

Nerin Kabaalioglu's Development Work Active learning in a Grade 3 classroom at Orhan Gazi School, Istanbul

Nerin is a Grade 3 teacher¹ who identifies herself as someone who loves teaching, children and self-development. She always seeks opportunities to participate in professional development activities. She works in a school where students come from a low socio-economic background. She was concerned that students were not taking responsibility for their own learning; they were not showing enough interest in learning and seemed quite passive in lessons. She wanted to grow students who are hungry for learning and discovery. She wanted active learners, who are critical, innovative and intellectual.

Nerin started her development work, reading widely about 'active learning' (Watkins, Carnell and Lodge, 2007), 'multiple intelligences' (Gardner, 1983, 1993 and 1999) and 'differentiated instruction' (Tomlinson, 1999). She found a survey instrument focusing on active learning and applied it in her classroom. It confirmed that her lessons were not engaging and challenging enough and some students were bored. She realised that the students were not to blame and it was quite understandable that they should behave like this. Once she became more aware of this, she was able to see clearly that some students were drawing or daydreaming during the lesson. She started to take note of the behaviours that told her when students are really bored. She also realised that her taking the centre stage was pushing students to be passive. She said to herself 'it is not about me teaching. It is about them learning'.



She arranged a discussion session with her students. She asked them why they were bored, what their interests were and what kinds of activities they wanted. Students suggested activities they would enjoy. She was surprised to find out

¹ Grade 3 – students are 8-9 years old

how much students are aware of their own preferences. Every student was different. She discussed what she found out about her class in a staff meeting and others suggested that she could design activities according to each student's intelligence. She found a multiple intelligences profiling tool and used it with her class. This told her about the different ways in which students learn most easily.

She was aware that, if she was going to change her teaching style, she would need to design the learning environment accordingly. Active learning required a different context and a different set of rules. She first established some ground rules with students. Then she changed the seating arrangements so that students could form groups of four and five. She designed different activities for each group. She did not randomly design activities. She asked students what topics and subject areas they have difficulty with. She designed activities around these topics.

She immediately saw that the energy level increased in the classroom and students seemed to be taking more responsibility. However, she saw another problem: parents were not promoting active learning at home and were 'killing their creativity'. She invited all the parents to a meeting in which she talked about active learning and multiple intelligences. The parents were very impressed and started to pay more attention to their children's learning. Then she did something that was very unusual in her situation; she wrote a report every week to parents about what their children had done in school and how the parents could support them in a way that would consolidate their learning.

She had been trying to influence her colleagues in the school, but something happened that accelerated this process. Her students' parents talked to other parents, who, in turn talked to their children's teacher. They then began to ask her about what she had been doing. She responded enthusiastically and shared her activities with other teachers.

For Nerin, it had not been easy to design these activities. In taking the development work forward she needed support from her colleagues. She began to ask them what they were doing and what activities they could suggest. She also realised that she should ask students to help her to design activities. She was surprised to discover just how much students can teach their teacher. She realised that 'I need my students as much as they need me!'

In order for this way of working to become embedded in the school Nerin knew that she had to influence others. She persuaded colleagues who also belonged to her development group to help her create an 'activity room'. Each teacher would describe the activities they have used in their classroom and then place the materials they had used in the activity room. This had a big impact. Colleagues are now going in and out of the activity room and they are now talking more about learning and teaching. In addition, the parents visit the school much more than they used to and they work more co-operatively with their children and their teachers.

Through this project, Nerin learnt that every student is capable of learning. She also demonstrated to herself and to her colleagues that teachers can learn new ways of teaching that effectively engage their students in learning.

References

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