

Project “X” (Excellence) - Phase II: “The Brain Activating Oasis”

Loretta Tetreault

As the principal of Sacred Heart Community School in Regina, Loretta Tetreault realized “that the traditional approach to education was no longer an alternative for our unhappy school children and their parents. We needed to meet the needs of every

individual: ‘Learning for All - Whatever It Takes.’” Dealing primarily with inner city families who live in poverty and are highly mobile, the school needed to provide a stress-free climate that stimulated students’ interests and abilities, balancing the need for security with the need for challenge. Working together with her staff and seeking financial support from the McDowell Foundation and other sources, Tetreault initiated Project “X” (Excellence), a

concentrated effort to make Sacred Heart “as much like a good home as possible”. Over a period of five years the troubled school was transformed from a place with a reputation for violence and academic failure to “a brain activating oasis”.

The first phase of the project concentrated on establishing a school environment that was safe and orderly. The results are documented in the McDowell research report #43 subtitled “Our Jacob Became Our Jesus”. Numerous changes were introduced, including a responsibility plan, some unique

grade combinations, an adjusted school day, a high quality physical education program, and an emphasis on academic success. Encouraged by the positive results of these innovations, the staff began phase two, the implementation of brain-based learning in their school.

For four years, all professional development focussed on acquiring, sharing, and experimenting with information, ideas and strategies related to how the brain learns. Conferences, workshops and literature provided contact with the work of Howard Gardner on multiple intelligences, the definition and principles developed by Eric Jensen for brain-based learning, the thoughts of Lawrence Lezotte on effective school reform, the insights of Ruby Payne into students and adults living in poverty, and the ideas of Daniel Goleman on working with emotional intelligence. Working together in workshops, as teaching partners and through classroom visitations, the entire staff gradually made significant changes in the teaching methodologies used throughout the school. At Sacred Heart, brain-based learning became “a beautiful framework that packages and confirms all that we know is good for our students”.

The project report for phase two identifies thirteen brain-activating strategies that the school has used to re-create itself as an oasis:

1. Changing from teaching to “activating brains”.



Loretta Tetreault gives a presentation on Phase I of the project at the 1999 Learning from Practice seminar.

2. Respecting and enhancing the role of incidental learning.
3. Creating homey, informal, multi-age classrooms that stimulate learning.
4. Giving students control over learning through hallway huddles, immersive environments and thematic approaches.
5. Helping students reach appropriate learning states.
6. Using music to support student learning.
7. Initiating brain-breaks that meet students' natural need for cross-lateral brain activity.
8. Basing math in real-life, personalized learning.
9. Using eye movement patterns to enhance thinking processes.
10. Strengthening students' language skills daily through a variety of short, oral exercises.
11. Employing multiple-path learning techniques like mind mapping and concept webbing.
12. Creating transparency and consistency for student assessment through rubrics, portfolios, and Integrate Pro.
13. Modeling the Catholic principles of hope, joy and love through celebrations and individual recognition.

To monitor the effect of these strategies on student learning, the school has administered the Canadian Test of Basic Skills to its students since October, 1998. Over approximately one year and seven months, the school as a whole gained 1.7 grade equivalent years on the Reading Composite, 2.3 grade equivalent years on the Language Composite, 1.9 grade equivalent years on the Math Composite, and 1.9 grade equivalent years on the Total Composite. Whereas five years ago, students were two grade equivalent years behind the national norm, today they are only .5 grade equivalent years behind the norm. Partly on the basis of these tests and partly on the basis of feedback from students, teachers and parents, the school regards Project "X" (Excellence) as "living proof that when 'many brains' work together for a common goal, the results can be extraordinary".

When you know that children learn in different ways, then you know that you must teach and assess in different ways.

One day a prominent visitor was in our school and saw model brains the children had made hanging from the ceiling in the classroom. He asked the students what they were and was told they were the students' brains. Finding this rather cute, the visitor asked, "Well, what are your brains doing up on the ceiling?"

He was promptly told that they learned how they were smart and the models were there to remind them. The visitor then asked, "Well, how are you smart?"

Little hands went up all over the room and I heard: "I am body smart." "I am number smart." "I am art smart and word smart." One little seven-year-old boy, with his hand frantically waving, said, "I'm interpersonal smart."

Taken aback by this little tyke, our visitor smiled and said, "I guess I just don't understand all this stuff."

His little "interpersonal smart" friend said, "Oh, it's easy! We are all smart in different ways and when we share how we are smart, we all get smarter."

Out of the mouths of babes!!