Continuing Progress in the development of Independent Learning
A project of Transition School (2016-17)

Overview

Transition School’s program strives to initiate a life-long process of individual development towards a balance of body, mind, and spirit. For the past few years teachers at Transition School have been focusing on identifying skills that will help our children become more independent in their learning. This is a progressive work with students ranging in age from 6-14. We started the year with a review of the work we had done the year before, and identified some learning/study skills and strategies that are in line with our work on integral education. These were different for different age groups. Throughout the year teachers kept this in mind and met and shared their ideas and their findings.

Teachers worked together and with their students to explore developmentally appropriate strategies which help to sustain the attitudes, values and skills that will make it possible for the students to become independent and conscious life-long learners. We then included these skills purposefully in the school program, explaining the role of the strategies so the students could understand how they can help themselves by using the skills. We also helped the children become more aware about different learning styles and understand the particular learning strategies that support their preferred way of learning. Teachers spoke about the importance of ‘learning to learn’ with the parents of the children in conferences and meetings held throughout the school year.

The following are reports from various teachers that illustrate the outcome of this ongoing work.

Developing learning skills in Grade 3

To teach children how to learn is as important as teaching any subject. In third grade we worked with many tools and learning skills to support children in becoming more independent learners.

“How do you get organized to study or to do homework?” We brainstormed this together at the beginning of the school year. During the first few weeks of school, ‘homework’ was done in class together. Children modeled behaviors necessary to succeed in doing homework. They came up with a list that was posted in their homework books to help them remember at home. Parents received a follow-up letter so they were aware of the strategies for homework. They were encouraged to support their child during homework time.

Children were also taught how to choose a ‘good fit’ book (one which interests them, where they can read most of the words, comprehend, etc.). Each week during library time, children chose at least three English language ‘good fit’ books to read in class and at home. Children also took a book from our classroom library when they wanted another book to read in class. Easy access to books, time to read, and the practice of frequent reading to the class helped facilitate improvement in reading skills. Kids developed a love for reading.

Another skill helpful for independent learning is use of a dictionary and thesaurus. We had a guided discovery whereby each child had a dictionary and learned what was inside and ways to use it. Children were regularly taught and practiced skills to become more proficient looking up a word in the dictionary. Now all children independently consult the dictionary when they need to understand the meaning of a word or when they are unsure how to spell a word.
To support the learning of alphabetical order we played a game with the whole class. The game was timed and everyone had to focus to do well as a team. After five weeks of playing this fun game, all children had developed the skill to put words in alphabetical order independently.

In creative writing and research, we used a ‘4 square’ methodology. Children decided on a topic and 4 different aspects that supported that topic. This method helped children to focus on relevant information while doing research, and to write in paragraphs, and it made it easy to avoid plagiarism.

Posting a weekly list of activities was another approach that was helpful in creating an atmosphere of independent learning. Children were aware of the goals for the week. They were encouraged to work towards completion of the goals in class. This strategy was successful as many children left on Friday with no homework. They were delighted that they could just take pleasure in reading.

Summary writing, research skills and paraphrasing (Grades 6-8)

This year we learned about summary writing: how to retell something in our own words, keeping it short and yet including all the important information. We read texts which we summarized together in class, and others which we summarized on our own. We also applied what we learned when writing our book reports and summaries. Summarizing is an important skill to learn as it helps students to discern important information in a text and to identify and integrate main ideas. It also encourages critical thinking.

We also worked on paraphrasing. This is difficult for young students, but it is a very important skill to learn. As paraphrasing is ‘putting things in your own words’, we started with simple exercises of reading a paragraph or a story and then ‘putting it in our own words’. In middle school the students learn research skills and compose longer pieces of writing, so as the year went on we worked more and more on these aspects of writing. They did progress and were able to see their progress, but we have a lot more work to do!

Different learning styles (Grades 7 and 8)

For the older students, in seventh and eighth grade, the teachers thought it could be interesting for the students to become aware of different learning styles – to find their strengths and see how they could use these to improve in their studies.

The teachers met in the summer holiday to research materials that would be accessible to the students which address the different ways individuals learn. The material we found looks at three different learning styles: visual, auditory and kinesthetic, and gives strategies for how students can incorporate this information into their ways of working.

We introduced this to the students with a questionnaire. There were 16 questions with multiple-choice answers. The students completed the questionnaire, and then calculated their learning strengths. It was thought-provoking for them to see that generally they were quite balanced: most students learnt in all three ways, with perhaps a slight leaning towards one style or another. We followed up with a group discussion on what the different learning styles mean.

For both students and teachers this was a rewarding exercise. Teachers could see that changing something in the classroom – the seating, the noise level, the location of a student’s desk – could enable a student to improve in her/his studies.

The students were very interested in the results of the questionnaire and wanted to learn more about the different learning styles. They immediately started to use some of the study strategies that were suggested that suited their learning style, and continued to use them throughout the school year. For example, visual learners can study more effectively by taking notes on post-it notes
or index cards and reviewing them regularly; this became a favorite method for studying for tests in the eighth grade.

By becoming aware of their learning styles and helpful strategies for using them, the students were more involved in their education, and they took steps towards becoming independent learners.

**Learning to use time productively (Grade 7)**

In the seventh grade class I have been working to try to include more opportunities for the children to organize their own work, work more independently, and have more choice in the activities. A very important study skill is learning to use one’s time well. This year I again used “work plans” with the students.

Every two weeks the students were given a work plan that clearly stated the plans for the week and the expectations (assignments). It gave suggestions for alternative materials that they might want to use. The children learned that this work needs to be finished within the prescribed time, and that it can be done in class. Each week, two or three hours were set aside in class as “work time” in which they were free to do the work that they chose to do.

In the beginning, the students often needed to be reminded that these hours were “work time” and that they needed to work. As time went on there was a positive change in the atmosphere of the class as students learned to organize themselves, working in small groups or individually to do the diverse assignments. I noticed a greater concentration, and less disruption. They seemed to enjoy the freedom offered to decide what to do instead of having to do a particular activity at a given time. This independent work time also freed up a lot more time for me to work with individuals and with small groups of students.

For the past several years most of the students have profited a lot from this way of working: the combination of group work, project work and the freedom that the “work plan” gives. I think that with a balance of individual and collective work, it is possible to enhance the students’ sense of personal responsibility for their studies and help them develop a good sense of organization.

I also asked the students to assess the method. Through their comments, it is apparent that they not only like the freedom of organizing their day, but also that this way of working helps them become more aware of their needs and personal growth.

**Conclusion**

Choice, creativity and the development of skills are all important aspects of a classroom experience. When these are in balance it leads to a joyful atmosphere with enthusiastic learners who come to take ownership of their work and their progress. When children are given the tools and skills to help them progress, they generally become more motivated and enthusiastic about the day-to-day learning.