

Project Q.E.

Encouraging Habits of Mind – Phase I

Staff of Queen Elizabeth School,
Lloydminster



Kindergarten students create a “Rainbow Fish” from the book used to teach Listening with Understanding and Empathy (left). Students in grades one and two create houses like the *Three Little Pigs* to practice Accuracy and Precision

The staff of Queen Elizabeth School observed that their students were demonstrating a general inability to solve problems independently in the classroom, on the playground or in the course of completing school work. Some students tended to give up quickly or fly off the handle when things did not work out the way they expected. Many showed little natural inquisitiveness about life around them. Since all students need the skills to perceive and solve any problems that come their way, the staff decided to focus on teaching intelligent behaviours to their students. They realized that their task was a challenging one in a world where schools compete for students’ attention with the varied, quick-paced life that most children lead outside school.

Several staff members were familiar with the

work done by Art Costa and Bena Kallick in defining “Habits of Mind”, a series of 16 intelligent behaviours that help people become better problem solvers and experience more success in their lives. It was decided that the staff would initiate a two-year, school-wide research project that used Habits of Mind as a framework for teaching intelligent behaviours to their students. Eight Habits were chosen as the focus for the first year of the project. Phase I, which was carried out during the 2000-2001 school year, focussed on teaching one Habit of Mind each month:

- Managing Impulsivity
- Checking for Precision and Accuracy
- Thinking Interdependently
- Responsible Risk Taking

- Responding with Wonderment and Awe
- Listening with Empathy and Understanding
- Persistence
- Thinking Flexibly

Phase II includes an extensive review of the eight Habits as well as the introduction of three more Habits:

- Clarity of Thought and Language
- Posing Questions
- Metacognition

Research Methodology

Each month staff members met in grade-alike groups to discuss the Habit to be taught and plan a concept attainment lesson. These learning circles allowed teachers to become comfortable with the ideas involved in practising that behaviour. They also provided an opportunity for the staff to establish a common vocabulary that was used throughout the school. The students were empowered by the behavioural structure provided through the Habits of Mind and by their own comfort level with the vocabulary. Programs were set up throughout the school to encourage and recognize the use of Habits of Mind. A home component was also encouraged and supported through the school's parent group. As well as being at the forefront in each classroom, the Habits of Mind were made a part of the school culture.

The staff realized that it is difficult to document and evaluate changes in the way students think. Moreover, any changes took place gradually and cumulatively as a new Habit of Mind was introduced each month and practised in subsequent months. Nevertheless, the staff developed a test that asked students to evaluate themselves on their use of the Habits of Mind. Separate test statements were created for students in grades one and two and grades three to six. The older students also were asked to provide evidence substantiating their evaluations. In administering the tests, the teachers read each test statement and clarified the students' understanding of it prior to having the students record their answers. The same test was given to students at the beginning of the project and again in June. At the end of May, data were also gathered from parents through a Reflection Sheet that asked for feedback on the Habits of Mind project.

In their learning circles, teachers evaluated their progress on a regular basis. As a final evaluation, all staff met to consider the results of the project for their report on Phase I and add their input to its observations and conclusions. They also prepared a final reflection paper in which they discussed how their instructional styles or "habits" in the classroom had changed.

Conclusions

The test results indicated that over the course of the school year, the students gained a better understanding of most Habits of Mind and became more aware of their own behaviours. The Reflection Sheets filled out by parents indicated that the Habits of Mind project had effected vocabulary and behaviours at home. Teachers reported that they were focussing in their classrooms more on students' thinking skills and less on the curriculum. They also had developed a higher degree of metacognition and were making more use of "teachable moments" in the classroom.

*Habits of Mind:
Having a disposition
toward behaving
intelligently when
confronted with
problems, the
answers to which
are not immediately
known.*

– Art Costa

Perhaps the most important finding, however, related to the impact of the project on the school as a whole. At the end of Phase I of the project, the researchers made the following observation:

Our teaching of intelligent behaviors went beyond being a strategy or a new methodology. For Queen Elizabeth School, Habits of Mind became a way of looking at what was going on in and out of our school . . . [T]he effect that was least expected and the most appreciated was the sense of community that was established through our research project.

The project is continuing in 2001-2002 with a number of refinements based on the school's experiences with Phase I.