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Guiding My Students to Autonomy and Self-Control through Habits of Mind

Question

How will learning about and participation in Literature Circles using Habits of Mind affect Second Graders' development of autonomy and personal responsibility?

Rationale

Gifted students tend to display specific attitudes and dispositions including self-direction, social maturity, problem solving, heightened sense of humor, and an interest in a variety of topics with unusual task commitment. Appreciation of a differentiated curriculum and high cognitive concepts are two qualities that gifted students usually enjoy about their learning tasks in school.

I teach seven year-old students tested and identified as gifted students. Of the eighteen students in my classroom, five percent were identified by their intelligence quotients and ninety-five percent were identified by a Metropolitan Scale for Kindergarteners. Despite participation in a self-contained, structured first grade classroom; then promotion to my second grade class I noticed that the majority of my students were under-performing academically, socially and emotionally. I wanted to know why my students' achievement in all these areas was negative and why, despite developmentally appropriate teaching and learning strategies, my students exhibited a lack of discipline, task completion and personal drive to do what they *said* they wanted to do.

Background Context

As the first three months of school progressed I observed that seventy-two percent of my students displayed off-task behaviors and that incompletion of class assignments with a myriad of excuses was their norm. I also observed

that my students had very limited listening skills and preferred a behavior management plan that utilized extrinsic rewards.

My behavior management technique followed the Social Behaviorist method. I usually taught concepts about social behaviors, discipline, peace-making techniques, bullying, friendliness and personal self-control through character education study in biblio-therapy (books), class examples, and *Berenstein Bears* videos. We were not having success with this social method of intrinsic guidelines. My principal suggested and created for me an extrinsic method of control similar to one the students had been subject to in their former year of study at our school.

I created a list of rules and consequences for breaking them and also a gauge that resembles a traffic light and posted them in our room. Every student started with a green light each school day. As a rule was broken or violated a warning was issued then the student was directed to move his or her name down the color chart of consequences. If a student committed multiple lapses of self-control in a day, a student's name pin could "drop off the chart and fall in a black hole" to signify the level of consequence that the student reached. However, this method of management bothered me for many reasons.

Such an extrinsic system of behavior management was against my teaching and management style. I had always believed that an intrinsic locus of control and direction are rewarding for any person trying to monitor his/her behavior. In the past, I had always had success applying that value to students. Even after the introduction of the extrinsic chart and consistent, methodical use of it daily, student achievement in my classroom was still very low. The majority of my students displayed no change in scholastic achievement. When they reflected on their behaviors and the consequences, they did not use positive terms to describe their experiences. I did not like the messages being conveyed in my classroom. I wanted to *empower* my students by providing then with *something to think about* and use as a guide when they were in challenging situations with their peers.

Research

Three of the Core Propositions from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards formed the core of my pursuit of a way to help my students with classroom management: 1) Teachers are committed to students

and their learning; 2) Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning, and 3) Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience. These core propositions helped me pursue successful aid for my classroom regarding our needs with class management. (NBPTS,99) Other beliefs that guided me forward in pursuit of this action research included the ideas that: "Teachers are concerned with their students' self-concept, with their motivation, with the effects of learning on peer relationships, and the development of character; teachers need to know how to encourage students even in the face of temporary failure and the inevitable doubts that students meet as they push themselves to new affective, intellectual and physical planes; because they work in a field marked by many unsolved puzzles and an expanding research base, teachers have a professional obligation to be lifelong students of their craft…" (p. 16, 24, 26).

My school district, Miami-Dade County Public Schools, has a Code of Student Conduct (October 2003) specifically for elementary students. The document is in compliance with the Florida Board of Education Board Rule 6Gx13-5D-1.08, regarding a zero tolerance policy for school-related violent crime. The Code of Student Conduct addresses alternative education and dropout prevention programs and is translated into different languages to reach the various families and languages represented in Miami-Dade County Public Schools. I felt that if there is a zero tolerance policy for violations of this code in school, and if students and their families did not always know the best behavior choices for a given situation, and if families wanted to learn these strategies, then I owed it to my students to assist them with that learning.

