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Challenging Second-Graders to Be Critical Thinkers, Problem Solvers, & World Changers

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"Whether you think you can or can't, you are usually right." - Henry Ford

"Why can't second graders do it?" I still hear those words being repeated throughout every lesson that I plan. My background: I had taught fifth grade for a decade, ventured into middle school for a year (what was I thinking?) and landed back in elementary school. I was finally a teacher of seven-year-olds or second graders, as we call them in the educational world.

I had formal training in Socratic seminar, higher-level questioning, and Kagan Structures, but when I began my year with second graders, I never thought they could handle what the older kids could do. I began with teaching the basic standards, while offering some choice. A lot of guidance occurred on a regular basis.

In the back of my mind, I kept thinking, "These kids can handle 'guided' choice, but not much more." I did an amazing job at being a great facilitator and maintaining an element of control along the way, but was I actually allowing them to explore in the areas that they wanted to? Were they learning what they needed to learn? Most importantly, were they able to show how they learned the content in the capacity that best suited them? I honestly couldn't answer these questions. During a conversation with Scott Fuller, Next Generation Coordinator and challenger extraordinaire, he asked, "Why don't you think seven-year-olds can do that? Have you tried it? Have you given them the challenge?"

Anyone who knows me knows that I am up for a challenge. More importantly, I'm up for a challenge with students that don't typically fit into the mold. So this was perfect. This was exactly what I needed: to be challenged to get my kids to be critical thinkers, problem solvers, and world changers.

The light bulb came on. I immediately set up composition books for Socratic seminar for my seven-year-olds. The toolbox may have looked a bit different than with fifth graders, but not too much. They were given question stems and taught how to use 'right side' (also known as Depth of Knowledge Level 3) question starters. I made this a Professional Learning Community goal of mine to make sure that I followed through with coaching students on how to question effectively. I incorporated respectful routines (rules), a talking stick, and systems to hold each student accountable for contributing to the discussion...very much like I had done with my fifth graders. It worked!

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Literally, seven- and eight-year-olds were having productive conversations. Not only that, they also were challenging each other and coming up with solutions and/or arguments to real-world issues. I strategically walked around the room and found myself wanting, desiring, to be a part of their conversations. I realized that these young minds were just as capable of contributing to meaningful conversations as the older kids.

What does this mean? For me, it meant that I could actually challenge my students in so many more areas. They really can choose their own "place to learn." Flexible seating became an obvious--and easy--next step. They can choose their own groups or how they display that they learned the content.

This experience opened my eyes. My students were given a math problem, inquiry style, and it was amazing to watch their eyes light up, their minds stir, and their conversations begin.

The lesson that I learned: seven-year-olds are capable of doing a lot more than we would ever think. Try it. I promise, you'll be amazed rather than disappointed. When you start to wonder if your students can do something, remember: they probably can.

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