

TEACHING METACOGNITION THROUGH FLAG TIME

How to Empower and Equip Students for Lifelong Learning

by Anne Baldisseri, Bruna Alves, Gabriela Mayer, and Andrea Davis

Metacognition, the ability to understand and regulate one's own thinking and learning, is a key skill that plays a central role in effective learning at all ages.[1] Through development of metacognitive skills, students become aware of their strengths, weaknesses, and learning strategies. Metacognition promotes intrinsic motivation and autonomy by giving students the tools to take ownership of their learning. By setting goals, monitoring progress, and reflecting on their learning processes, students cultivate a sense of empowerment and become active participants in their educational journeys.[2]

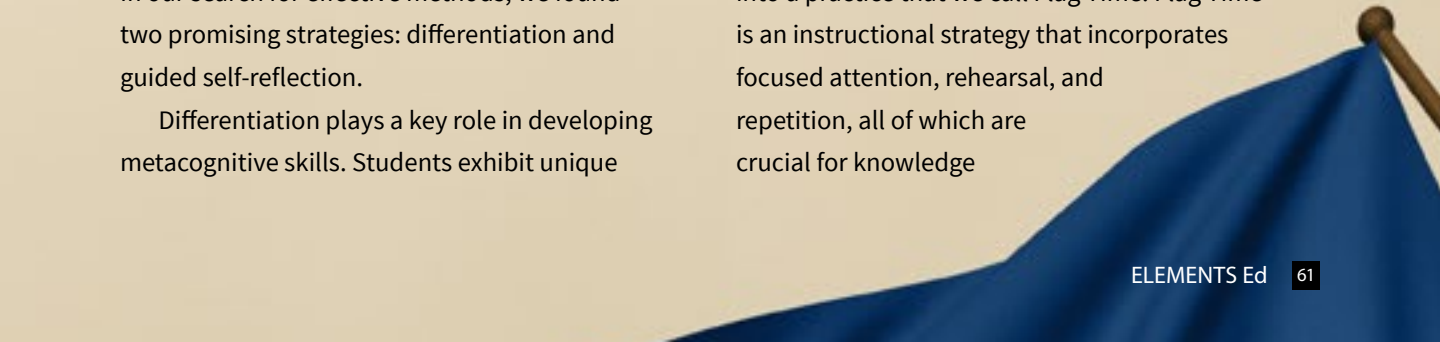
Well-designed instructional strategies promote curiosity, intrinsic motivation, engagement, and critical thinking. They also encourage self-reflection and metacognition, enabling students to assess their progress and set goals for continuous improvement. As a result, students become more adept at managing their learning, develop a deeper understanding of different disciplines, and ultimately become smarter learners.

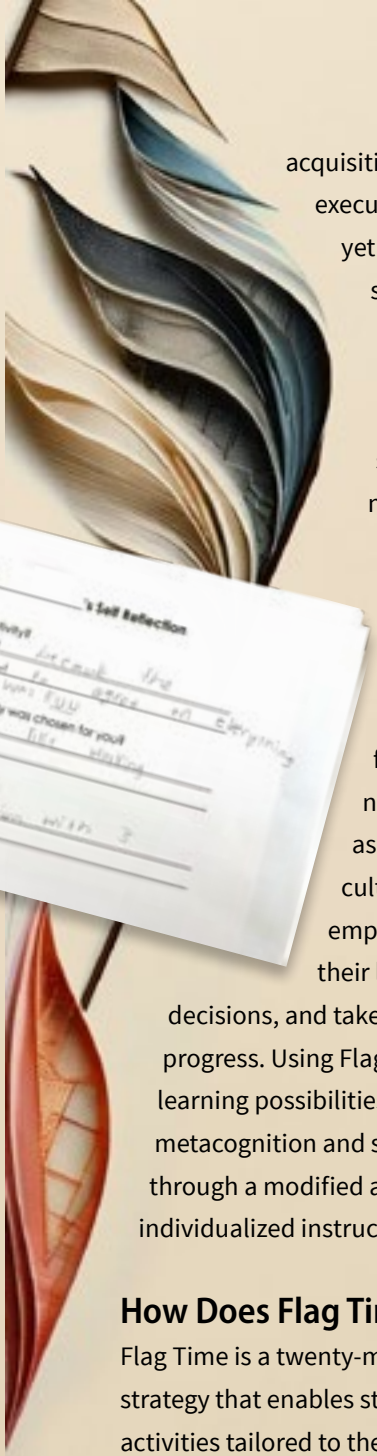
However, it is challenging to develop metacognitive skills in children at school and at home because children have varying degrees of cognitive development, life experiences, abstract thinking, and executive functioning skills. Guidance and modeling may not always be available to walk children through the practice of metacognition, which requires patience and self-awareness.[3] In our search for effective methods, we found two promising strategies: differentiation and guided self-reflection.

