



# **Rooms of Change and Achievements: Teacher Comments on Working in an eMINTS Classroom**



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## **Rooms of change and achievements: teachers' comments on working in an eMINTS' classroom**

The learning environment has changed for students and teachers alike in the eMINTS setting. eMINTS teachers report changes in student cooperation, confidence, and motivation. The eMINTS teachers report changes in teaching practice that have improved their attitudes about teaching. The eMINTS professional development and technology have made teachers eager to start the next year. The teachers cannot see themselves going back to their former teaching practices because, among other things, they “know it works.”

### **Context of this report**

The information in this report is taken from a series of nine focus group interviews with participating eMINTS teachers conducted in the summer of 2000. One group was conducted in each cluster. eMINTS evaluation team members moderated the focus groups. The purpose of the groups was to understand teachers' impressions of program services during their first year as eMINTS teachers. Teachers were asked to discuss their experiences with the eTHEMES service, their experiences with eMINTS and GE Capital technical support, and their experiences with Cluster Information Specialists (CIS). What also emerged from the focus group discussions were stories of extraordinary changes in the eMINTS classrooms. This report reflects the changes experienced by the teachers and their students.

### **Uncomfortable change**

Transitions of any kind are difficult to manage. Managing the transition by the eMINTS project, changing from a teacher-centered to a facilitative environment, left many teachers doubting their abilities. At the beginning of the project one of the teachers said that she literally did not know how to turn on the computer. Another teacher said that at first she was “frightened to death.” Many teachers wondered, “Can I do this?” Others described “surviving” the change and some said they were close to calling it quits. Overwhelmed and surviving were two words heard often to describe this transition period.

“I got overwhelmed, there were a few tears.”

“We were overwhelmed at the beginning.”

“This worked at Tan-Tar-A, why won't it work in my room?”

“We're used to semi-smooth sailing and we're out of our box.”

Despite all of the disruptions, the instructional practices in the eMINTS classrooms are changing. By the focus group sessions at the end of the first year, teachers expressed the desire to use all of the classroom resources available to them to transform the lives of their students. This desire is intensified as teachers observed changes in student work and behavior.

## **Transformed students**

In the process of observing the work eMINTS students performed the teachers have noted many important changes in their work habits. The eMINTS classroom environment offered students greater possibilities to demonstrate new, undiscovered competencies. Students' roles changed from being passive recipients of knowledge to being active constructors of knowledge. The children were happy to be learning and the teachers noticed increased cooperation, confidence and motivation in their classrooms. eMINTS succeeded in engaging students. Teachers described the changes in their students in terms of increased confidence, improved motivation and a desire to work together.

### **Changes in Student Confidence**

There were many times that the children learned through direct experience, without the need of adult instruction. One teacher said her students were the "cock of the walk." There were many, many stories of raised confidence, like this one, "My kids' confidence, their confidence is ... way up . . . they're teaching each other." Teachers talk of the kids' eyes sparkling when they can show you something, "you [think] 'whoa, how'd you do that? You know, it makes them feel good." In another incidence, one student asked the principal, who happened to be in the room, how to change a PowerPoint background. The principal could provide no assistance, but another student came over and assisted. That teacher reported that the student's confidence was raised.

### **Changes in student motivation and student work**

The eMINTS classroom has had a generally positive impact on student motivation. The sources of motivation begin with the opportunity to work with the computers. When other teachers in the building were complaining that they could not keep their kids focused, this eMINTS teacher felt "guilty" because it was the next to the last day of school, and the students were quietly working. "So the motivation is very intense."

Very quickly the focus of student motivation shifts from "computers" to "schoolwork", as students use their computer skills and Internet resources to explore subject and curriculum areas. "They're self motivated and self instructed" is how one teacher describes the students. Another teacher claims that there is "an excitement that I've never seen before in all my years of teaching." One teacher says that the students' "take off" after a demonstration. Another teacher says that the students pay more attention when the SMART Board is being used, that the students are more observant. This teacher said that the students were learning things about the SMART Board that the teacher did not know, and that her students could explain how to use the SMART Board to different teachers in the building.