Art Costa's Habits of Mind (2000) was recommended to me as a potentially useful text for my endeavor. The Habits of Mind specifically span three academic areas: personal growth, creative thinking and critical thinking. The Developmental Series, Habits of Mind, teaches learned intelligent behaviors which then become automatic. Internalizing these behaviors can guide children to think skillfully. Once students work with these habits in a classroom, learn them, and are reinforced when using them, students learn to engage in problem-solving skills and work through the decision making process, thus learning to be persistent. This process is consistent with the advocacy of America's leading character education organization, the Character Education Partnership (CEP), in three of its Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education. (Lickona, PHI DELTA KAPPAN, 1998)

Provisions of the Habits of Mind program specifically meet the following three Principles: "Character" must be comprehensively defined to include thinking, feeling, and behavior;" "character education should strive to develop students' intrinsic motivation;" and "effective character education includes a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners and helps them succeed."

In Habits of Mind, Kohn critiques various programs and writings regarding character education. One of his arguments that caught my attention was his distinction between the broad and narrow kinds of character education. Kohn rates broad character education as good because it focuses on educating the culture of the school community instead of the students only. The narrow kind is bad, according to Kohn, because its moral training "relies heavily on exhortation and intrinsic incentives to get children to work harder and do what they're told". (Likona, 1998)

Development of moral reasoning is paramount to growth of character. In Why Johnny Can't Tell Right From Wrong, William Kilpatrick proposes that children learn character traits from living experiences demonstrated by adults and others around them. Learning from example and having opportunities to repeat the thinking process and new behaviors are crucial to help children develop and possess the new traits that they learn. My research project substantiated this fact in that though we utilized self-reflective discussions, Literature Circles with storybooks, daily journaling writing before and after planning and reasoning activities, one of my students was suspended two weeks before school closed and others were struggling with anger and impatience even after months of our consistent work. After a close look at my data and the close role models in one student's life, I observed that positive examples of patience and follow through for students were limited.

Learned behavior is not easily extinguished and behavior that is modeled and repeated over a lifetime is not easily replaced simply by good intentions, good teachings, or good discussions. Classical conditioning of behaviors refers to reflex behaviors that are performed automatically without thought. If a conditioned stimulus is presented without the unconditioned stimulus then the automatic conditioned response can become extinct. (Psychology Today, 1975) Psychologists believe this is why behavior that is modeled for young children is what they generally learn automatically from their closest caregivers.

Psychologist Erik Erikson used his eight psychosocial stages of development to explain the importance of crisis or successful resolution of critical periods in a person's social and mental growth. Basic trust and mistrust characterize the stage of infancy. Throughout toddler and early childhood stages, children work through resolution of autonomy or doubt and shame. If socially acceptable behaviors are achieved then the individual progresses to initiative or a reservoir of guilt. The fourth stage and middle childhood is learning and competence or a reservoir of guilt, and experiences at this stage can be interpreted as one or the other. It is for these particular reasons that I wanted to bring an energizing, empowering intrinsically motivated behavior management plan to my students. I wanted them to learn and experience successful achievement from the reasons and decisions that they chose instead of being controlled by assertive teacher behaviors only.

I loved the rationale of the sixteen habits. They were presented as intelligent behaviors and I immediately saw that they could be useful to my students and me. This was my introduction to the Habits of Mind program and it was my answer for intellectual guidelines to teach my students and lead them into an understanding of character education and knowledge. One fact that particularly inspired me was that the Habits could be linked to children's literature that my students had already read or titles that we could find in libraries or bookstores. I was excited about implementing this study with my class.

