the evidence of the inquiry. This deep reflection is central to a transformative experience. It cannot be assumed that teachers will do this on their own without outside support.

Student agency and 'insiderness' is still relatively little understood in the education sector. Many more research projects will need to be carried out in a multitude of contexts to develop deep understanding of these concepts. Some of the systems, processes and environmental factors that assist student agency are relatively well known. However, these are generally actions taken by teachers who in the end still hold the power. Going forward research projects need to focus on genuine power sharing - when students are able to act in authentic ways upon the environment and within the learning community. It needs to move beyond student choice about timing and place, to include curriculum content and delivery. This will require teachers seeking constant feedback from their students and being continually responsive to it.

Conclusion/additional comments

We are very grateful to the Ministry of Education for funding this inquiry – particularly because it enabled us to provide release to teachers to assist in carrying out the inquiries. The teacher inquiry approach is based on experiential learning and as such it proved to be transformative for teachers, who all finished with a strengthened belief that student agency and 'insiderness' are central to ensuring that each child continually reaches his/her potential. They also finished with a strengthened belief that their practice is not where they would want it to be. As a school, we are committed to continuing to develop our understanding of fostering student agency. In fact, currently a number of our teachers are engaged in a term-long inquiry into other aspects of student agency and 'insiderness'. Our journey continues.

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