

Creating a Culture of Thinking that Cultivates the Perspective-Taking Disposition

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Abstract: Through action research, the researchers engaged a group of third grade children in a project that offered a variety of learning activities to develop the children's perspective-taking ability. As a result the teachers found a significant increase in the emotional connection of the students to the characters in the literature.

I know what it means to feel what someone else is feeling. I just pop out my heart and pop in theirs. This is empathy and it connects me to the people in my life and to the characters in the stories I read.

Robert, Age 8

Preparing our students to participate fully in today and tomorrow's world demands that we develop their global competence. In order to do this, we must cultivate within our students a disposition of understanding and compassion and nurture their ability to recognize multiple perspectives. Educating for global competence presents educators with important challenges, most importantly, helping students to break through their own cultural perspective and genuinely understand people from different contexts. In order for our students to understand their role as global citizens, they need to be able to perceive, know about, and care about the point of view of themselves and of other citizens.

Learning for global citizenship is a priority and responsibility that educators have to address. Consequently, it is imperative to keep in perspective the goals for children's social and moral development in order to nurture understandings that ensure lifelong learning experiences. Changes in students thinking will happen only when they understand the underlying causes and effects of good citizenship and social responsibility.

Theoretical Background

Empathy and cultural sensitivity develop early in life when children are exposed to and afforded the opportunity to understand global issues that affect them and other people in their homes, schools, community, and world. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1986) states that the child's environment on development and learning must be broadened to understand the environments where children live. His theory highlights a child's development within the context of the system of relationships that form this environment. It is also true that children learn best about the social world in meaningful contexts and, in this case, understanding self and family as well as understanding people and society. Immordino-Yang and Damasio's (2007) research into the physiological systems that support social interaction and emotion, points out the important role of culture (the culture of our classrooms) in shaping neural and behavioral responses such as admiration and awe. It has been confirmed that social and moral thought emerge as functions of the interactions between the body and the mind in social and cultural

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contexts. The implications of this mind brain research on education require that we address what it means to be a “good person” and a “good citizen” Gardner (2007). As educators we must listen to the advice of Howard Gardner (2011), and model these positive virtues ourselves, while cultivating them in our students. In order to accomplish this goal, we need to cultivate within our students a disposition of understanding and compassion. We need to nurture their ability to recognize multiple perspectives so that they can develop their own ethical compasses to navigate by as they engage the world.

Scholars (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2008; Ritchhart et al., 2011) state that when teachers make thinking visible, they not only have access to students understanding, but also to how they understand concepts. A growing body of evidence supports the efficacy of deliberately nurturing children’s thinking abilities and encouraging their understanding of what thinking is (Perkins, 1992; Ritchhart et al., 2009; Salmon & Lucas, 2011).

For Perkins (1992) learning is a consequence of thinking, thus it is important to develop thinking dispositions in children in a way that helps them to be more flexible in the way they think about themselves and about others. Social mediation provides children with meaningful and appropriate cognitive and language experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). One way of implementing this theory is through the implementation of the Visible Thinking Routines (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2008) within the social context of a classroom culture.

The ability to take perspectives and to see things from different angles is becoming increasingly important as our world becomes even more globalized. Standards of good citizenship and social awareness are developed when children are taught to understand the “why” and “how” to become effective change agents in society. Educating for global competence presents educators with important challenges, in particular helping students break through their own cultural perspective and genuinely understand the perspectives of people from different contexts. In order to do this, we must cultivate in our students a disposition of understanding and compassion and nurture their ability to recognize multiple perspectives, thus enabling them to become inquisitive and proactive (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2011). While global competence is best seen as an integrated outlook on the world and not a collection of skills, as we attempt to educate our students for global competence, it becomes necessary to start by addressing the second global competency: recognizing perspectives at the onset. The disposition to recognizing perspectives is a prerequisite to understanding and applying the other three global competencies (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2011): (a) investigating the world beyond our immediate environment, (b) communicating ideas effectively with diverse audiences, and (c) taking actions to improve conditions. Therefore, it is essential that we start with cultivating the perspective taking disposition so that are students are capable of engaging effectively with the other three global competencies.

Immordino-Yang’s (2007) research supports integrating and respecting the power that emotion can yield toward greater understanding. By looking to our museum counterparts and weaving practices unique to the museum experience, we have been able to expose our students to additional tools that complement our use of Visible Thinking Routines (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2008) and better assess our students’ progress and development toward thinking.