Tools

I used surveys, interviews, weekly literature review, group discussions, journal writing, teacher observations, parent observations, sociograms and exit surveys **to do what…?**

I initially surveyed the eighteen families in my classroom to find out if they saw the relevance of intrinsic behavior guidelines for the children and if they wanted their children to participate in the action research. Seventy-two percent of the families said, "yes" to both questions and gave written consent for their children to participate in the research study. Fifty-three percent of the participants were girls and forty-six percent were boys. **(Is this boy/girl info necessary?)** In Melanie Fine's, Habits of Mind (1995), Fine presented "six distinct characteristics of a morally mature person." The six characteristics were, "showing respect for human integrity; caring for the

welfare of others; integrating individual interests and social responsibilities; demonstrating integrity; reflecting on moral choices; and seeking the peaceful resolution of conflict".

I introduced that list first to my students then to their parents, surveying who they thought was responsible for developing those characteristics in young people - parents, churches, governments, or schools. Students ranked parents first, schools second, religious institutions third but did not rate or include government as being responsible for moral upbringing of young people. Their parents ranked parents as most responsible followed by schools, and they ranked religious institutions and government equally as third most responsible.

I interviewed my students before, during and after the end of the study to assess their understanding of the meanings of the habits, their interpretation of their experiences and learning of the habits of mind. I gathered the information from individuals but within our group work.

I used sociograms because the nature of my work was social and I was working with heterogeneous group of students. My seven and eight year-olds usually have conflicts and disagreements about friendship and best friends that usually escalate into pushing or hurting one another. I wanted to find out if the students' perceptions of who their best friends were and the perceptions of the supposed best friends were consistent with one another. I wondered if those people choose them first in class assignments or games. Who were the "stars" in the class and who were the "isolates" and did they see themselves as such? Did their classmates see them as they saw themselves?

I also analyzed student work samples which the students wrote in the form of journal writing. Initially when we started the project we wrote weekly after our literature circles or when students highlighted moments at home when they thought about and used Habits of Mind in decision-making. After three months of the research, I noticed that though my students were very excited about the richness of our conversations and learning, very little changes were actually reflected in the colors representing student behavior on our traffic light. This disturbed me so I decided to encourage the students by implementing a period in the morning for planning of expectations for the day and an afternoon discussion period about what really happened and how they felt about it.

Students' standardized achievement test scores (SATs) were used to indicate the passing rate and levels of student achievement for the school year.

DATA

Data from the sociogram revealed that only two boys and four girls chose each other first when they had a choice of who to work on tasks with. These were same sex friendships, which are very typical of this age group. Only two boys of the entire group chose a girl first but those girls did not choose those boys as their first choice. "Best friends" amongst boys shared things in common, called each other outside of school, and used the term "best friends" to describe themselves. "Best friends" amongst girls reported that they had good communication, that they were good at the same things, and that they attended the same aftercare classes. The majority of students who missed being chosen first by the person they hoped would choose them reasoned that they chose the person with hopes of making friends, admired the other's talent and smartness, and stated that the other was a best friend because they were partners in a P.E. class event or other activity. In relationships where students celebrated one another ("cool group", "nice to me", "problems…we work towards a solution) and had things in common ("he likes horror stuff like me", "good at a lot of the same stuff", "same class after school on Wednesday", "tricks on the monkey bars") trusted one each other and were most likely to choose that person to be a partner for class work activities. This is significant because it provides some understanding and insight into how feelings of hurt or acceptance can cause peace or conflict in the classroom or school setting.

Starting in January, we **(Who?)** met weekly for our literature circles and class discussions of Habits of Mind, our learning, progress, and challenges. I started a separate library in our classroom with books that exemplified specific habits. Students started to bring in their own personal storybooks and volunteered to say "my mother brought in I'm Sorry: Just a Piggy Bank by Mercer Meyer as demonstrating HOM #1 because the Critter was always getting into trouble but didn't give up on himself…PERSISTENCE). **(This is too unclear… It must be reworked.)**

By February during a separate reading program one student got a storybook by Eric Carle, <u>A House For Hermit Crab</u> which after reading it she came and told me that it demonstrated HOM#7 "…because the hermit crab was solving problems until it found a shell home that fit". I was getting excited about the program because my students were transferring knowledge from paper into their thinking, reasoning, reading, speech and reason for making certain decisions. I was excited because my students were Thinking about their Thinking.

