

“THAT’S TOTALLY ME!”

HOW SELF-AWARENESS ALLOWS BOYS TO BETTER LEARN TOGETHER

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate how Grade 8 boys become more familiar with the way they think when working collaboratively with their classmates. Each boy identified his own mind pattern and was challenged to make use of this knowledge as he worked in a group to create a video about a factor leading to Canadian Confederation. I discovered that knowledge of mind patterns allowed the boys to work more efficiently and show greater respect for one another. As a result, they got along better during group work and created a project that was reflective of their combined knowledge and skills.

Introduction

The word ubuntu means that a person becomes human through other persons.

-Archbishop Desmond Tutu

According to Dr. Shimi Kang (2011), author of *The Dolphin Parent* and keynote speaker at the IBSC 2016 conference in Vancouver, we have reached a point in time “when our activities are changing the planet and its ecosystems more rapidly than in the past” (p. 192). In order to solve these increasingly complicated problems, our young people will be required to work together. Dr. Kang goes on to explain that we need “to come together as a community to solve our problems” (p. 192). Her clear explanation of the current state of our world is a call to action for educators. How can we teach students the skills required to collaborate effectively?

Crescent School, along with many of our fellow Ontario independent and public school boards, clearly recognizes the value of collaboration in our society. In fact, this learning skill is assessed three times a year in each report card. Crescent’s understanding of collaboration is inspired by the Ontario Ministry of Education’s (2010) definition. In *Growing Success*, the Ministry explains that a student demonstrates collaboration when he:

- accepts various roles and an equitable share of work in a group;
- responds positively to the ideas, opinions, values, and traditions of others;
- builds healthy peer-to-peer relationships through personal and media-assisted interactions;
- works with others to resolve conflicts and build consensus to achieve group goals;
- shares information, resources, and expertise and promotes critical thinking to solve problems and make decisions

While it is clear that we value and are able to define collaboration, what are we doing to support boys in learning *how* to collaborate? In particular, are the boys able to speak about their own strengths and weaknesses when it comes to collaboration? Are they able to bring their best selves to the group while asking for the support needed to be successful? These questions, along with my reading of the book *Collaborative Intelligence* (Markova & McArthur, 2015), led me to my research question: *How might an understanding of individual mind patterns enhance collaborative intelligence in Grade 8 boys' learning groups?*

Clearly defining collaboration, building self-awareness in boys, and providing opportunities to reflect and tackle collaborative tasks were all implemented through an action research methodology. This participatory research allowed boys to take ownership of identified group work problems with the intention of improving the situation. They were involved in each step of the research process and were motivated by its transparency and potential benefits.

Literature Review

Before deciding how to teach collaborative skills, we must clearly define collaboration. The previously mentioned definition explicitly outlines behaviours we are looking for when students work in groups; essentially to listen to and value the opinion of others in combination with the capacity to share one's own point with respect and clarity.

Collaborative learning is further described as, "An educational approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product" (Laal & Laal, 2011, p. 491). As educators, we are looking at how to get students to work together, to share responsibility, and to work toward a common goal. Laal and Laal further highlight the importance of group dynamics, explaining, "The underlying premise of collaborative learning is based upon consensus building through cooperation by group members, in contrast to competition in which individuals best other

group members” (p. 493). This call to action and these definitions set the stage for how we can help our students improve their collaboration skills.

Students must identify their own strengths and weaknesses before they can work with others. Notes Kaplan (2011), “The self-inventory prior to entering the collaborative experiences facilitates determining the nature or type of contributions one brings to the group and the roles one plays in the collaborative process” (p. 262). This reflection on one’s own ability to collaborate with others is the perfect opportunity to help boys build their own knowledge of themselves, how they think, and how they interact with others. This is a responsibility of a boys’ school educator, and is supported by the work of Kindolan and Thompson (2011), who explain the importance of giving boys “permission to have an internal life...help develop an emotional vocabulary so that they may better understand themselves and communicate more effectively with others” (p. 241). I can think of countless occasions when boys have had trouble navigating group work, when they’ve struggled to allocate responsibilities fairly, miscommunicated, and experienced frustration when someone is not pulling their weight.

