

Teachers as Mentors, Students as Constructors of Knowledge

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Background

- The study discussed in this paper was conducted over a six month period in one suburban school in New South Wales, Australia.
- The student participants ($n=67$) were twelve to ten year old students and their teachers ($n=3$).
- The study focused on the potential of the students to develop the cognitive capacities of executive function as defined by Moran and Gardner (2007)
- Executive function is the 'observable' component of intrapersonal intelligence, the other being self knowledge.

Study

- However, whilst the overall findings of the study were very positive in terms of the students' increased capacities relating to their executive function skills, the responses from the three teacher participants indicated that the benefits of the study were not confined to those experienced by the students.
- The nature of the intervention program required that the three teachers acted as mentors; a very different role to which they were accustomed; as described by Moran and Gardner (2007) and allowed the decisions related to task choice, completion procedures and modes of product presentation to the students.
- It created a very different classroom dynamic and it was this context that the teacher participants that the teachers acted as mentors to their students during the intervention program that was the focus of the study.

Intervention program

- The intervention program required students to select their own learning tasks from a differentiated program of work which was planned use a matrix formed by the two typologies of the taxonomy of cognitive processes developed as the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl 2000) and the Multiple Intelligence domains that constitute Multiple Intelligence Theory (Gardner 1993)
- The program comprised over 80 activities
- This intervention program was implemented in a dedicated time frame during the part of the day that was timetabled for studying English (BOS 1196).
- Each of the tasks that comprised the differentiated program of work was cross referenced with the appropriate outcomes and indicators from the mandatory curriculum document

The teachers and their experiences

- The teachers were each asked to complete an evaluation task at the midway point of the research project and at its conclusion.
- The complexities and challenges of intervention program were initially formally noted on the evaluations that the teachers completed midway through the research project.
- This evaluation tool simply comprised of a chart labelled: Pluses, Minuses and Interesting observations.
- There were comments about the high level of organisation that was required to implement the intervention program and the demands that placed on the teachers' time and energies and the difficulties of resourcing the diversity of activities that the students had self selected.
- However, all three teachers were very positive about the students' attitudes to their self selected tasks, the high level of task engagement and the degree of enjoyment with which the students planned, organised and completed their 'real' tasks. There was also a comment about the students' positive interaction with each other.

Changes

- At the conclusion of the research the themes relating to the students' degrees of engagement in, and enjoyment of, the opportunity to work on self selected tasks were again in evidence during each of the individual interviews that were conducted with the researcher.
- However, there were a number of additional comments that indicated a significant change in the relationships that the teachers had with their students.
- One teacher commented on the diverse nature of the tasks and the opportunities they afforded students to be creative. She discussed the chances the students had been offered to share their work with others and to develop respect for each others' gifts and strengths, indicating that the students had opportunities to develop a heightened sense of 'self' while remaining members of the class community.
- The multi dimensional components of the tasks were considered valuable and the teacher felt that this *'added value to the kids' own desire to learn'*.

One teachers experience

- When asked about the impact the implementation of the implementation program had on his usual role as the teacher another teacher replied *'It was a mess. I needed to restructure my classroom management strategies. But after some reflection I have a need to suit the class needs and now I haveit made me think outside the square.'*
- Having enjoyed working so closely with his students and restructuring his usual practice to meet the needs of his students, this teacher had taken ownership of the intervention program and for the final three weeks of the study had redesigned the templates, designed a flow chart for the students to follow and explicitly taught the students about organization and planning; a skill he described as *'an ongoing benefit'*.

And another....

- it was the third teacher who, unprompted, elaborated on the specific interaction that had an empowering impact on all of the teachers and students alike.
- She felt that the students benefitted from having to make decisions and choices and having to differentiate what works for each of them, as this capacity is directly related to the students' abilities to identify self relevant information.
- She particularly enjoyed the conferencing with students and having them articulate what they knew.
- She felt that much of this confirmed her insights about the students' learning and that these times were enjoyable and valuable for teacher and students.

- This teachers' perceptions that the conferencing sessions were '*valuable*' were supported by the validation she offered.
- The specific benefits of these conferencing times with the students that the teacher nominated were that she could negotiate at least one aspect of each task with the students individually, that she did not have to tell the students the next step – she could ask '*What do you think?*' and the students could talk about their tasks.

She realized that the students had developed competencies in specific literacy skills such as considerable improvement in their comprehension skills and a much improved understanding of writing a task for a specific audience.

They also had become adept at talking about their strategies for problem solving.

She felt that there were considerable benefits for the students, specifically in planning their strategies, taking the ownership of their work, their abilities to think independently, their capacities to make choices, the ability to participate in discussions and their plans for how to showcase their work.

Her concluding comment was that she *'was priviedged to work in this way with such a wonderful group of students'*

The conferencing...

- The one- to -one work focused discussions in which teachers engaged with their students over the six month period began to reflect the key components of any mentoring program .
- The collegial interaction, specialist support and respectful negotiation that characterised these ‘conferences’ allowed the teachers to recognise their students, not only as learners in their classes, but as organisers, strategists and constructors of their own knowledge.
- Before the end of the research intervention the three teachers were planning their own intervention program for implementation during the following year.



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