Student surveys and written interviews on February 9th revealed great self-reflections and awareness among my students of the habits and of how they were incorporating them into their everyday lives at school. Results from four major categories are shared below. Which classroom behavior have you seen any change or progress with and are most pleased with? Students' written responses included "in my behavior", "staying on task", staying on green", "listening", "helping others when they are hurt", "when I get to share", "self-control", and "reading skills". Which behavior would you like to exhibit more often in school? Their responses were "getting my work done", "meeting my dreams", "I want to show peace, kindness, goodness, self-control", "show respect for myself", "be nice", "behave good", "make my school happy", "show how good I am in my report card", "help others when they get hurt", in addition to "show respect and human dignity". Another question that I will highlight is which classroom behavior do you want to change? "Being off-task", "going up and down the behavior chart", "follow rules to not get in trouble", "to be careful with my work", "impatience, I need to learn patience", "my mouth because I talk too much" were their candid responses. How will progress in habits of mind help you in the classroom? It will make me "feel free", "feel confident", help me with my behavior and good conduct", "so I can have a good day", "not go down behavior chart", "avoid negative consequences", "teach myself", "being self-controlled", "help my friends", "cooperate with friends", "learn new books", "respect and care for others", "make me more happy", "will make me feel more like to try", "I can become better at my goal-comedy for star search", "patient, I can wait and get the stuff I waited for".

In just two months of exposure to our topic, journal writing and literature study, my students had learned quite a bit of the language associated with our goals. They were internalizing the goal of the project that was to be motivated intrinsically for their measurable, exhibited behaviors. We were very pleased with the climate of the classroom atmosphere and I felt that

with this quality reasoning from my young students that we were about to experience smooth sailing.

In March we experienced what seemed like a setback and all the negative behaviors that we didn't want to return to were happening again. What was going on? Why were we experiencing déjà vu? Was this a flashback? Is it impossible to change human behavior? We realized that extinction of behavior was not as easy as two months of journal writing, reading literature and class discussions when other crucial factors were also involved in shaping our classically conditioned behaviors.

Some students were not accustomed to prolonged times of self-control and positive feedback so they felt they had reached a pinnacle, were proud of that, and reverted to familiar forms of social interactions but those did not produce the progressive changes we saw with the habits of mind. Also compounding this result or dilemma was the fact that most students did not have consistent role models of the desired outcomes outside of school. That lack limited any transfer of learning from the classroom to their other environments.

RESULTS

After eight weeks of studying, when it seemed as though our work was failing, I was left with no option but to listen to the children. They were still talking about individual habits, they were still hopeful and committed that they could be successful, so in that week's meeting, we addressed the dilemma. On March 5th their discussion included reasoning such as "because I don't want to make mistakes", "because I'm doing better; cooperating with other kids", "because first of all it's one of your ideas and all your ideas are good; also, I'm not very good with patience when things aren't done right away so I want to learn to be calm and wait; I get on my mother's last nerves and I don't want to do that again so I'll go on with Habits of Mind", "it's fun writing journal entries and drawing happy faces so I'll stay and I won't give up", "because in P.E. I'd scream at folks and get mad but I think of habit #7, Posing a Problem, then I go away", "I want to continue because I've been going a long way, in the beginning I was so-so but now I'm going up good and it helps me to mind my own business and my mother helps me with Habits of Mind", "I'm doing a lot of mind thinking now", "because I want to learn more and stop being mean to people and I want to me nice to them now".

It was obvious that my young learners were critical thinkers who used evidence from their learning of the Habits of Mind to make sound decisions to continue our action research. They proved that they were independent thinkers, not quitters, but persistent students, striving for accuracy while remaining open to continuous learning. We continued because their commitment showed me that they saw many benefits in the program for themselves.