Knowing oneself, or being aware of one’s platform, is a necessary element toward developing the skill of perspective taking or the ability to discern a point of view which may be foreign/different from one’s personal viewpoint. This is an essential first step toward cultivating in our students a disposition of understanding and compassion that nurtures their ability to recognize multiple perspectives.

Ongoing Action Research Study

This is an ongoing action research study that includes a pilot enrichment course as a follow-up to the initial action research project. Action research is a powerful tool to help teachers become more conscious of their practices and realize how their practice reveals who they are (Salmon, 2010b). As a natural extension and follow up to the initial study, the authors created an after-school enrichment class aptly titled *My World, Your World*. The purpose of the class was to pilot a more in-depth course of study independent of but supplementing the current curriculum.

Creating a laboratory classroom with the conditions necessary for pushing students' thinking forward is often a goal for teachers dedicated and committed toward the development of deeper understanding. However, this endeavor is not always feasible, given the multiple objectives, standards, and requirements that must be accomplished within specified time frames. After-school enrichment programs and classes provide viable alternatives for educators looking to establish environments in which they have greater autonomy to create ideal conditions for learning that meet specific understanding goals.

Through identity texts, literacy engagement, discussions, and concrete activities involving different types of perspective-taking, students were able to discern connections and association, become more aware of perspective (both literal and figurative), recognize the value of seeing another's point-of-view, and understand themselves just a little bit more.

A singular feature of this course offering was the utilization of strategies characteristic of museum-based learning. Museums are a unique learning environment in comparison to classrooms. With access to historic documents, images, and collection items, young visitors are not only exposed to primary resources as learning tools but also are surrounded by specific and intentional, guided connections to history. Much of the learning that takes place within museums involves the power of looking, the power of perspective, or that initial observation that draws a visitor to a work of fine art, a cultural artifact, or an unfamiliar object.

Thinking Routines

Thinking Routines (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2008), that are geared toward the use of visual images, such as Zoom In, were weaved into classroom instruction to enable the students to experience images in ways that build their perspective-taking ability. The authors incorporated images directly related to the literature to which they have previously been exposed. Imagery reinforces the learning that comes as a result of analysis of literary texts. However, the power of image, when used to provoke further thought, adds a layer to understanding by tapping into the affective experience of the learner.

The authors were being strategic in creating and optimizing the learning experience through instructional variables that sought to value, support, and emphasize the perspective-taking ability. This was achieved through a variety of mediums that allowed students to develop this disposition intellectually in ways that are developmentally appropriate. For those students who struggle with this ability, activities that are concrete and involve a perspective from a realistic and three-dimensional angle work well. We alternated from the conceptual to the real.

As learning outcomes the students became acquainted with Harvard's Project Zero Visible Thinking approach and the use of thinking routines (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2008; Salmon, 2010a). Routines are a necessary and integral component of classroom settings. For young children, the repetition of routines contributes to creating a sense of comfort and understanding about the world and how it operates. Routines are particularly significant within early childhood

environments, providing the structures in which even the youngest students thrive and learn. Within any classroom culture, various routines are used to accomplish specific goals. Within this study Visible Thinking Routines specifically designed to cultivate the perspective-taking disposition were utilized.

Thinking Routines from Project Zero offer a defined sequence of actions that lead to making meaning and at the same time highlight the thinking process (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2008; Salmon, 2010a). For example, the children were encouraged to share what they perceive, know, care about a character, event, problem, or object as they explore diverse perspectives and viewpoints. When modeled and used consistently, routines such as perceive, know, care about became a natural approach to thinking that students were able to apply independently.

Through these learning experiences and frequent exposure to and practice in Perspective Taking-Centered Routines students have cultivated their disposition to recognize multiple perspectives. They have developed a better understanding of themselves and others enabling them to better understand what it means to be a global citizen.

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this case study was to explore the best possible practices of educating students in the four global competencies (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2011) as well as how and to what extent frequent exposure to and practice in Perspective Taking-Centered Routines (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2008) could cultivate in them the disposition to recognize multiple perspectives and to foster the development of empathy and deeper understanding of others. The authors' hope was to demonstrate that direct instruction in Perspective Taking Routines would cultivate in their students the perspective-taking disposition and increase their level of empathy and deeper understanding of others.

