

Pairing Passion with Purpose: Change-making at Romeo-Dallaire P.S.

By Jennifer Birse

Abstract

This article describes a school's approach in embedding an inquiry approach through a modern learning lens.

Key Works: Modern Learning, Inquiry, Growth Mindset, Authentic Student-directed Learning

"You have to be burning with an idea, or a problem, or a wrong that you want to right. If you're not passionate enough from the start, you'll never stick it out."

- Steve Jobs

What is your passion? What inequity do you need to see resolved? How can you take action? How can your actions change the world? These are the profound questions that we at Romeo-Dallaire P.S. asked our grade 6 students to interrogate while participating in YRDSB's 2015-2016 Agents of Change Project. Although the responses were varied, the results were resoundingly similar. All students had something they were passionate about, some idea or talent they wanted to share with others, some action they needed to take to better their community. From coordinating art classes, to running sports clinics, from inspiring their classmates to embrace minimalism to encouraging themselves to embrace empathy, with the Agents of Change inquiry-based learning project, our grade 6 students were truly engaged in deep learning.



Grade 6 students coordinated and ran a hockey clinic for younger students to promote collaboration and teamwork.



Grade 6 students created a dance workshop for grade 4 students to promote resiliency and active and healthy living.

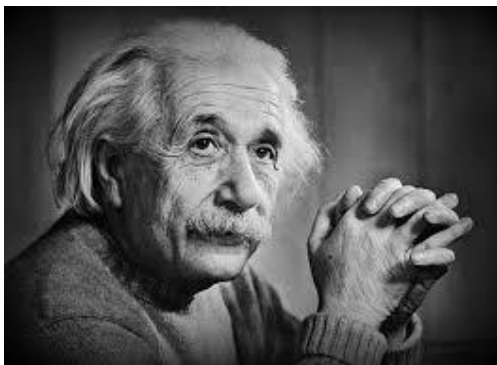
Although learning may be achieved in a variety of ways, deep learning can only occur when students engage in meaningful tasks. It was with this idea in mind that our school embarked on our modern learning journey. Rooted in personalized education, our Agents of Change project encouraged students to activate critical 21st century skills, such as problem solving, collaboration and creativity, as well as internalize all modern learning mindsets. By thoroughly investigating their own interests and courageously creating and communicating a variety of action plans which would allow them to share their passions with others in an impactful way, students shifted from introspection and metacognition to the development of innovation, community and global mindsets. Significantly, all of this was achieved while responding to a variety of grade 6 language curriculum expectations (e.g. persuasion techniques, effective speech writing, targeting your audience, research skills, etc.). For these inquiry based projects, students researched their passion and then imagined an action they could take which would allow them to both express their passion and become a change-maker within their community. Next, they created a persuasive pitch which was presented to their peers and staff judges and, finally, they realized their passions by presenting them school and/or community-wide. Some students presented to parent groups, some to students in different grades, and others to staff. Three students further extended the reach of their project by presenting their learning journeys at a Regional Agents of Change event, hosted at Romeo-Dallaire. The resulting engagement and educational ownership observed were astounding. After only a few short weeks, the grade's dynamics changed. All students, even those who were once too shy to raise their hands in class for fear of being wrong, began to see themselves as change-makers.



Shira (left) and Salma (right) share their Agents of Change projects at the regional event hosted at Romeo-Dallaire. Shira focused on educating her community on water scarcity while Salma examined empathy for those suffering from financial and/or medical hardships.

However, the road to change is certainly not an easy one. Our students, teachers and administrators all had to work together diligently to ensure that RDPS's Agents of Change was a success. Throughout the process, staff and students embraced a growth mindset in the pursuit of passion. Whereas our students explored their individual talents and interests, our staff explored its desire for the creation and implementation of meaningful educational tasks. Through careful planning and modification, student-led conferences, teacher observations, continuous feedback, moderated -marking, PD sessions on student-directed learning and whole-school collaboration, we at RDPS did our very best to provide all of our grade 6 students with an inspiring and supportive learning environment which would foster deep-learning. Although it was a long and intensive process, the results were well worth it.

Our school's experience with Agents of Change quickly revealed that pursuing one's passion may not be easy, but it's the only way to ensure we will create positive and sustainable change. As Steve Jobs and many other great thinkers have noted, true and complete dedication to any goal stems from passion. However, actively pursuing passion often means taking risks, learning from one's mistakes and trying anew. Through this project, we at RDPS learned many things. We learned how our students can truly grow through individualized learning, we learned how we, too, as a staff, can grow by consistently investigating and rethinking our practice through a modern learning lens, and we learned that, although this project was a success, we still have a lot of work to do to ensure that all students are able to engage in deep learning. Reflecting on our process, I believe our next step is to work towards using the examination of individual passions and talents to creating and fostering a passion for life-long learning in each and every one of our students. For it is only when we are "passionately curious" about our world that we can truly change it.



“I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.”

- Albert Einstein