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What Does it Mean to ‘Be a Learner’?

Students in today’s classrooms are bombarded with assessments, standards and expectations for growth, but I wonder if they are actually leaving the classroom as learners. Learners, who can access information, think critically about what they read and hear, question sources, wonder deeply, read for enjoyment and purpose, and pursue learning for its own sake. It often makes me ask: “Are they truly leaving my classroom as learners?”

This question led me on a different path at the start of the last school year. Traditionally, we begin with setting the stage for learning and interacting in our classroom: what it means to treat each other with respect, what things we are responsible for, when we share, how we access materials, what it means to be safe in the classroom, getting to know you. Last year, it occurred to me that all of these could be taught through the central goal of ‘Being a Learner.’ We treat each other with respect and concern for safety through our words and actions as learners, and in the process we were reminded of how we too would like to be treated. We are responsible for our own materials and focus in our work because as learners we need to have our materials at the ready and respect ourselves by engaging with our work. We work smarter when we know who we are, so we used learning style inventories and multiple intelligence surveys to more deeply understand our strengths and limitations. ‘Be a Learner’ became a mantra as students readily engaged with creating the culture and community of our classroom, recognizing their own role and control in making it a reality. Students would often step in to help a classmate to stop talking during instruction or to question off-task behavior with a quiet reminder of ‘Be a Learner.’ The mantra became our springboard for looking at subjects that were new to us, and helped to define our work as scientists, mathematicians, historians, readers, researchers and reporters.

Common Core State Standards and non-cognitive skills also came into play as we began to focus on the Mathematical Practices, the Capacities of English Language Arts and the Habits of Mind. These practices, capacities and habits include concepts like perseverance, demonstrating independence, remaining open to continuous learning, constructing viable arguments, managing impulsivity and comprehending as well as critiquing. These became weekly topics of focus to drive our learning, where we would define the idea and process to understand it, connect with a quote and our personal experiences, provide examples and set Learner Goals, as well as create an art piece or a rubric to assess our work. We often looked for examples in our read aloud books, analyzed characters for these concepts, and did self-assessments of our individual and class progress towards meeting our Learner Goals.

Social-emotional skills came into focus as we incorporated empathy and relationship building. Students began to write weekly goals and affirmations to support their daily work, as well as reflect in writing and through sharing with others how their goals and affirmations were driving their learning. Connections were rich and words like metacognition, growth mindset and interdependence quickly became part of our lexicon. Did students struggle with these ideas? Of course! Sometimes you just want your teacher to tell you where to find the answer, rather than to ask you open ended questions to further your own independence. Did we face bumps in the road? Of course! Routinely coming back to 'Be a Learner' helped us to refocus and rededicate ourselves to our overarching goal.

During the last week of school, I had a student ask me a question in relation to a math prompt, "How many weeks in a month and year?" This led me to bring our whole class together for a conversation about 'Being a Learner' for the summer. We talked about the fact that I would no longer be at their side or available to guide them towards a resource, so how could they continue to be learners outside our classroom walls? Students initially shared their summer desires to play endless video games and watch TV. As I reminded them of all the work we had done this year and wondered aloud about how they could 'Be a Learner,' they began to share multiple creative ideas like researching how to create a video game, building a fort or achieving a milestone at the pool. It made me realize even more the importance of broadening our scope beyond the measureable of test scores and standards, to the essential goals of building capacity within our students to successfully "Be a Learner" in and out of the classroom.

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