In *Collaborative Intelligence*, Markova and McArthur (2015) tackle how groups or teams can work together in the most efficient and supportive manner. The first step is to identify how *you* think in order to figure out how you can think with others. They identify three different states of attention relevant to how we process information, broken down in the following definitions:

Focused Attention: Helps you accomplish tasks, attend to details and timelines

Sorting attention: Helps you digest information and think through confusion

Open attention: Helps you imagine possibilities and innovate (p. 72)

According to Markova and McArthur (2015), each state of attention is triggered differently. “There are three languages of thought: visual, kinesthetic (hands-on), and auditory. These languages of thought cause each of us to shift to a different state of attention” (p. 72). After establishing which thought language triggers an attention state, you are able to fit into one of nine mind patterns. Each pattern has unique characteristics and styles of thinking.

Markova and McArthur (2015) provide strategies on how to work best in groups according to your mind pattern. For example, a boy with an auditory-kinesthetic-visual (AKV) mind pattern should be cautious of assuming that other people feel as confident as he does expressing themselves orally, and he should also remember that it is important not to

interrupt. This self-knowledge will both validate the boy's experience while empowering him to take steps to collaborate in a respectful manner.

Research Context

Crescent School, established in 1913, is a day school in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. While the school has historically catered to boys of higher means, there has been a shift to increase diversity within the school in recent years. The school prides itself on our character education program, best seen in our vision statement *Men of Character From Boys of Promise*, which is woven through our academic and co-curricular activities.

Twenty Grade 8 boys participated in this study. These boys were part of my mentor group; mentor groups include a random sample of the overall 80 boys in Grade 8. During our Curriculum Evening in September, I explained my action research project to the parents of the boys in my mentor group. I highlighted the action I planned to take, the IBSC process of action research, and the importance of keeping each boy's identity and data confidential. The parents were then encouraged to read and take a copy of a letter outlining my project as well as to sign the informed consent form. Both parents and boys were encouraged to ask questions in person, as well as through email.

The Action

Each boy took the quiz outlined in *Collaborative Intelligence* (Markova & McArthur, 2015) and discovered which of the six mind pattern options suited them best. After they had identified their mind patterns, the boys accessed modified material from the book, which I adapted to meet their needs and wrote in boy-accessible language. This information broke down the definition of their mind pattern as well as outlined some strengths and weaknesses associated with this mind pattern.

The boys then went through a process of identifying their personal strengths and blind spots when they work with others. They were given a standard worksheet, again developed to be accessible and useful to a Grade 8 boy, which required them to reflect on both their strengths and blind spots. This process encouraged them to reflect on how they communicate their specific skill set to their partners (including how they ask for help and how they volunteer for jobs).

At this point in the action, we decided as a class how to create groups in order to undertake a group-worthy task. The boys knew that they would be working on a History project where they would have to research, write a script, and create a video about a factor leading to

Canadian Confederation. In a class discussion, the boys decided that I should make the groups based on their thinking patterns. We wrote everyone's name on the board and split the boys into six groups of three and one group of two.

Data Collection

Primarily qualitative in nature to allow for the boys' voices to shine through, my data collection included a variety of methods: pre- and post-surveys, focus groups, feedback forms, reflections, and exit tickets. I mainly focused on gathering data that might highlight a mindset change in the boys; specifically, were they able to reflect on their current and acquired skills and challenges?

Prior to the beginning of the action, the boys completed a survey about collaboration. The survey included Likert-style questions as well as short answer questions. The aim of this survey was to encourage the boys to think about their skills and challenges. This same survey was used at the end of the action in order to measure how the boys developed their self-knowledge of their skills and challenges, and how they integrated this knowledge into group work.

