187. The Student-Centered Revolution: Exploring the Impact of Student Agency in Modern Classrooms with Michael Nicholson

Michael Nicholson: [00:00:00] Kids likely can't experience authentic failure unless you give them the freedom to fail from their own decisions, not somebody else's task demands.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:13] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your Host and Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin.

We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always I'm super excited because we get to have great conversations with folks doing incredible things out in the world of education, and today is no different. Today, we're going to be diving into the concept of student agency as a transformative approach in lot of the work that's happening right now in schools. I'm super excited about that, as a matter of fact.

And joining us to have that conversation is Mike Nicholson, who has been in education in one form or another for well over 30 years. And his passion is to support authentic student agency across school districts. And he does that as Principal of Learning InspirED, a forward thinking education consultancy agency that's committed to learning and supporting the development of student agency. So, Mike, welcome to the program.

Michael Nicholson: [00:01:39] Thanks, Annalies. It's great to be here. I look forward to it. I'm looking forward to it for a while.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:44] Excellent. I'm looking forward to it, too, because, honestly, student agency, student-centered, student autonomy, I'm sure between the two of us, we could come up with a whole list of other ways that people sort of capture this concept into a bucket of some sort.

And post-pandemic, this has really, really taken off. It's unfortunate, obviously, that it took a giant pandemic to really sort of shoot everybody in the arm on this concept because it's one we should have been doing decades ago. But the reality is it's here. People are finally really starting to dig into this in ways that are going to be super helpful for our kiddos. So, let's start with the first piece here, Mike. So, how do you define the concept of student agency?

Michael Nicholson: [00:02:37] I agree with you, there are a lot of terms that seem to be interchangeably used. I take from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development out of Paris. The organization that runs the PISA. I love their definition. And they have a short paragraph of it, and the first part has to do with self-regulation, which makes a whole lot of sense.

But the second part really draws me in. The student agency is defined as the capacity to set a goal, reflect, and act responsibility. It's about acting rather than being acted upon, shaping rather than being shaped, and making responsible decisions rather than just accepting those determined. It has such an initiative and proactive connotation that, unfortunately, is very different than what we see going on in most schools.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:20] It's true, and we're going to dig into that in just a second. But I want to go back to sort of the other thing that we mentioned, that there's a lot of terms for this. And so, can we sort of think just a little bit from your perspective, in your work because you are, honestly, eyeballs deep in this. So, is there a difference in these terms or are people truly using them interchangeably? And, honestly, does it matter?

Michael Nicholson: [00:03:48] Great question. I think the purist would say that there is a difference in the terms, but I think that might be more academic than practical. I do agree, though, that in order to really tell or really discern if a student has agency, you have to give them autonomy. If you don't give them autonomy, how can you tell if they have agency? So, I think the prerequisite of autonomy almost makes it on the same playing field as student agency.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:15] Yeah. And I would agree with that. I, for one, oftentimes when I talk about this, I try to throw all the terms I've been able to find - and I'd love to compare notes with you - because one of my favorite sort of ways to facilitate the conversations is often to say, "Look, here's how folks sort of identify this bucket concept with all of these things." Because I think it's really, really important to get people out of the weeds immediately so you can move on to the heart of making the change. So, one of these days we're going to exchange our lists, Mike. So, we're going to do that.

Michael Nicholson: [00:04:47] That's right.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:48] So, as we think about this then, because some folks really do struggle with this, as educators, most of us have not been trained with this pedagogical or transformative approach as sort of the forefront of our practice. And so, that makes it difficult sometimes for us to really engage in that change. And so, before we get into the weeds of how you do your work to bring about the change, can you share with us a couple of examples of really great practice, I guess, if you will, or places.

I mean, you and I, we've seen a number of these over the years and we're going to talk about the Village, I assume, at some point because that was just, you know, really sort of front and center for me because I just got to go there and we did a previous podcast with the folks from the Village. But I do want to sort of talk about some examples because I think that it helps people sort of ground themselves in the conversation you and I will have later. So, can you provide a couple? Think about it as a case study, I guess.

Michael Nicholson: [00:05:50] Yeah. Just two quick ones. For real live practical examples, I'll take you out to Virginia, which is actually going to be the place where we host our next summit next year. Frederick County Public Schools, Virginia is probably one of the districts that are far out there in front of this. It's not universal across districts, but they have an accelerating number of places in the district that are demonstrating this.

