

Fostering Learning through Dissonance

Caitlin Faiman, Ravi Grewal, Sidra Moshinsky, Helene Oberman, Bialik College

'Even though the dissonance causes discomfort, it is essential for conceptual change and, therefore, serious learning. Learning results from these episodes of dissonance.' (Linn & Songer and Olsen and Bruner in Earl 2003)

JEWISH ETHOS

Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust, writer and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, famously cautioned: *'Always question those who are certain of what they are saying.'* From Abraham's direct questioning of God, *'Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty?'* to the ritual at the heart of Passover which has the youngest children at the table asking questions, Judaism inculcates a respect for intellect, forthrightness and the voicing of doubt.

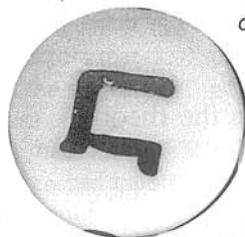
As a Jewish school that is, uniquely for Australia, not aligned to any particular denomination, Bialik College seeks to foster and encourage in its students and staff a way of approaching the world and learning that is enthusiastic, energetic, imbued with wonder and also robust - resisting of certainties, open to questioning, contradiction and dissonance.

EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES

In the words of Lev Vygotsky, *'Children grow into the intellectual life of those around them.'*

On one hand, this implies that individuals are in a constant state of evolution - wholly responsive to the world around them. On the other hand, with this awareness comes the responsibility for a school to create an intellectual environment into which students may grow.

At Bialik, we attempt to empower our learners to achieve excellence in *'an enriching, innovative and nurturing environment'* (Mission statement). Through our various approaches - Reggio



at a glance

- A culture of learning from K-12
- Use of Reggio Emilia
- Harvard University – Project Zero – Thinking Skills

Emilia in the Early Learning Centre, Cultures of Thinking across the school, as well as further opportunities for enrichment and extension provided by the Rosenkranz Centre for Excellence and Achievement - students are encouraged to explore their ideas through many different 'languages'.

REGGIO EMILIA IN THE ELC

Our work in the ELC challenges our role as educators to strive to make visible the curiosity and resilience of the young child through active listening. Children are seen as unique individuals, but also as members of a group, and so the learning is a process of individual and group construction.

Imagination sometimes comes true and sometimes it doesn't. Imagination is when you are thinking about making something and thinking about how to make it.

Imagination is when you think about something you like and you want it to happen. You are imagining that it is coming true.

These statements are examples of students' responses to 'What is imagination?' highlighting their capacity to think deeply, employing their own sense of judgment as they engage with the world. In our Early Learning Centre (ELC), inspired by the Reggio Emilia educational approach, we observe the development of children's thinking, prompted by their own discussion and beliefs, through a process that gives rise to considerable dissonance and complexity.

Children come to school with many variances in their conceptual, verbal, physical and social skills. Not only are children at different stages in their development, but the

pattern of their learning can be uneven. As part of our approach, we continue to encourage children's wonder and thinking through ongoing investigations, inspired by the concept of 'The hundred languages of children.'

CULTURES OF THINKING IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY

In the Primary and Secondary schools, Cultures of Thinking, a joint research project with Project Zero, Harvard University Graduate School of Education, which enriches and inspires teaching and learning. Informed by Ron Ritchhart's *Intellectual Character* and David Perkins, *Smart Schools*, over the last ten years, we have sought to nurture thinking dispositions in our learners, encouraging them to be curious, ask questions, be risk takers, while engaging in thoughtful reflection that leads to construction of knowledge.

This can be exemplified through one of the routines of the Making Thinking Visible Project, 'Step inside', which invites students to adopt the point of view of a person, object or concept. This encourages experimenting with perspective and developing empathy.

Students of a senior English class are asked to 'step inside' music, a major element in a novel, to consider its role as a living force:

- I am the world's voice for self-expression
- I inspire change in the world
- I inspire emotion
- I am an universal language
- I am a tool of exploitation

Although students admit to a degree of uneasiness with being asked to adopt the point-of-view of music, 'I was uncomfortable at the start', they attest to the 'stretching' of their thinking as a result, 'It forced me to think outside the box'.

Such unsettling of thinking, creating time and space for inward and outward delving into possibilities, is a feature of classrooms in every discipline across the school. In this way, thinking is valued, visible and actively promoted, fostering a culture of growth in our

learning community.

ROSENKRANZ CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE AND ACHIEVEMENT

Focused on providing students with opportunities to develop and be challenged beyond their current level in all areas of schooling, the Rosenkranz Centre for Excellence and Achievement plays a critical role. We believe that integral to this process of growth is being met by complexity, disequilibrium and dissonance and that real learning takes place at the point of challenge. This is facilitated in numerous ways, from teacher support, planning and professional development, through to purposely-crafted programs offered to students. These programs may take the form of whole class and year-level enrichment opportunities, small group withdrawal extension opportunities and individual mentoring sessions.

Students' inclusion within the Rosenkranz Centre occurs via nomination from teachers and parents, as well as from expressions of interest from the students themselves. The pathway that is created for them is determined via an assessment process that uses both formal and informal modes.

As an example of opportunities offered through the Rosenkranz Centre, we can follow the discipline of English and see how it is explored in two different areas of the school. In the ELC we offer year-level enrichment with the integration of the Junior Great Books program into Year 1. The Junior Great Books program brings a rich selection of high-quality literature from many genres, forms, cultures and times into the classroom to be explored through shared inquiry. In Year 8, a small group of like-minded students participate in a two-day extension English workshop. On the first day students attend a writers' festival, hosted externally; the following day, students work with a writer-in-residence.

On some occasions, enrichment opportunities are offered to all students within a year level, working closely with the classroom teachers, and at other times particular students are targeted in a purposely-created workshop

experiences.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS

Across the College, teachers undertake professional development within a team environment, including regular pedagogical meetings, research action groups and dedicated times when student and teacher thinking is actively explored, analysed and used as a springboard for the continuation of the learning journey.

Through the College's collaboration with Project Zero, participation in international conferences in Reggio Emilia and partnership with Hebrew University's Melton School, teachers work with some of the world's leading educational thinkers over an extended period of time. Students are the ultimate beneficiaries of these projects as the focus is on providing new strategies of learning to enrich their experience and develop thinking skills for their lives both within and beyond school. Lives which, in all their known and unknown elements, will inevitably involve encountering and dealing with disequilibrium, dissonance, the need to think and rethink.

This article is the collaborative work of

Gaitlin Faiman, Head of the Rosenkranz Centre for Excellence and Achievement;

Navi Grewal, Coordinator of Cultures of Thinking;

Sidra Moshinsky, Acting Head of Curriculum and Professional Learning

Helene Oberman, Deputy Head of the Early Learning Centre

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