
KNOWLEDGE BUILDING IN ACTION LEADERSHIP



Academic Press at Queen Alexandra Middle School

Written by Emma Nichols

Bringing IDEAS to life!

5.2 ACADEMIC PRESS AT QUEEN ALEXANDRA MIDDLE SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

Queen Alexandra has been employing Academic Press as a teaching and learning strategy since they began Knowledge Building three years ago. As our understanding and experience with the KB strategies deepens, so too has the format and structure of our AP days at the school. Academic Press involves teachers across all subject areas, one grade at a time. In this case study, we will highlight how our Academic Press days are organized, and how we have integrated the Knowledge Building Principles into the format for the day.

What is Academic Press?

Academic Press has traditionally been defined as all school members, including teachers, administrators and students, being motivated by achievement oriented goals, values and norms (Shouse, 1996). It is “the extent to which the school is driven by a quest for academic excellence,” through its policies, practices, expectations, and norms” (Hoy, Sweetland & Smith, 2002, pg. 79; Lee, Smith, Perry, Smylie, 1999).

Through our Academic Press day at Queen Alexandra Middle School, we are able to develop a cultural system of shared norms, values and beliefs that emphasize and promote academic achievement. Academic Press has a focus on mastery learning.



Students from multiple Grade 7 and 8 classes gather together in the library on Academic Press Day.

KB PROVOCATION: WHAT DOES ACADEMIC PRESS LOOK LIKE AT QUEEN A?

Academic Press occurs twice during each inquiry cycle — once at the mid-point, and once near the end of the cycle, just a few days before our Inquiry Showcase. Our AP days involve teachers, administrators, and students across an entire grade, coming together to take collective responsibility for the learning of the entire group.

The structure for the day involves everyone (teachers, students, and administrators) gathering together in the Learning Commons, setting common goals for the day, and engaging in KB Circles (some small, some large) as they share their ideas, plans, and learning journeys with each other. Staff members move between the groups, encouraging the students in their use of accountable talk strategies and the KB Principles.

What was your greatest challenge?

Some of our challenges have been:
Epistemic Agency — the gradual release of responsibility for setting goals and monitoring progress, from the teachers to the students.

Another challenge has been students failing to use Academic Press as an opportunity for feedback from teachers and other students, to advance their own knowledge. This is an active process, and many students struggle with it. Many students are used to taking a more passive role.

KB PRINCIPLES AT PLAY DURING ACADEMIC PRESS:

Epistemic Agency: During AP, the students are encouraged to set goals, engage in long-range planning, monitor progress, evaluate idea coherence, and support sustained knowledge advancement amongst all the students participating. The students are empowered to take charge at the highest levels.

Community Knowledge, Collective Responsibility: All participants in AP are considered to be legitimate contributors to community goals and need to take responsibility for advancing the community's knowledge, not just their individual learning.

Democratizing Knowledge: All participants are empowered as legitimate contributors to the shared goals; all take pride in the knowledge advances of the community. During the day, diversity of opinions are viewed as strengths rather than leading to separations along knowledge have and have-not lines.

Knowledge Building Discourse: The KB circles during Academic Press go beyond sharing ideas and opinions. They are intended to advance the knowledge of the group.

Symmetric Knowledge Advancement: Expertise is distributed within and between the learning communities and the various students from each class. "To give knowledge is to get knowledge."

STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINING IDEA IMPROVEMENT

- Build classroom culture
- Foster a Growth Mindset
- Start with student interests — know your students
- Reinforce strategies across all classrooms, all teachers

What surprised you?

“I was surprised at how useful it is to come together to unite in a common purpose”

“I was surprised by how much the students enjoy these days.”

“I was surprised that you could get over 100 students together in one room, and they would be able to share technology, resources, and ideas and to stay on task.”

What were some of your deepest learnings?

“The classroom culture, along with strong individual personalities, can derail the KB process in more unstructured settings.”

“Activating an individual student’s growth mindset is critical to the success of KB. It is when our students come to us with a strong fixed mindset, that we struggle the most.”

“Class size and teacher-pupil-ratio has had a huge impact on the success of KB at Queen Alexandra.”



Students and teachers sit in a Knowledge Building Circle.

REFERENCES

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