Frederick County Middle School with Jerry Putt. He has been working on this for a number of years, five or six years. Started from, you know, the Genius Hour and has grown from there. But he has taken the core areas -

and this is my language - threw it in the dryer and shrunk it. And the kids get their core before lunch and they're able to pursue any learning they want after lunch. And it's really interesting talking to the kids because they will call their before lunch educators, teachers; they'll call the teachers after lunch, facilitators.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:46] Interesting. By their own design or by school culture design?

Michael Nicholson: [00:06:50] Their own design.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:51] Own design. I love that.

Michael Nicholson: [00:06:51] Their own design. The teachers do not ask them to do this. I found this out because I ran a student focus group and we were having - well, maybe we'll talk about this - the latest 3D study. The student group was helping to vet the student surveys. And just as part of our conversation going out of it, they made this distinction about how they term their teachers before and after lunch.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:13] Yeah. So, I'm curious because I have to follow up on this. I'm super curious, so is it "Mr. Smith, my math teacher" before lunch and "Fred, my facilitator" after lunch? Is it that specific? Are they actually culturally to the point of - because names matter, I'm curious how far down this path the kids have already naturally taken themselves?

Michael Nicholson: [00:07:38] I don't know. It was not obvious to me in terms of whether they referenced them by their first or last name. But by their titles and roles, they definitely make a difference in the reference.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:49] That is absolutely fascinating and I love that, that's my anthropologist hat coming on actually being, "Oh, my God. This is the best." Because the reality is that's culture shift happening. I mean, that's tangible. It's very, very visible. And it's meaningful because, until we get culture shift, we can't have lasting change.

Michael Nicholson: [00:08:08] I agree.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:09] So, that's fascinating to me. I cannot wait to dig into that particular example.

Michael Nicholson: [00:08:15] Yeah. You'll have to get Jerry on your podcast.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:18] I will 100 percent. Yes, 100 percent. Having just heard him speak, I will definitely be reaching out. So, let's dig in a little bit then, Mike. So, a school says, "I love this. I know this is going to be in the best interest of my kids. I want to make this happen." How do we go about it? This is the nuts and bolts of the work that you do. So, how do we do this? Not giving away the trade secrets. That's not what I'm after here. But I really want to help folks understand that there is a process. And that the process, although we often want to say let's just throw the rules out the window, we do know that there are some really key components that if we can't get there, we really are not going to be able to get the change that we seek.

Michael Nicholson: [00:09:01] I don't know if there's just one way to get there. But, certainly, one organized way that we do is, when a district wants to go deep or wants to get serious about this, we do with a why, what, and how. We have 55 perspectives. I stopped short of calling them reasons, but we have 55 perspectives of why we need to consider giving kids much more control over their learning. And it stems everything from mental health, distress and control, to American ideals, to technology. It spans the gamut.

And one of the underlying conceptual models that undergird this approach is self-determination theory. It's

Deci and Ryan, 1985. It's their model on motivation and well-being. And it stands on the assumption, actually, empirically demonstrated model that we have three core psychological needs. And these are universal. These are cross culture, cross gender, any way you want to slice and dice the population.

These three core psychological needs are autonomy. We all want to feel like we have a hand in our short and long term fate. We have a strong need for feeling competent in our environment in ways that matter to us, not to somebody else. And Daniel Pink does a slight shift on this, but I think we can generalize it by saying the third psychological need is that we want to relate to people and ideas beyond ourselves.

Those three psychological needs are hard pressed to be found in most public schools. As a matter of fact, we seem to be organized and as kids move up and matriculate through the system, they're hard pressed to get those needs satisfied. Which can be one explanation why students tend to lose motivation the longer they're in the system. So, that's the why.

We lay out 55 and we don't tell the people that you need to do this. We help them find their own doorway. Which of these perspectives is your doorway to seeing that we need to give kids more control over their learning lives? So, once they establish their why - not we - once they establish their why and we see which doorways they're going through, then that helps to inform how we talk about the what. What are these three psychological needs? What are the tools to help us access them? How do we organize them? And then, after we figure out the what, then we move to the how.

And it's not as clean as that, but that helps us organize the approach. What's really interesting is that people sometimes won't see a why until they see a glimpse of the how. It's almost like they say, "Okay. I'm not sure I can see the why until I can see that this is actually possible." But that helps us organize.