Once the boys identified their mind pattern, they completed a standard worksheet requiring them to reflect on both their strengths and blind spots. This task encouraged reflection on how they communicate their specific skill set to their partners (including how they ask for help and how they volunteer for jobs). Over the course of the action, the boys gave each other feedback and filled out exit tickets to reflect on how they used this new knowledge of how people think. The data collection was date stamped in order to see how the boys integrated their knowledge into group work.

Focus groups provided an opportunity for the boys to expand on these tasks and this self-knowledge. I recorded these sessions, which allowed me to be present in the moment. While these focus groups were primarily unstructured, I used a list of questions designed to spark conversation and create consistency between the groups. In addition, the groups consisted of three to five boys allowing for conversation without having to manage too many voices at once.

Data Analysis

I analyzed all of the qualitative data, including field notes and my own observations, looking for and coding recurring themes. I made every effort to make the boys' voices heard throughout my findings. While this work was difficult to code due to the personal nature of

each boy's experience, using multiple forms of data collection provided many entry points for each boy to share his experience. The use of technology, including Google forms and video recording, and subsequent transcription of our sessions, allowed for consolidation of the data. My various data collection methods simplified the analysis process and allowed ample opportunities to identify themes and patterns.

Discussion of Results

Efficiency and Trust

One of the most challenging aspects of facilitating collaboration in my classroom is helping the boys figure out who should be responsible for which parts of a group project.

Specifically, students frequently engage in conversations around what is "fair" in terms of how much work each person has done. Over the course of this project, I observed that the boys were having fewer conversations about figuring out how to split up the work. I learned that during data collection that there had been conflicts within the groups, but the boys found that they had the necessary skills to negotiate their disagreement.

When asked how his group used mind patterns to complete the project, one boy noted, "I feel like even if we didn't have the mind patterns we would still get it done, but with the mind patterns we are more efficient." Another boy in the same group went on to comment that before mind patterns, "We would just try to divide it into like, equally amongst ourselves, but now that we know who's better at what, we've been able to divide into so we can each do our best in each like, thing." A boy in a different group noted that, "There have been less fights because since now we can actually divide up the work evenly."

The ability to split up the work in a fair way allowed the boys to rely on each other. One boy shared, "We know each other's mind patterns, we used their weaknesses and their strengths to split up the work equally." This theme of trust continued with another boy as he reflected on being able to "trust my group members because their strengths are what they are going to be working on."

Self-Reflection

Over the course of this research project, the boys began to apply knowledge of their mind patterns to other areas of their school lives. In particular, they used mind pattern strategies when preparing for assessments and evaluations. One boy commented on how he previously prepared for assessments by having a "bunch of study notes in question and answer form and I give it my mum, and she'll read the questions out, and I'll be walking around with a ball or

something, throwing it against a wall.” Through this research action, he learned that auditory triggers his sorting and kinesthetic triggers his focus, so when he moves and speaks at the same time he is able to consolidate his knowledge as he prepares for a quiz or test.

This ability to self-reflect and apply this new knowledge to various aspects of their lives was echoed by many more of the boys. One boy noted that visual stimuli trigger his focus and he commented that when he prepares for evaluations, “I make study notes now. I like colour coding them so they stand out to me and like, so like yeah, I usually colour them and then like, I write down the formula in like different colours and everything and then it helps me like remember them easier.”

Communication and Learning from Each Other

The boys clearly believed that using mind patterns to plan their projects allowed them to better communicate and understand each other. When asked how he would have resolved a problem with his group member before understanding mind patterns, one boy reflected “he probably would have gotten even more mad at me. And we wouldn’t have gotten our work done.” Another boy commented, “We could understand that not everyone is perfect and they can’t do everything without getting distracted.” This idea of getting along better was present among many of the groups.