Differentiation plays a key role in developing metacognitive skills. Students exhibit unique knowledge, interests, and skills during early childhood and elementary school. Metacognitive skills include being able to discern our own areas of strength and challenges. Differentiation helps support metacognition because it prompts children to link a learning activity to their specific learning needs.[4] Differentiated instruction further enhances motivation and engagement by offering choices and autonomy tailored to individual student's interests and abilities.[5] When teachers provide students with choices and create activities that are aligned with students' interests, goals, abilities, and cultural values in an intentional and purposeful way, differentiated instruction recognizes the pace, interests, and abilities of students.[6]

The second key ingredient in developing metacognitive skills is self-reflection, through which teachers help students describe and evaluate their own learning and challenges and set goals for themselves. Reflection allows students to take ownership of their learning progress, monitor their understanding, identify areas of confusion or misunderstanding, and take proactive steps to address them. Teachers guide this reflection process by providing specific questions and prompts that allow students to think about their own learning. In the process, setting clear goals helps students monitor their own progress. Providing opportunities for self-reflection also encourages students to develop strategies to overcome challenges and adjust their learning approach to better meet their goals.

We combined these metacognitive strategies into a practice that we call Flag Time. Flag Time is an instructional strategy that incorporates focused attention, rehearsal, and repetition, all of which are crucial for knowledge





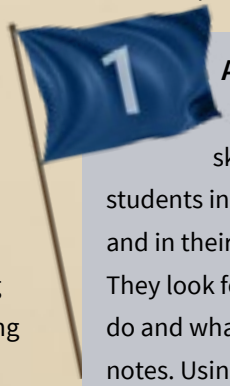
acquisition and the development of executive functions.[7] Challenging yet attainable tasks within students' zone of proximal development, coupled with the opportunity to engage in deliberate practice, allow students to develop a growth mindset and perseverance.[8] Reflection on their learning experiences and strategies enables students to assess their progress, identify areas for improvement, and set new goals. The reflective aspect of Flag Time aims to cultivate metacognitive skills by empowering students to monitor their learning, make informed decisions, and take responsibility for their progress. Using Flag Time, we aim to expand learning possibilities for children by promoting metacognition and self-regulated learning through a modified approach to differentiated, individualized instruction.

How Does Flag Time Work?

Flag Time is a twenty-minute daily instructional strategy that enables students to engage in activities tailored to their interests and unique needs. We call the activity Flag Time because children find a flag that bears their name and a designated activity based on their interests. Flag Time activities can take a variety of forms, ranging from word games to multistep math problems, from writing prompts to book club discussions. During Flag Time, teachers foster metacognitive thinking by providing direct feedback and creating opportunities for students to describe their own learning.[9]

At first, Flag Time in the classroom looks like the more familiar activity "Center Time." Students work in groups at different tables; some play math games while others work together on spelling or word recognition. Looking more closely, an observer can see the activities are differentiated; each group (and sometimes each student within each group) has a task specifically chosen to fit their learning needs and goals. Teachers float around to each group supporting, encouraging, and stretching students where needed. It isn't until Flag Time ends that the metacognitive work begins. Each student walks to their cubby and gets a laminated reflection sheet. With a dry-erase marker, students indicate—by circling a sad face, a smiling face, or a neutral face—whether they have enjoyed the task that day, whether it was difficult or easy, and what their favorite part of the session was. At the end of each week, students fill out a similar but more extensive reflection about their learning throughout the week, their preferences, strengths, and weaknesses across math and reading.