You know Brad Mitchell. Brad Mitchell and I partnered on a Martha Holden Jennings grant to take four districts deep in this work. And they were four very different, very different districts. The largest urban in Ohio, a small rural by the border of West Virginia, an affluent suburb or what I call Norman Rockwellian suburb out east of Columbus, and then more of a closer ring suburb, to Columbus. It was fascinating watching these four districts move through this and the similarities and the differences that could be observed across them. But let me stop there because I know you have questions or comments.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:22] No. I mean I think that it's really interesting. And as folks are sitting back thinking about and contemplating this, you know, a number of things sort of come to mind having sort of been in the weeds in some of these conversations myself, to sort of watch folks struggle with this.

I think one of the things that was really interesting that you said that I truly appreciate was that, you know, folks oftentimes can't see. And that's fascinating to me and I think that you might be aware of this, but one of the reasons ultimately PAST Foundation decided to build the PAST Innovation Lab, a place - I never wanted a place - but one of the reasons I ultimately decided we needed to do this thing was because I heard over and over again, I hear what you're saying, but I just can't imagine what you're talking about. And I think we bumped up against this on all kinds, you know. And folks were saying that to me as it related to how I think about using space differently to facilitate student agency-based, fully applied learning. So, that's one element of it.

And as you work folks through the 55 components upfront, I understand why people might struggle to see, because I've experienced that myself. And I am curious on those 55 things. Have you seen a trend? Are there two or three that always pop out?

Michael Nicholson: [00:13:46] Yes. And, again, to see this across districts. So, we had them rate these perspectives. We have leadership narrowed down from the 55 to something that's more consumable for their staff, but there's certainly overlap in what schools typically reference. But the one that seems to pop up - and it's not seem, it does - is this concept of failure. Is that how we treat failure in schools - and this is my terminology - we treat failure as a blunt instrument.

And we know the inherent value of failure for learning. But yet the way we've culturally addressed this in schools has been, I think, like a blunt instrument and everybody wants to stand clear, whether it's a student who doesn't want to take a risk in their learning, which we know that's necessary for learning, or teachers. Everybody seems to want to stand clear of failure, which when you see the concept of agency of putting yourself out there, it maybe makes sense in hindsight why failure is such a stumbling block. So, that is one that pops at the top.

And kids likely can't experience authentic failure unless you give them the freedom to fail from their own decisions, not somebody else's task demands.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:05] Dig into that, Mike, because, honestly, I think folks struggle with that. The idea of failure, like you, I think fail, fail often, learn from it, have a great time with it. Holy moly, the opportunity for a kid to just gain in leaps and bounds from that moment, you can't even put a label on it because it has the potential to be so transformative if you allow it to be. And yet we still struggle with this.

Michael Nicholson: [00:15:34] Of the 55 reasons, we did not guess that failure would pop out as number one. But maybe in hindsight it makes a whole lot of sense. Actually, one of the various ways that we support districts and support this work in the field is, every several years we do what's called a 3D survey. We survey parents, educators, and students around concepts and constructs that are related to agency, motivation, purpose, relationships, failure.

And so, in this latest iteration, which is out now, one of the questions we ask is what is the stumbling block to us learning better from failure. And actually through the focus groups that we had leading up to this design, eight reasons possibly - and we're going to see which ones pop out - that inhibit people from learning from failure.

Everything from maybe do the schools intervene too quickly before kids get to the point of failure? Does the preeminence of grades stop people from taking risks with their learning? What we said earlier, do students perceive that these are other people's tasks and I don't really associate myself with the failure of these tasks? Is it the ego? Is it that we don't want to learn from failure because if we do attach our identity to it, it's too sensitive, it's too close to home? So, there's any number of reasons.

But I think possibly one way to sum it up is, heretofore we've treated failure as too much of a blunt instrument. So, it's interesting. We have more to learn from this, but that was one that pops to the top.

Another one is the sharing control with students improves teacher student relationships. That's one that when you share control with folks, you tend to open up the vulnerability and the chance for deeper relationships with one another. So, that's another doorway.

Certainly, the mental health crisis has opened up a doorway. Bill Stixrud - which you saw at the summit out in Colorado Springs - says one of the most stress inducing conditions is the lack of control. Which is, unfortunately, too long for how we put kids in the schools that they have so little decision making control over anything meaningful in their educational lives. But he would contend their broader lives.

