

Bialik: where teachers love to teach and children love to learn

BIALIK

With thanks to Fiona Gordon, Director of Learning and Innovation.

One of the cornerstones of Bialik's philosophy is that it is the teaching staff who turn a good school into a great one. Nurturing good teachers is as important as nurturing happy students. This is why Bialik teachers find real support for their vision of how they'd like to teach, the school invests in their professional and personal development; and they are prized and appreciated by their students, their colleagues and the parents of our school. As part of Bialik's "Cultures of Thinking" (a collaboration with Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education), teachers focus on allowing students to drive their own learning, and to construct their own knowledge. To help teachers implement this approach practically, the school provides them with frequent and necessary opportunities to visit classrooms, to see students learning in a range of environments, to think about teaching practice, and to wonder how their teacher colleagues solve their own puzzles. Teachers discover that having the time for professional learning conversations and sharing their puzzles can create both subtle and significant change in their classrooms.

Inquiry in the Early Years

Kindergarten teacher Gali explored her approach by setting up a studio table with flowers in a jar, paint, brushes and containers for colour mixing. She then observed her students listening and responding to each other's perspectives, waiting their turn to talk, building on each other's ideas and making a group decision to draw one flower together.



Gali shared her observations, explaining that even though the children involved are all at different stages of their development, it was a powerful learning experience for all of them. "The pleasure of contributing to the group achievement was far more meaningful than individual [achievements]. Successful experiences [such as these] build children's confidence and self-worth and open up many doors for further learning inside and outside school."

Mindfulness and learning

In Primary School and Senior School, two teachers collaborated in their investigation of how mindfulness can enhance learning. "Our day has changed significantly", the educators reflect. "The children walk in knowing that they are going to meditate at the start of the day and that they have to put personal interactions



aside for 10 minutes. They have time to focus on their breathing and try to let go of their worries and other thoughts.

"They see gratitude with greater complexity and understanding. They are encouraged to think about this time we have together and how it can help them as learners and as friends. They are encouraged to value this time we have together. The time spent understanding being "present" as a learner and making visible connections between meditation and learning has made this experience different from any other."

Building understanding

In VCE, the Head of Jewish Studies decided to guide her VCE students through the explicit "steps" or "moves" needed to build understanding of their subject. Students were offered various opportunities to use

the Understanding Map, (developed by the Harvard Project Zero Cultures of Thinking Project) as a tool for reflection.

The map is made up of eight 'thinking moves': Consider different viewpoints, reason with evidence, make connections, uncover complexity, capture the heart and form conclusions, build explanations, describe what's there, and wonder about it. The VCE educator explained that students used post-it notes to identify areas in their work where they successfully demonstrated one of the thinking moves. "One of the benefits was that the Understanding Map gave us a shared vocabulary when discussing work, what was needed and sharing feedback."

The next stage of the journey

Teachers at Bialik can choose to focus on several inquiries, including neuroscience, sustainability, makerspace and coding, multidisciplinary literacy, as well as the opportunity to choose a puzzle from their practice, or to team up and apply for an innovation seed grant.

By offering our teachers one-to-one coaching and regular focus groups to share findings in the professional learning schedule, Bialik is digging deeper into what makes both student and teacher learning fulfilling and successful.

Bialik is holding its 6th Culture of Thinking Conference on Sunday 27 August and Monday 28 August 2017. The Conference is open to all educators, parents and others interested in exploring ways of learning and ways of teaching.

Visit www.bialik.vic.edu.au for more details.