I made adjustments. We increased our journal writing from one time a day to twice daily. We started an a.m. planning where they projected what habit they would like to achieve for that day and why. Towards the end of our work day we wrote again, p.m. planning to ascertain, did I achieve what I planned to do? This daily ritual helped the students to watch themselves closely. Eighty-five percent of the students were on-task most of the time. One hundred percent improved listening skills and obedience to rules. Thirty percent identified Thinking about Thinking, habit #5, as the habit that helped them the most to improve. Twenty percent reported that Persisting, habit #1, was responsible for their improvement. Equally at ten percent they reported that habits 6, 4, 2, 7, 3, 14 helped them the most.

Half of the students reported that Humor, habit #14, was their favorite. Remaining Open to Continuous Learning and Taking Reasonable Risks were chosen equally for thirty-three percent for being popular habits among my students. Equally at ten percent, they identified the hardest ones for them to achieve as #5, #10, #16, #7, #6 and #9.

Their performances on the standardized achievement tests, SATs 9th Edition, resulted in eighty-six percent of my students achieving 71% or higher in mathematics application. 62% of those students scored ninety percent or more. In Reading Comprehension eighty percent of the class scored 77% or higher. Student achievement was accomplished plus my students were experiencing intrinsic motivation to behave and learn instead of only relying on automatic, conditioned, familiar behaviors.

ANALYSIS

My close examination of my question was very profitable for my students and me. The results shared in this paper demonstrate that students want to learn character traits that help them become critical thinkers in their daily lives. Students and their parents want to improve the internal quality of their

lives. Young students in a nurturing, peaceful environment will thrive to meet the expectations of their teachers and leaders if the students are consistently provided with (given) the information, guidance and time that they need to develop character and academic gains. Student achievement increased, off-task behaviors and waste of time decreased, intrinsic reasons and motivation to act became more common in our classroom than prior to our research project, and above all my Gifted Students were developing characteristics associated with learners staffed into such a program. In just four months we turned our efforts and concentration towards positive self-development and that learning and engagement changed the tone of our classroom atmosphere. At the close of school for that year we had success in variable areas of our school lives.

Our program, it must be noted though, had not completely eradicated instances of violent or disruptive behavior amongst my students. Thirty percent of the research participants still struggled with anger, hitting, stabbing with a sharpened pencil, and other negative behaviors at times. Therefore, inconsistencies up and down the classroom behavior chart persisted. On May 20th, I had to attend a Teacher of the Year award ceremony and within half an hour when my assistant principal joined that meeting I was told that one student (research participant) was suspended for stabbing another student (also a research participant) with a pencil in his neck. The stabbed student kept on provoking the other with a cough and, though being asked to stop or turn away, he persisted. The other student said he felt provoked and because the other didn't stop, his anger built until he stabbed with his pencil. These two young men were the two young men in the report earlier in this paper that mutually chose each other first to work with because they were best friends. This incident showed the disadvantages students have when their early conditioned learning excludes consistent positive social responses, positive social behaviors, is characterized by mistrust, doubt, and shame, or when conflicting ideals have already been developed in the child. This suggested that a more long-lasting integration of Habits of Mind, woven throughout the elementary curriculum, might be necessary to successfully foster the types of positive behavior patterns we want students to adopt.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Curricular time should be provided in the school day, along with the three Rs, for implementation of programs such as Habits of Mind since schools in

Miami-Dade County have the Zero Tolerance Policy (breaking school rules or violating school rules). Character Education programs such as Art Costa's Habits of Mind expose students to intelligent behaviors as a means for success with the Zero Tolerance School Policy. Families of elementary students want guidelines to promote positive behaviors to empower their children to learn in school. All teachers in the school building should be using and reinforcing the Habits so students have more role models and consistent familiar expectations. Students empowered in this way will achieve more for their attendance in school. With daily consistency and teacher-student monitoring and managing, student learning and school achievement could therefore be maximized.