But if you just look at school, one of the tasks that we asked folks to do - and we won't take five minutes to do this - in a room full of 25 adults, we put forth a digital platform. We say, "Here, upload this digital platform through your phone or otherwise, list all the ways that we make decisions for students in school."

And it's remarkable, in five minutes in a room with 25 people, you can immediately amass about 130 ways that we have made decisions for kids, everything from what learning there to do, how they demonstrate, who they learn with, who they learn from, when they have lunch, when they can go to the bathroom, what they wear to school, you name it. And we overregulate the kids. And so, we can see how that might be stress inducing over time. They don't have control over their day-to-day lives. And why we ever thought that was healthy for kids, I'm not sure.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:40] Yeah. Well, and what we know is it's demoralizing to kids. It's interesting, when I worked with districts that are struggling with student engagement, honestly, it takes a lot of control on my part to just go, "Really?"

Because when you dig and you really dig in, one of the things you find, or at least I find - and I'm super curious if in your work you see the same thing. It might be unique to the places that I go, and I certainly want to know that - one of the things that I see in districts that are struggling with student engagement - and oftentimes that is the thing that's happening that results in a phone call to PAST. And it may be a different thing that results in a phone call to you - when I dig in and you really sort of look, what you find in the places that say our engagement is really low, our kids aren't showing up, we've got chronic absenteeism, and you really sort of look, one of the things that you find is there is so much control.

There is so much control that there is no space for innovation, much less for autonomy and all of the other things that can come out of a fully engaged learning environment. And so, when you sort of dig into that, you realize that the depth of the problem, really, it's huge.

Michael Nicholson: [00:20:05] And, Annalies, coming out of the pandemic, when we hoped that people would not go back to "normal," because who is normal serving a decreasing number of kids, and then you get learning loss, whether perceived or real out there, became this reason to double down on how people were doing things before, double downing on those structures that were inhibiting kids from being able to have any real sense of autonomy.

So, yeah, it's an interesting situation, but I'm hopeful that a growing number of districts are recognizing and all of us a Johnny-come-lately moment, is, maybe we need to turn things over to kids a little bit more.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:53] Yeah, 100 percent. Okay. So, here I'm going to throw a bit of a curve ball at you. And it's fair for you to say, "Nuh-uh. Nope. Not going there, Annalies," and that's okay.

Michael Nicholson: [00:21:02] Go ahead.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:03] All right. Many folks have heard me say over many years I am not a fan. I am not a fan of large, comprehensive high schools. It's not my thing for a whole host of reasons, which we are not going to get into in this piece of the conversation. But the reality is there's an awful lot of these out there in the world.

So, one of the questions that I often get that I'm curious sort of about the way that you think about this, because I know that some of the places where you have been and are currently working are based on a

system, a district system that does, in fact, encompass large comprehensive high schools as a part of its portfolio of schools. So, how do you take the notion of small and intimate, very personalized opportunity for students in an environment that is not by design structured to facilitate this type of teaching and learning and make it work in a place like that?

Michael Nicholson: [00:22:11] That's a great question. And it certainly gets at that third psychological need of relatedness. So, the places where we've seen the early pioneers do this, I referenced Frederick County Middle School, let's shift to their high school, as a matter of fact, the high school that Frederick County Middle School feeds into. They have taken some of Jerry Putt's ideas and actually was independently run. So, it wasn't really Jerry's. It was simultaneous to Jerry's idea. Sam Gross, the principal there at James Wood High School, created a NEXT program. They don't call it that. They call it RISE in their high school, a large high school. And so, they do a school within a school model.

I was just talking to a superintendent out in Long Island yesterday who has written up an Adweek. He did the same thing. He created this smaller community inside the high school. And I would never advocate whatever model of agency that you want to develop. It seems oxymoronic to impose that on a school. So, it's a whole notion of choice. So, I think one way to get at that large, impersonal - you didn't use that word but sort of inferred it in their - setting is to create options for these smaller communities to emerge.

And it was interesting because when I was out in another state recently talking to their assistant superintendent and she was introducing me to the district superintendent, she said, "So-and-so, here's Mike. He's working with so-and-so about their engagement program." And he goes, "Oh, that's that school. That's where kids can choose to go," and almost dismissively talked about it. And I was thinking, "Why was the superintendent thinking like that?"

