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What's a Teacher to Do?

Ben teaches second grade—a heterogeneous bilingual classroom in a large district. His assignment in a graduate class was to conduct action research. There was never any question what Ben would do. He was concerned about the academic performance and motivation of two gifted but underachieving Hispanic boys. Both students had been identified as gifted the previous year based upon high scores on standardized and nonverbal tests and teacher and parent recommendations. Each of them demonstrated high cognitive ability both mathematically and verbally. But, Ben had a problem.

After nearly a full year in the second grade class, both students have shown varying degrees of interest in learning and self-discipline. There was an apparent discrepancy between their scores on standardized tests and their actual performance on daily work in the classroom. They quite often seemed to coast and attempt to get by with the barest minimum of effort.

Ben's frustration was the conundrum of high potential vs. underachievement. These students could outperform all the other children in the class in both Language 1 and Language 2 (English and Spanish). But, they were often bored and spent their time daydreaming or drawing.

This probably sounds all too familiar to many of us who have worked with gifted students. We are also familiar with the research, which says that “untreated” underachievement becomes an

entrenched behavior, one that is increasingly difficult to correct. Fortunately, Ben wasn't ready to let that happen! He wanted to discover what could be done to help them achieve greater academic success, and instead of berating the children—such a temptation when we know they can “do better”—he determined to study what might happen if he could create a better atmosphere for learning, one “in which they might willingly engage and self-motivate to higher academic standards?” One of Ben's insights related to the importance of motivation. As he reviewed research in this area, he concluded that no matter how one defined it, motivation was an essential part of learning.

He also looked at the underachievement literature. He discovered that it was important for underachieving students to have teachers willing to give them individual attention and show personal interest (Zentall, Moon, Hall, & Grskovic, 2001, p. 510). Other insights included the need to match instruction to the individual student and to provide a “supportive or ‘effective’ learning environment” (Heller, 1999, p. 14). Ideally, the teacher should be “flexible . . . allow[ing] for discovery learning where the student is allowed to pursue topics of interest . . . [using] self-selected material and exploration” (Heller, p. 14).

So, what did Ben decide to do? He determined to give the boys two different kinds of assignments. “The first would be traditional, teacher-directed, theme-based assignments as a normal course of study for the class. . . . The second would be a self-selected, self-directed . . . independent research

project.” Each student had free choice to select a topic; while little structure was given, they were expected to become experts and teach the class. They had class time to work and were also encouraged to work at home, using the library and the Internet. Ben reported that “for the most part, the students did all the work for themselves with minimal input from teachers or parents.”

Ben confided that initially he was only cautiously optimistic, fearing that the students wouldn't be able to sustain their studies and conduct in-depth research requiring “a greater use of vocabulary and linguistic ability than had been demonstrated in the classroom prior to the initiation of the project.” He was also concerned about assessment of their learning. Early on, however, the students seemed highly motivated and energized. This was the first time this year that the students seemed to sit and work independently with such intensity. He was encouraged by what he saw. As the time drew near for their presentations, the boys were very excited. There was disparity in the quality of the presentations and in the linguistic skills the students demonstrated. Ben observed that

One student particularly impressed me with his detailed explanation of wolves and their habits. He spent quite a bit of time explaining in great detail what he had learned. This was far beyond anything I had seen from this student to date. The other student had obviously put a lot of time into learning about crocodiles but had limited success when it came to present his project. . . . He seemed to be more reserved and attempted to read more of his material

directly from his poster. Nonetheless, I don't believe his reticence in oral presentation should be interpreted as lack of learning. His shyness is obvious at other times as well.

What did Ben conclude? “Not much changed during the 5-week project in terms of student output, creativity, or achievement” on the standard classroom assignment, he observed.

The self-directed project, however, seemed to be a huge success. The students exhibited greater persistence, drive, interest, creativity, and more dynamic creation of product. They were obviously more motivated to learn and work hard to accomplish the things in which they had interest. It apparently was not as motivating to do the teacher-selected work. In terms of quantity, quality, and motivation, the self-selected project seemed to be more effective. The students' self-report also indicated a higher interest level in doing this style of task.


Not only did the two students have a meaningful learning experience, but so did Ben. In fact, his action research demonstrated the difference a teacher can make—one who views students as individuals, who gives them personal interest, and is involved. Ben *was* that teacher who is supportive and flexible in creating a dynamic learning environment that allows for self-selection and exploration. Ben concluded his study by saying that

As teachers, our pedagogical models must adapt to include

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more creative means of challenging our students to interact between their own interests and the academic content of the classroom. We must provide positive learning environments where experimentation may be allowed and encouraged. We must get outside the box and plan lesson instruction in innovative ways that involve the learners in focused output . . . based on the academic content of our classes.

I think Ben is already taking his own advice! Don't you agree?*

*Would you like to talk to Ben? If so, contact me at khargrov@smu.edu, and I'll put you in touch with him. 

References

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