Teachers with the intention of cultivating the perspective-taking disposition in their students began by making their students thinking visible in an effort to uncover their understanding of the concept of peace, kindness, and global citizenship.

Setting and Participants

The setting was a 3rd grade classroom of 18 students in a suburban independent school. The participants included 18 students, 9 female and 9 male ranging in age from 8 to 10. The 18 students are of middle class socio-economic status. The two female teachers involved in this project are acquainted in Project Zero's Visible Thinking approach and the Teaching for Understanding Framework.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data from Student Pre- and Post- Perspective Taking Routine Questionnaires where students rated protagonists and antagonists in the story they were reading: "I believe Despereaux is a good mouse and a good citizen" was disaggregated by gender to dismiss the presumption that the female students might "feel sorry" for the characters and have a tendency to be "more emotional" in their responses. Methods of data collection utilized in this study include observations of students' dialogues and routine protocols by teachers. Observations were recorded over the research period (3 weeks). Teachers worked directly with students modeling perspective taking routines and the dispositional perspective taking they foster.

Each teacher and student completed a survey that documented his or her attitude, understanding, and development of the perspective-taking disposition. The survey was administered three times over the course of the study. Student and teacher reflective diaries were kept to document and evaluate participants' progress in perspective taking as well as their

inclination to engage in the disposition. Student and teacher self-assessment measures were given as pre and post documentation.

Findings

One of the initial trends included that 13 of the 18 student post responses followed a pattern of changing from *I agree* or *I disagree* to *I strongly agree* or *I strongly disagree*. There was also a pattern of increased student written explanations of their choices and within these explanations 15 of the 18 students directly stated how the character made them *feel* and referred to a situation within their own life when they were made to feel the same way. A trend was noted in the post questionnaire of no student response *I am not sure*. The research findings were shared with the students themselves. Both the pre and post test questionnaires were returned to the students who were asked to share their interpretation first. After an audiotaped class discussion, the authors shared the formal interpretation of the study results with the group of children.

A significant increase was found in the emotional connection of the students to the characters in the literature they read as indicated by 15 out of 18 students stating *I felt like Despereaux when... Despereaux's mother makes me feel...* (Di Camillo, 2003). In the pre test questionnaire only four students used the word *feeling* or referred to how the character *feels* and none of them referred to how these characters *make them feel*. In the post questionnaire, 15 of the 18 students use the words *feeling* or referred to how the character *feels*.

Of the 15 post test questionnaire students utilizing the words *feel* and *feelings*, 13 students provided examples from their own lives of when they were made to feel the same way. The decision to disaggregate the group pointed out that emotional responses were not significantly related to gender. All nine of the male students referred to their *feelings* and how the characters make them *feel* while only six of the females referred to *feelings* at all.

Discussion and Conclusion

Preliminary findings lead the authors to believe that frequent exposure to and practice in Perspective Taking Centered Routines (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2008) does cultivate in students a disposition to recognize multiple perspectives and to foster the development of empathy and deeper understanding of others. Immordino-Yang and Damasio's (2007) research supports integrating and respecting the power that emotion can yield toward greater understanding. The data reveals that the teachers were able to cultivate the perspective-taking disposition in their students who began to verbally uncover their understanding of the concept of peace, kindness, and friendship.

By looking to museum counterparts and weaving practices unique to the museum experience, the authors were able to facilitate students' engagement and to enhance their progress and development. For Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007), the physiological systems that support social interaction and emotion point out the important role of culture (the culture of the classrooms) in shaping neural and behavioral responses such as admiration and awe. It has been confirmed that social and moral thought emerge as functions of the interactions between the body and mind in the social and cultural contexts. The implications of this mind-brain research on education require that we address what it means to be a "good person" and a "good citizen". It requires that we cultivate within our students the perspective-taking disposition so that they are capable of listening with understanding and empathy to their fellow citizens.

As educators, we must listen to the advice of Howard Gardner (2011), and model these positive virtues ourselves, while cultivating them in our students, so that they can develop their own ethical compasses to navigate by as they engage the world. By enhancing our students' disposition to recognize the perspectives of others' as well as their own, we are educating them for global competence and preparing them to engage the world.

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