And I'm thinking, to dismiss it because it's a student choice option almost misses the point. The point is we need to give kids much more choice than they're learning and that's where the power is. So, I think this school within school might be one way to address the shortcomings of those large bureaucratic systems that we see out there.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:21] Yeah. And I would agree with that. Oftentimes, again, when I'm working sort of in that space or our crew at PAST is working in that space, that is one of the strategies that often comes up. And we have seen that strategy be effective as a mechanism to sort of make a shift.

Because I think the other thing that you mentioned right at the beginning of our conversation as one of the key things that you see, we know that relationships matter. We know they matter all the way through a child's development to adulthood. And, yet, to your point, we've created this, sort of at this point now, long term approach to that K-12 space where we've minimized relationships or we've structured relationships to make them so hierarchical that what has happened is we've lost the ability to relate along the way, relate to our fellow teachers, relate to our students. The student relationships to each other we know are really, really strained in the face of social media and so many other factors that have really come to play.

So, that relationship piece, that mentoring component, I would argue in many ways has as important as the ability to actually make a choice. Because a choice in a vacuum of a relationship to guide you through, what it means to be autonomous is like growing up without any supervision whatsoever to lead you along the way. So, how do you help adults who are hesitant learn how to do that?

Michael Nicholson: [00:26:01] That's a great point. And what's kind of remarkable in the various places we see doing this is, although it's under the auspices of giving kids autonomy, and adults almost pulling back, the

adults almost pulling back to give space for the kids to be able to explore and take risks and so forth is this sense of community that comes up. It's remarkable.

And, again, maybe we shouldn't be surprised. I think we're sort of surprised because, again, it's often under the umbrella of autonomy, of self-choice, of independence. And so, this very individualistic notions would not seem to holler communities can emerge from this. And it does. It does. And we wonder if it's because it gets at the very thing that you're talking about, when you redefine the roles of the teachers and the students around this endeavor of learning, does it also redefine the relationships? And we think it seriously does.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:04] And I agree 100 percent. Our data shows this exact same thing.

Michael Nicholson: [00:27:10] And it's a beautiful, beautiful surprise. And maybe we shouldn't have been surprised, but it was. And it's tangible. I mean, you took the tour out of the Village. I imagine you took that school tour.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:25] Oh, yes. I signed up first thing in the morning. I wanted those kids fresh.

Michael Nicholson: [00:27:30] And you probably saw the morning meeting, which is a kind of cool thing to see too. But when you walk in that lobby, for those who don't know, the Village is made out of a former bank. It's a bank lobby. When you realize all that buzz that goes on in that lobby and when you understand more those kids do not have to be there, they could do this from Starbucks because of how they've set up their core learning, but they choose to be there and the teachers choose to be there. It's all about giving kids and giving teachers more space and autonomy to do it.

So, the dynamics of why that happens, I think we can explain in a 30,000 or 60,000 foot. But I'd love to understand at some point more intricately why do the relationships get solidified or at least get strengthened when you give people choice and autonomy? It's a beautiful dynamic.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:24] It is a beautiful dynamic. And, again, to put my anthropology hat on, when I walked in there, what did I see? I saw humanity at its best. And I saw humanity at its most raw. And I saw humanity at its most vulnerable. And I saw humanity at its most collaborative state.

Michael Nicholson: [00:28:48] Amen.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:50] And you know why that matters or why in my mind that's powerful is because the power dynamic of a traditional educator-student relationship does not exist there.

Michael Nicholson: [00:29:06] The hierarchy was minimized.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:09] Yeah. Yeah. And really hard to find.

Michael Nicholson: [00:29:11] Yes. Yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:12] Right? And really, really hard to find. Because I spoke to lots of teachers and, of course, I had done an interview with Nathan and a teacher and a couple of students before, and so I had a sense. But when I walked in and I had a chance to talk to more teachers, and to talk to more students, and then to listen as they were presenting about the experience that they have in that school, it was made really, really clear to me that I think even more important, and if you asked everybody, they would all talk, "Oh. No. It's the student agency that I get to be autonomous."

And I think that that's what was verbally sort of put out there.

But when you peel back the layers of the onion - again, this is me with my anthropology hat on - that's not really what it was. It was the breakdown of the formal relationship that allowed the autonomous experience to flourish. That's what I saw.