The organization and implementation of Flag Time take place in the following steps:



Assessment of Skills and Interests

In order to determine students' skills and interests, teachers observe students in everyday activities and games and in their interactions with each other. They look for evidence of what students can do and what they are interested in and take notes. Using the notes, teachers identify skills to be practiced as well as students' varying interests and strengths.

2 Grouping and Activity Design

Teachers group students with similar skills and interests and create specific activities for each group. Teachers design groups strategically so that each student is appropriately challenged while successfully completing the activity within 20 minutes. Teachers use a small flag with the student's name or photo to help students identify their assigned activity.

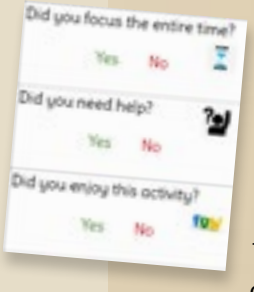


3 Implementation

Teachers invite students to look for their respective flags to begin their activities, explain the learning objectives for each group, and provide support, feedback, and guidance to students where necessary. A stopwatch (maximum 20 minutes) tracks each group's time on task.

4 Monitoring and Reflection

Students use checklists (right) to monitor their own learning and progress during Flag Time. These checklists also allow students to reflect on important aspects of the activity they participated in, such as motivation to learn, types of learning skills used, or learning objectives. Once the activity is over, teachers encourage students to explain their reflections to the teacher or to a classmate.



5 Weekly Reflection

On a weekly basis, teachers invite students to describe and evaluate their own learning through self-reflection and to record the activities they enjoyed and found interesting or challenging. At week's end, students include a record of one activity in a Flag Time portfolio by creating an audio recording about the activity or posting a photo referring to the activity, along with a comment in an electronic learning journal. Teachers also inquire about the learning process and help students identify strategies[10] for the next Flag Time activity using questions such as, "What did you learn?", "What was difficult?", and "What strategies did you use to try to overcome the challenge encountered?" Teachers can use these student self-reflections for future planning and in their communication with parents.

Conclusion

Flag Time promotes self-regulation by enabling students to create their own toolkit of strategies to use when encountering a difficulty. Critical thinking is naturally developed as students reflect on their own work by questioning and criticizing their methods of thinking.[11] Finally, students start transferring their learning across different areas as they recognize connections among different learning contexts and apply their knowledge, skills, and understanding to new situations. By reflecting on their own learning processes, students can better understand how to transfer their learning to real-world scenarios.

Flag Time as a daily instructional strategy enhances motivation and engagement by giving students the opportunity to work on tasks aligned with their interests and skill development. By incorporating reflection into each activity, Flag Time also enables metacognitive growth.

Well-designed instructional strategies like Flag Time promote curiosity, intrinsic motivation, engagement, and critical thinking. They also encourage self-reflection and metacognition, enabling students to assess their progress and set goals for continuous improvement. As a result, students become more adept at managing their learning, develop a deeper understanding of different disciplines, and ultimately become smarter learners. Ed

Anne Baldisseri is passionate about building community, motivating people, and sustaining a culture where teachers and students learn together. Before becoming head of school, Anne served as Avenues São Paulo's founding head of the primary division.

Bruna Alves has worked in elementary education for more than fifteen years. She joined Avenues São Paulo in 2018 as a primary homeroom teacher and has tested and consistently implemented Flag Time in groups she has taught ever since.

Gabriela Mayer has been a head teacher at Avenues São Paulo since its founding in 2018. She has fifteen years of teaching experience from nursery to fifth grade. Her training and love for literacy give Gabriela the support and skills needed to help move students forward in reading and writing.

Andrea Davis brings more than a decade of experience in primary education in international schools. Andrea has led professional development in areas ranging from phonics training to classroom culture to differentiation. She is the founder of the project Teach to Grow, Grow to teach, a teacher coaching business.

Endnotes

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