At A Crossroads ---

Teaching Intermediate Students

“Habits” for Lifelong Success

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Description of the Teaching Context

As a Professional Development School (PDS) Intern through Penn State, I am currently working in a fourth grade self contained classroom at Easterly Parkway Elementary School. With a class of 24 students, ten girls and fourteen boys, I have experienced many different behaviors and scenarios this year. My classroom includes three Chinese students, two of whom are still currently enrolled in ESL, one Indian student, one Brazilian student, and one Autistic student. There are five students enrolled in Title 1 reading, three in Title 1 Math, two in Speech, and two who have auditory processing disorders. About a third of the class comes from lower socioeconomic status.

Academically, there is a wide ability level range. High level achievers make up 12/24 of our students (50%). They produce high quality work, have prior knowledge that they make connections to, great support systems at home, test in the advanced and high proficient levels on PSSAs and district assessments. Middle level achievers make up 4/24 of our students (16%). They are hard workers for the most part but do not necessarily always produce accurate work. They place in the mid to low proficient levels on the PSSAs and district assessments with a few exceptions here and there. Low level achievers make up 8/24 of our students (33%). Seven of the eight receive Title 1 services or Learning Support. The eighth student has the ability to produce mid-level work but lacks the responsibility and motivation and therefore does not put forth the effort. These students place in the basic or below basic levels on PSSAs and district assessments with few exceptions in the low proficient level.
In this fourth grade classroom, I noticed early in the year that my students were entering a time in their lives where big decisions were going to be made. Most of them had older brothers and sisters and were entering the “middle school” phase at an early time. I feel that this is the time when students begin to find their friends for the remainder of their schooling days and hopefully they choose the right ones.

**Description of the 16 Habits of Mind**

My mentor and I discussed many different ways to teach our students and guide them down the right “paths of life”. My mentor remembered a sort of curriculum used at one of her former schools called *The 16 Habits of Mind*. It is research based by Costa and Kallick and includes 16 different ‘habits’ that encourage students to think about themselves and others around them. (Please see Appendix A for a complete list and short description of each habit.) The habits could easily be immersed into the curriculum and were put in understandable and age appropriate terms. The habits of mind apply to all of the disciplines of school as well as personal and social aspects of life. These are critical skills in our world today because young adults are expected to enter the work world with skills that allow them to be productive, critical thinkers who can also work well with others in a reflective way. The way that we presented them allow our young students to comprehend and make connections to their own lives in order to understand and comprehend a sophisticated concept. Also, there was a method to how we introduced each habit. We used a five-step process for each habit. First was articulation, where we explained the habits so we knew the students understood
them. The second was scaffolding; giving the students examples and connections that make sense to them. Thirdly, we encouraged our students to use the habits in school and in their lives. The reflection aspect came by giving them opportunities to reflect upon the meaning and how they have used them. Lastly, we celebrated our students’ use of and understanding of the habits (by them recognizing them in each other).

I chose to teach a new habit weekly. I used the habits in a different order then they’re written on purpose. I chose the habit of the week based on things in the classroom, our units, and the attitudes of the students. They were introduced at the same time each week and the students were unaware of all of the habits until the last week. The students received a bright yellow card, about the size of half a sheet of paper, and were given a label each week with the new habit and a description on it after it was learned. These cards were to be taken home and shared with parents. Throughout the rest of the week, the students filled out “golden tickets” when they saw other students (or themselves) displaying these habits. The tickets were shared each Friday morning at Morning Meeting and celebrated. There were posters with each habit on them that were left on the board throughout the weeks (we added one each week). After a habit was taught, we tried to infuse it into the curriculum. We would bring them up and compare them to what we were learning if applicable. This allowed the students to be reminded of them constantly.
Wonderings and Questions

Main Wondering:

My inquiry focuses on the social curriculum as well as the character education of upper elementary grade levels.

“How can we teach children habits that contribute to their lifelong success?”

Sub-Wonderings:

• How is it beneficial to teach character values in school to supplement the character education students are receiving at home?

• Does this improve their learning: academically, socially, emotionally? If so, which?

• Does teaching and embedding these character traits in the curriculum change how they view themselves? Is it positive?

• Is “character education” more important today as opposed to ten years ago?

Data Collection

Clear Description:

I used data collection before, during, and after I put my inquiry into action. I used the data to see how my students’ behaviors changed, if they changed at all.
Before:

Prior to the first teaching of a habit, we gave our class a survey. I was curious to see what my students thought of themselves before they knew the habits and before they understood they should be looking for them. (The survey was based on a scale from one to five, strongly disagree to strongly agree.) There were sixteen questions for the sixteen habits and each habit was put into a positive situation related to the students. (See Appendix C for student pre-survey.)

During:

During the teaching of the sixteen habits, I thought it was important to follow up each week with the students about how they felt about the habit and have discussions. We discussed the habits each Friday by celebrating the tickets. These were helpful to me because I was able to see which habits students were recognizing in each other as well as themselves. It also allowed me to see which habits weren't be showcased enough and needed to be reviewed. There was a group of my students that loved to add tickets, while there were other students that rarely put in tickets. This was interesting to see which of my students took to this idea quickly and which needed a little more push. (See Appendix D for a few examples of tickets written by students.)

We also sent home a parent letter asking parents to talk with their child about the weekly habits. We explained exactly what we would be doing and how we wanted help from home. We asked parents to inform us if they saw their child displaying these at home. (To see parent letter, refer to Appendix E.)
Also, I asked the students to write reflections on these habits. They wrote throughout the process, which allowed for me to see growth from Week 1 to Week 16. Because my class is full of authors, I thought my students would enjoy these reflective journals because they could write about their feelings but I found that some students gave me more in depth reflections while some simply wrote down a few sentences. I realized later that even though some of my students only wrote down sentences, they were deep sentences that allowed me to see a little bit more into their ideas about these habits. (See Appendix F for excerpts of student reflections and quotes.)