Michael Nicholson: [00:30:10] I agree. I agree. Yeah. It's powerful.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:14] It's incredibly powerful. And so, again, I encourage folks (A) listen to that episode, but more importantly, (B) reach out and go there, or to many of the other places that Mike is working in because you can learn so much just from spending a day experiencing what it feels like to be immersed in that learning environment. And sometimes I think that we also, as hesitant adults in this world that we're trying to transform, we need to have an opportunity to not to just see it, but to feel it, too, because we're scared.

Michael Nicholson: [00:30:50] Well, you know, to that point - exactly to that point, so how do we viscerally experience this? The very first of the 55 perspectives we ask educators to consider is shadow a student. And I'm not talking about one period. I'm not talking about looking at him from the hallway. I'm talking about starting the day and ending the day with them so you could viscerally understand, emotionally understand how we set up the experience for our kids 180 days of 1/13th of their K-12 experience. And we find that to be a very moving perspective to help people.

While you do that, while you guide your shadowing experience, how many meaningful decisions do kids get to make about their own education? And then, once you extrapolate that, do we start to understand better why we think their engagement declines the longer they're in school. So, your point about experientially witnessing what some of these pioneering districts are doing, I think, is pretty powerful.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:57] Yeah. And I agree. Folks really need to dig in. You know, Mike, I always like to try to close the conversation recognizing that as our listeners who come to us from all over the world have a variety of different perspectives and experiences and opportunities in their face, in their communities, in their lives who've been sitting here listening to you and I just having this great conversation but are wondering to themselves, "I really want to do this. I think that Mike is spot on and I want this to happen. And I might not be able to make this happen at my district, but maybe I could take some baby steps in my own classroom." So, if you had a recommendation for somebody who's thinking about this just to get started to tow in, what would it be?

Michael Nicholson: [00:32:45] You know, that's a great question because some people see this as a tectonic shift, and in many ways it is a tectonic shift. But there are small ways that you can start moving that mountain. There's a gentleman, a professor out of the Boston area from Olin College, it's a small engineering college, who's created this great piece, he calls it the student autonomy breakdown. And there are ten different ways that we could offer kids autonomy in the classroom.

Certainly, the learning goals and the course content is one, but sometimes people see that as a no-go because of either state standards or the accountability system. So, if we can't give the kids more choice in what they learn - which we can save that for another discussion but let's give that to them - there are nine other ways that you can give kids choice over the learning experience. Everything from the physical space of the classroom, to which resources they access, to who they work with in the classroom, to the due dates and the schedules, to the grading and evaluation, to the applications.

There are nine different ways. And if you just take one, just take one of these ways that you give kids more

choice, more meaningful choice in this, I think you'd see some pretty remarkable moves.

And let me just give you a very real example about this. I was asked to come up to give somewhat of a keynote up in Illinois to this North Shore School district. And they are organized K-8. So, they're primary teachers, intermediate teachers, and middle school teachers. And after I gave that talk, I circled back with them about a month or two later. And it was primary teachers who were the more immediate ones to respond to the concepts that I shared.

And I'm intrigued, I said, "Primary teachers. Some people argue the kids have more autonomy in kindergarten than they do in high school. So, some people see you farther, you know, the play corners or with the choice corners." They said, "No. Actually, in many ways we could be even more prescribed." And they said, "We took some of what you said and we just sampled it."

This one primary teacher, just this one thing said, "Okay. Usually, I tell the kids to take out a pencil, take out their lined paper. I just played with it. I asked the kids to take out any writing instrument you want." Just a simple little move. And she said, "It could have been a fluke. But the kids actually were more engaged and wrote more than I've ever seen them write. And so, I just kept going with these little moves."

And so, to your point, I think there is a way to sample this and see for yourself if we give kids just a little bit more freedom, what do we get in the power of giving away power?

Annalies Corbin: [00:35:30] I love that. The power of giving away power. Excellent. Thank you for that, Mike. Thank you for taking time out of your day to join us and have the conversation. And for those of you that are listening, I hope that you will reach out to Mike Nicholson. You can find him at Learning InspirED. And we will provide the resources and links in the show notes for everybody. But if this is a journey you're interested in making, you have a great opportunity and a resource that is Mike Nicholson. So, thank you, Mike, for joining us today.

Michael Nicholson: [00:36:01] Thanks so much, Annalies. I appreciate the partnership and doing this important work. I'm sure I'll see you around the neighborhood in this work.

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:09] A hundred percent we're going to be there.

Michael Nicholson: [00:36:11] Excellent. Thank you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:13] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @annaliescorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.