

ACTIVATING AND ENGAGING HABITS OF MIND

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CREATING “THOUGHTFUL” CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS

ARTHUR L. COSTA AND BENA KALLICK

I am looking at a behavior called persistence. It means like people that never give up. For an example, Christopher Columbus sailed to the Indies to look for gold. He kept on going back to the Indies to search for gold. He never found it. But the thing he did, he never gave up looking for it. That's what persistence means.

And another book I read is Katy and the Big Snow. One day it was snowing bad and the snow was about 18 inches tall. The whole town couldn't get out of their houses because the snow was covering it. When Katy saw all the snow she decided to take all the snow out. It took her one day to clean up the snow. She didn't sleep. She didn't even get tired. She never stopped taking out all the snow. I learned that people who never give up are very brave.

Student at Hidden Valley Elementary School
Burnsville, Minnesota

We begin this second book in Habits of Mind: A Developmental Series by considering classrooms and schools where the habits of mind already flourish. How have these educators created thoughtful environments where students encounter, think about, and develop habits of mind? Specifically, how have teachers created environments where children discover the habits of mind in the characters of a novel or describe them through the heroes of history? How have teachers helped children gain insight about their own habits of mind based on what they've learned from others? Exactly what characterizes these kinds of rich learning environments?

A DEEPLY HELD BELIEF

In classrooms where the habits of mind succeed, we find a deeply held belief that all students can continue to develop and improve. For many years, educators and parents alike believed that thinking skills programs were intended to challenge the intellectually gifted. Indeed, some thought that any child whose IQ fell below a certain score was doomed to remedial work or compensatory drill-and-practice. Much research, however, with hydrocephalic, Down syndrome, senile, and brain-damaged persons demonstrates that almost anyone can achieve amazing growth in intelligent behavior with proper intervention (Feuerstein, Feuerstein, & Schur, 1997).

In classrooms where the habits of mind succeed, we also find a belief that the habits of mind aren't just "kid stuff." Teachers, parents, and administrators can also monitor and modify their own habits of mind, such as managing impulsivity, thinking about thinking (metacognition), listening with understanding and empathy, and thinking flexibly. We never fully master the habits of mind. Though we begin work with the habits as children, we continue to develop and improve them throughout our lives.

HABITS OF MIND AS GOALS

Students often expend great amounts of energy trying to figure out a teacher's intentions. In classrooms where the habits of mind succeed, teachers make one intention explicit: Mastering the habits of mind is the goal of students' education. They also help students see that the responsibility for thinking is theirs.

Students grasp that mastering the habits of mind is a classroom goal when thinking becomes the content. They come to understand that having more than one solution to a problem is desirable. They see that it is commendable when they take time to plan for and reflect on an answer rather than respond impulsively. They also learn that it is desirable to change an answer with additional information.

IT TAKES TIME

In most schools, educational innovations are seldom institutionalized: "Last year we did performance standards, and the year before it was mis-

sion statements.” Many educators believe the “thinking movement” has been succeeded by the “authentic assessment” movement, not realizing that thinking is central to the authentic practices they now pursue so fervently. Experience tells us it takes about three to four years of well-defined instruction with qualified teachers and carefully constructed curriculum materials for the habits of mind to “succeed.” After three or four years in a school, we’ve started to observe significant and enduring changes in students’ behavior.

If students are to “habituate” the habits of mind, they must encounter them again and again throughout the elementary and secondary years in every subject and in every classroom. Educators must teach the habits of mind and thinking skills directly. We know that the amount of time on task affects students’ academic learning. This relationship also is true for acquiring thinking skills. When thinking becomes a goal of instruction, teachers and administrators place greater value on learning activities that stimulate cognitive processes.

Time is also an issue because some students come from homes, classrooms, or schools where the habits of mind are not valued. These children can be dismayed by and resistant to a teacher’s invitations to use the habits. Time and consistent instruction are necessary to overcome this reluctance.

A RICH, RESPONSIVE ENVIRONMENT

Students must work in a rich, responsive environment if they are to make the habits of mind their own. They need access to a variety of resources that they can manipulate, experience, and observe. For example, the classroom should be filled with a variety of data sources: books, encyclopedias, almanacs, videos, CD-ROMs, and databases. Do students have contact with knowledgeable people in the community? Or can they contact others through the Internet to explore theories and test ideas? Field trips are important, too, not just for their content but because they provide students opportunities to plan for and reflect on learning.

Thanks to technology, the world beyond the school isn’t as far away as it once was. Students manage more information and resources than ever before. As they move into adulthood, they will need the discipline of the habits of mind to guide their higher education and their careers. A rich, responsive classroom environment helps prepare them for all these experiences.