One week, students had to think about exactly what they felt like when they used a habit. Instead of having them write, we asked them to draw a comic strip about a situation when they used this habit. These comic strips allowed me to see how and when my students were using the habits. They used previous habits and incorporated them into the current habit we were working on and this showed me a retaining of knowledge. (See Appendix G for student comic strips.)

I received an email from a parent during the teaching of the habits that encouraged my inquiry a little bit more. The parent discussed how much they, and their student, were enjoying the habits. It encouraged discussions at home as well. (See Appendix H for parent email.)

After receiving the email from the parents, I decided to ask them for an interview. I asked them if I could question them prior to their son’s conference. They answered all questions honestly and are the basis of evidence for one of my claims. (See Appendix I for transcribed quotes.)
After:

The post survey given to the students is exactly the same as the survey given pre-teaching. The only difference is the students were asked to explain how they felt about the situation expressed. They were asked if they knew which habit they could use for the situation.

Explanations of Findings: Claims and Evidence

Claim #1: Students responded positively to the teaching of the habits, socially and as a community.

My students responded very positively to the teaching of the habits. Throughout the course of this study, they were consistently celebrating and pointing out each others’ showcases of the habits. Students responded in reflective paragraphs when asked how they felt about the habits. The responses were positive and accepting. The students showed great interest in continuing to learn the habits as well as put them into practice. See Appendix E for student quotes on their views of the habits.

We also observed the students discussing the habits and using them for social situations. After we taught the students “Listening with Understanding and Empathy”, we noticed them trying to work out their problems and conflicts on their own instead of coming straight to the teachers. They began to talk about their
conflicts and work them out by looking at each situation from the other person’s point of view.

Claim #2: Parents reacted positively to the teaching of the habits and acknowledged the benefits of the habits.

The parents were definitely supportive throughout this process and some even became involved in the classroom. My hope was that parents would be shown the yellow card and the students would talk to them and reflect on what they learned in school. This would hopefully be a wonderful discussion starter and topic for at home conversations.

In an email from one happy parent, they stated, “...When I try to tell (my child) stuff like this I sometimes feel like he isn’t listening. But he definitely listens to you!” For the full email, please see Appendix H.

The same parent agreed to an interview prior to their child’s Spring conference. Please see Appendix I for quotes from the interview.

Claim #3: Students assessment scores improved due to the teaching of habits such as, “Striving for Accuracy”, “Metacognition”, and “Persistence”.

As stated above, my class was very split when based on ability. After teaching the habits, some of my students assessment scores exceeded anything they’d ever seen. For example, Student A is a Title 1 student who usually scores a Basic maybe a low Proficient on district assessments. On the Spring Reading assessment, Student A scored an Advanced. It was such a far jump from the
assessment in January that when I looked at my notes, I noticed that Student A had been exhibiting all of the habits throughout the course of the inquiry.

I also noticed that a high achieving student in my class who frequently made careless mistakes due to rushing began to increase their scores due to double and triple checking tests and assessments.

One student also wrote in a reflection, “I use Metacognition a lot in my math homework when it tells me to show how I could do it in another way, then if I get a different answer I think about how I got it the first time and if its really right.”

**Reflection and Implications for Teaching**

I will absolutely continue to teach my students the habits of mind. They can be adapted for any grade level. While I believe these Habits are ideal for students at the intermediate and upper intermediate age, they could be taught at any time and hopefully retained throughout schooling.

I believe my students benefitted greatly from the teaching of these habits. They’ve gotten stronger as a classroom community through the celebrations of the habits as well as the observations of their classmates.

If I could go back and do it again...I would start at the beginning of the year. I would teach them every other week as opposed to every week. Though I think it’s important to have the time scheduled in, I think it is also important to stretch the teaching our as long as possible. I might even teach them all before Winter Break and then start over after Winter Break, taking them a little deeper with their understanding. I would use these habits for goal setting conferences, potentially
creating a goal for each habit. If I were teaching in a fourth grade classroom again, I would start a reflective journal at the beginning of the process and have my students reflect on how they feel they did with the habit of the week. While we do have the tickets to celebrate how we see peers doing with the habits, I wish I had more data on how the students felt they were doing with the habits themselves. I would have my students create a book about the habits, something that could be added to like the yellow card. Each page of the book could have the title of the habit at the top with one box for an illustration and one box for a paragraph. That way, all learning styles are incorporated.

One important note to discuss is the fact that nothing needed to be eliminated from our daily routines. We were still able to have morning meeting and fit everything into our day. The teaching of the habits of mind didn’t take away from academic time. They were taught each week during morning meeting on Tuesday. After each habit was taught, I noticed my students, as well as myself, tried to incorporate the habits into every subject and lesson. Sometimes it was planned, usually it wasn’t.

I noticed my students gravitating to certain habits that they noticed more often than others. They noticed, but also needed to be reminded of, managing impulsivity the most. The students were always proud when they noticed themselves striving for accuracy. This was a popular one that was recorded for golden tickets.

One more thing that should be mentioned is that while I’m presenting this information and making claims based on the data I have currently, this is a
continuing inquiry. We haven’t taught our students all of the habits yet and will continue to assess the students’ learning. Hopefully the habits will have even more positive influence on their futures.

In conclusion, I will continue to teach my future classes Costa and Kallick’s 16 Habits of Mind. I’ve even started questioning the different effects these teachings would have on students from urban backgrounds or rural backgrounds. The students I worked with are all from sub-urban to rural backgrounds. I’ll collect data next year as well to see the differences in school population and their acceptance of the habits.