Once the boys began using this knowledge when preparing for evaluations and assessments, they were naturally drawn to other boys who had similar strategies. For example, boys for whom visual triggered their focus were able to explain concepts to boys for whom auditory triggered their focus. Their knowledge of their own mind patterns as well as those of their classmates’ led to a situation where they were able to support and learn from each other. When they had a good understanding of their own mind patterns as well as their group members,’ they were able to use this knowledge in a flexible way. One group realized that their focus and their sorting were flipped, so if they were able to trigger both of these thinking states by moving and talking at the same time, they were able to benefit even more from each other. According to one of the group members, “I am figuring out a problem from what [my partner] has said while staying focused while walking.”

It was rewarding to watch the boys realize how much they could benefit from each other. In particular, many groups found they were able to create better work when they used their knowledge of their mind patterns. One boy noted, “We both came up with ideas and they were kind of weaker ideas and then the other person would add on and it would just

continue.” Another boy added that he thought the “quality of our work has gotten much better.”

Knowledge of how other people think helped the groups in general. One boy pointed out, “It’s good to know your group members’ mind patterns because then you know what works and how they work.” As a result of their knowledge of mind patterns, the boys were able to have reasonable expectations for themselves and others.

Conclusion

From the first moments of exposing the boys to this work, I was impressed with how interested they were in the information being presented. Those first few sessions watching them read their mind pattern definition were very rewarding as I heard echoes of, “That’s totally me!” throughout the classroom. While I suspected this to be true before this research, I am now convinced of the importance of providing boys with opportunities to learn about themselves and apply that knowledge to their daily lives.

Through data analysis, I answered my research question and learned that knowledge of their own mind patterns (as well as their classmates’) allowed the boys to better collaborate with each other. One of the surprising aspects of this study was how much the boys used this knowledge outside of our mentor group and History class. Prior to our focus group sessions, I had not realized the boys had been using their mind patterns to help them study for other classes. To me, this was another reminder of how keen these boys are to use their time efficiently and work independently.

Implications for Future Practice

One of my favourite aspects of this work was how simple it was to put into practice. Once the boys had a good understanding of the basic concepts of mind patterns, they were able to use this knowledge in ways I could not have predicted. Even now, months after we have finished our action research, I am able to ask the boys, “How are you using your mind pattern to the best of your ability?” or, “It sounds like you need to take a walk to trigger your sorting because you seem frustrated.” They understand exactly what I mean, and they use their knowledge in order to get focused, problem solve, or think creatively.

Considering the simplicity of this work, I plan to introduce the idea of mind patterns at the beginning of next school year, allowing the boys to consider and implement this knowledge throughout the year. Creating a classroom culture where this vocabulary is common will

allow each boy to continue developing his understanding of how he thinks and how he is best able to work with others.

Implications for Future Research

One of the most intriguing parts of this research was how the boys were kinder to one another when they considered someone else's mind pattern. Watching the boys navigate difficult conversations was a totally different experience when they acknowledged the other person's point of view. I think it would be fascinating to investigate how understanding mind patterns could help tackle the challenges of recognizing other perspectives.

Reflection Statement

I undertook this project as I was beginning my first year in our Middle School. While I had previously taught many of the participating boys when they were in Fifth and Sixth Grades, many of the boys were new to the school and me. I was nervous about how they would respond to a new teacher trying to get them to reflect on their feelings. The manner in which the boys undertook this project with maturity, kindness (for each other and me!), and genuine interest reminded me how much I enjoy teaching in a boys' school. Through this research, I developed relationships with my mentor group boys that I think otherwise would have been missed opportunities. I will forever be grateful to the IBSC as well as my school community for this important reminder of trusting the boys.

I am thankful to the IBSC, Margot Long, Trish Cislak, and Bruce Collins for their dedication to, and support of, this international action research community. I am grateful for the incredible guidance, thoughtful questions, and immense patience provided by my team advisor, Laura Sabo. Together, this organization and these people made it easy for me to enter into what could have been a very messy process. I will always appreciate the structure provided that allowed me to dig in and get my feet wet.

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This experience reminded me, yet again, of how lucky I am to call Crescent home. I am grateful to Michael Fellin, Sandra Boyes, Robert Cranston, Trish Cislak, and David Grant in

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