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Overview

New Possibilities

On a visit to Stonebridge Elementary School in Oklahoma City last fall, I noticed a bulletin board near the principal's office portraying the skill of "observing." Beneath it was a table strewn with seeds and nuts for the children to inspect, touch, and smell. One way Stonebridge School emphasizes thinking is by highlighting a different skill each week that all teachers incorporate into their lessons.

Educators like those in Oklahoma City have shown great interest in teaching thinking in the last five years. Several published programs designed specifically to teach thinking skills have achieved noteworthy results (Nickerson et al. 1985), but most practitioners believe thinking can and should be taught within the framework of the regular curriculum.

That view is reinforced in a recent statement from the prestigious National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. Lauren Resnick (1987) concludes from her study of research that no approach is conspicuously more effective than others but that "the cumulative evidence justifies cautious optimism for the venture as a whole" (p. 35). She recommends that instruction in thinking skills be embedded within the academic disciplines: "higher order skills must suffuse the school program from kindergarten on and in every subject matter" (p. 48).

Most educators probably welcome that statement but may not be completely sure what it means. What exactly is "the venture"? What is it like for higher-order skills to "suffuse the school program"? This issue of *Educational Leadership* provides a partial answer (though not necessarily what Resnick had in mind) by reporting examples of how schools teach thinking. The examples are quite disparate, however, so rather than clarifying, they may only add to the impression that teaching thinking can be almost anything.

A helpful, if oversimplified, way to conceive of "the venture" is to classify it three ways: teaching *for* thinking, teaching *of* thinking, and teaching *about* thinking (Brandt 1984).

Teaching *for* thinking begins with provision of intellectually engaging content and learning activities. It also includes development of language and conceptual abilities through various forms of interaction: teacher questioning and follow-up (p. 49), group discussion (pp. 34 and 48), cooperative learning, and so on.

Teaching *about* thinking is encouraging students to be aware of their thinking and helping them learn to control it. Teachers try to do this by asking students to monitor their own thinking (p. 14) and by making deliberate use of various thinking frames such as those from Talents Unlimited (pp. 35 and 36), CoRT (p. 32), and Tactics (p. 42).

The most controversial and least well understood element is the teaching *of* thinking: the attempt to teach particular mental skills and processes such as summarizing and decision making. As critics like John Baer (p. 66) point out, we don't yet have a body of knowledge about teaching thinking—or even about thinking itself—that provides us a sure sense of direction. In the years ahead we will probably learn more. For now, though, teachers and principals like those at Stonebridge School will keep doing what they believe to be in the best interest of their students—sharing the excitement of new possibilities for developing the human mind.□

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