Promoting Student Thinking in Primary School:
Successful Strategies in New Zealand's Year 3-6 Classrooms

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Abstract

This thesis examines the promotion of student thinking by six primary school teachers in Auckland, New Zealand. All students think; however, cognitive research indicates the powerful ability teachers have to promote higher levels of student thinking. In a rapidly changing world, the researcher believes now is an ideal time to link relevant literature to the practices of New Zealand primary teachers.

This study has three aims: firstly, to investigate why the teachers believe in the significance of promoting student thinking; secondly, to examine what the teachers are doing to facilitate higher levels of thinking by investigating their teaching practices and learning environments; and lastly, to provide descriptive examples of how New Zealand teachers in Year 3-6 primary classrooms are promoting student thinking.

The qualitative, case study research design provided descriptive data that was subsequently analyzed. This study was undertaken in three phases to achieve the research aims. The first phase asked teachers to assess their promotion of student thinking on a written scale. The second phase involved the observation of lessons that the teachers believed facilitated higher levels of student thinking. Individual interviews comprised the third and final phase of this study. The collection and triangulation of the data informed the analysis from which emerged the common themes and results.

The teachers represented a range of experience levels and worked in schools with differing socio-economic statuses. All teachers believed in developing the children ‘holistically’ with consideration of the children’s academic, social, emotional and physical growth. They involved their students in collaborative activities, stressed the importance of literacy, and included time for children’s reflections. Discrepancies in the extent to which children were engaged in metacognitive activities and the school support received by the teachers appeared to be the largest disparity. The differences and similarities provide important discussion points.

The researcher suggests that successful approaches to promoting student thinking are first and foremost in the hands of teachers. This research indicates that teachers can independently develop their professional knowledge in this area; however, a whole school promotion of student thinking benefits the teaching staff and the student body, which in turn can positively affect New Zealand.
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