

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

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SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATORS OF PRACTICE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context:

In my work with primarily 9th grade students in Spanish class at Byram Hills High School, I am confronted everyday with heterogeneous classes that need to have a homogeneous outcome: mastery of the Level II Spanish curriculum. Over the years I have gleaned a cache of differentiation techniques to facilitate student learning. Thus, my expectation was that the vast majority of my students should be both successful in learning the curriculum and, equally important to me, enjoy the journey. However, as diligently as I prepared and addressed the variety of learning styles, I still had a couple of students each year that didn't give verbal evidence that they were on top of what had been taught. I reflect yearly, monthly, weekly, and daily on what worked and what didn't work in class and while differentiated activities and teaching strategies do make a huge change in student learning outcomes, I knew that something critical was eluding me. When all was said and done, I didn't understand what made each individual student "tick".

Walking into an Investigator of Practice meeting one morning, I overheard a conversation between two elementary school colleagues in which one was telling about her daughter who wasn't getting what she needed in the classroom. My ears perked up – I wanted to know why? My colleague said that her daughter was a natural introvert and simply did not always verbally manifest her learning the way others did. Thus, because of my colleagues' conversation, I decided to research two things: What qualifies a person as an introvert or an extrovert? And, How can a tool designed to differentiate between introverts and extroverts inform my classroom practices?

Action Plan:

I began my research reading *Quiet*, by Susan Cain and listened to Cain present her research on introversion via the TED website. (www.ted.com). Cain refers to the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) as the defining tool for assessing personality type. Psychiatrist Carl Jung maintained that the way we take in information and the way we get "energized" form the basis of our psychological type. Those who focus internally are introverts while those who are energized by the outside world are extroverts. A college professor simplified it this way: If you had one free hour, would you rather spend time by yourself or get together with a group of friends?

The MBTI test was researched and "built" by the mother-daughter team of Catherine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Meyers. The type indicator uses Jung's two psychological types:

introvert (I) which is focused inward and extravert (E) which is focused outside yourself. He combined these types with his work on “preferences”: sensing (S) or intuition (I), thinking (T) or feeling (F), judging (J) or perceiving (P). This information yields 16 possible “types” – hence the T in the MBTI. The MBTI tool is designed to yield a four letter personality type. With this information we can identify how one perceives the world around him, takes in information, makes sense of that information, and ultimately arrives at a conclusion.

A high school colleague of mine in the Guidance Department mentioned to me that the MBTI is already being given at BHHs to all ninth grade students, and gave me access to each student’s 4 letter personality type. Reading this information gave me a clear insight into which students were naturally introverted and extraverted.

However exciting my newfound information proved to be, the question remained: how could I better reach the students who were not comfortable taking risks to give their opinions or use the Spanish language in a simple sentence? How was I going to use this data to inform my teaching this year with the current cohort of students?

Results:

Using the MBTI data, I chose to focus on one student, a virtual non-speaker in class. I thought there might be more to Johnny (not his real name) than he was showing in class because when I spoke with him individually, he was able to self-correct and in general, showed me that he understood what I was teaching conceptually. Fortuitously, his father sent me a “just checking in” email at that exact time and I voiced my perception that Johnny knew more than he showed outwardly. The father agreed. I took it as a sign.

I looked at Johnny’s MBTI results and determined that he was, indeed, an introvert. Through the MBTI I learned how he perceived the world. I decided to have a conversation with Johnny to establish a personal connection. I began my conversation by telling Johnny that I knew he understood what I was teaching and believed he was capable of more than what I was seeing – and he agreed. After the initial shocked look left his face, we then identified one of the roadblocks to him being involved in the class more. That roadblock turned out to be: people shouting out answers. I read recently that introverts can be described as, “Ready, Aim, Fire” while extraverts are “Ready, Fire, Aim”. This student was not about to engage while others were firing. He was taking careful aim. He was observing instead of participating the way I was used to expecting students to participate.

I observed that this student did not particularly like working in groups and asked him if he preferred to work alone rather than in a group setting - another “yes.” I recognized that I had isolated this student by insisting that he participate in group work, which is counter to his personality type.

Over the course of 15 weeks I intentionally connected with Johnny 3 to 4 times a week. I wanted to find out if he felt overall better about the class and if the actions I was taking were making a difference. The student had improved his achievement from a C to a B+. He felt comfortable enough to question why his grade wasn’t higher!

Implications:

Using the Meyers-Briggs Type Inventory has given me the information I need to identify the introverts and extraverts within each of my classes. I can connect with each student in a way that honors who he is even before I proceed with differentiated activities and lessons. I learned how each student perceives his world and what that looks like to the observer. Based on my inquiry, I made changes to my teaching practices. Now I:

1. Speak personally to Johnny several times a week to check in.
2. Seek out other introverts in my classes to be sure to establish a personal connection if I already have not done so.
3. Stopped using the “more participation needed” comment on the supplementary reports and report cards.
4. Provide choice in working in small groups or individually.

From there I established 5 things I could do to create a safety net for the introverted students in my class:

1. Connect verbally with introverted students on a weekly basis.
2. Reassure each student individually that I pay close attention to his or her work.
3. Insist that wait time in the classroom be honored.
4. Provide choice in working individually or in groups.
5. Ask for feedback.

The MBTI is already administered at Byram Hills High School as a tool for possible future career paths. It is equally as valuable in the classroom to identify introverts and extraverts to better create an atmosphere in which both personality types can flourish.

Many schools across the country train administrators and teachers to use MBTI as a tool in and out of the classroom. A tool that enables us to gain access into the perceptive world of a student provides a road-map to reach that student. In my practice, my perception of what I see in the classroom has undergone a paradigm shift that took “Why is he disinterested?” and “I’m not reaching him” and turned it in to “How can I honor each student’s natural personality type to allow him to perform to his highest ability?”

On a personal note, there are several conclusions I have reached:

1. After more than 20 years of teaching there is still so much to learn!
2. I got farther utilizing the expertise of my colleagues than I would have on my own.
3. It starts and ends with making a personal connection with each and every student.

Finally, in the next school year I would like to visit some of the schools that have trained faculty to use the MBTI information effectively in the classroom. I would like to see how that training manifests itself in classrooms. I had success with one student. What would it look like to have a classroom where the teacher pays as much attention to introverts as she does to the extraverts among us?