As students' work progresses, a powerful relationship between reading, writing, and oral presentation develops. In many cases, the children's writing can only be described as prolific. One teacher said that for the first time in her teaching career the students asked if they could write more than was assigned. Topics and reasons for writing emerge from many sources. Examples of the students writing for authentic reasons were talked about with the teachers and in one case witnessed by the evaluators. Topics materialized from the children's own experiences

and ideas. The students have a powerful desire to express these pertinent ideas. One evaluator saw a student's booklet of poetry, which marked her feelings of being abandoned by her parents.

The teachers have taken note of their students' ability to orally present materials that they have learned. One outside observer at a school district technology night also noticed what the students had accomplished. According to the eMINTS teacher, "There are people in my university class, computer science majors, who could not do a PowerPoint [presentation] like those two kids were doing. [The university students could not] present it to a group of people they don't know. That says quite a bit. That says quite a bit."

### **Change in cooperation**

Those unfamiliar with eMINTS classrooms suppose that the introduction of computers leads to student isolation, especially as student focus on their computers to complete their work. On the contrary, teachers report that the children work cooperatively, supporting each other in the learning process. One teacher portrays her students as having "such compassion for each other." Examples were given of cooperative strategies beginning to replace competitive structures: eMINTS students helping other eMINTS students in their class; eMINTS students helping other students in the school, eMINTS students helping the teaching staff; and eMINTS students helping their parents. When her students work in pairs, one teacher reported, "it really makes them work hard at finding solutions on their own."

### **Impacts on low achieving students**

Teachers' comments describe noticeable improvements in reading comprehension and writing fluency among children categorized as "low-achievers." In referring to a "problem child" who didn't like to read, teacher claims this same child "has just gone nuts, he loves to read," he's convinced his parents to get connected to the Internet. She speaks of him staying after school to create a PowerPoint presentation about his family. She refers to stories like this taking place in her classroom as "motivation in action." A teacher described a little girl who was a really low reader, who "just soared, it was amazing." She was now reading web pages. "The work that she did and the writing that she did on that computer and the research was amazing"

Teachers describe kids that "would never be involved, never" are now producing in the classroom. Children that one "never would think could teach someone to do something else" now teaching "the smartest kids in class how to do something." Teachers report these students gaining newfound confidence.

### **Changes in instructional practice**

In the eMINTS classrooms, the change in student motivation and activity accompanied a change in teacher practice. In their instructional practice, the teachers became increasingly aware of the limitations of traditional evaluative techniques and devices. In response, they are exploring the possibilities of inquiry-based activities.

### **Teacher-directed instruction balanced with child-initiated learning**

There is an appropriate balance in the classroom between teacher-directed and child-initiated learning, and the eMINTS teachers are striving for this balance. They are at different levels and going at different speeds. Some comments:

“I was very teacher directed first.”

“[Since eMINTS] I do a lot less direct instruction.”

Others are pushing other things back to give time for the students to explore. One teacher said that at times she still finds herself focusing on short quick assignments, telling the students what is wanted and what it should look like when it’s done. But she is changing her strategy, “that’s what I’m going to try to work on next year, is more higher level thinking and more inquiry based.”

### **Time for personal attention**

The changes in teaching strategies afforded teachers time for each student. A teacher explains, “The best thing is that I can walk around and I can talk to the students individually. I can look at their presentation, they can ask me specific questions, and I’m helping each one on their very own level...”

### **Change in student evaluation**

Children’s individual growth and achievement needs to be evaluated. The teachers spoke of refining the way they approach evaluation, of experimenting with methods of authentic assessment. Many teachers said that they could see a change in their students by careful observation, regardless of what a formal test might reveal. Formal test scores become one piece of the picture along with other components of evaluation. One was adamant, “I will tell you right now, MAP is trivial pursuit at it’s best, and what we are doing in our classroom is so much richer. It is done in collaboration, and it has to be done in collaboration, because you give one computer for every two students.” “Because if we were tested on do you know how to use a computer to find information, okay, we’ll ace it.” Continuing, the teacher adds, “All you have to do is come watch the kids.” Many teachers suggested that a portfolio be developed for each child so that they could revisit their work at any time and evaluate the development that has occurred.

### **Curriculum change**

The curriculum likewise changed. In one school, it is reported that textbooks have not been ordered for the coming year. The teachers say their curriculum changes because what they “find online might be ten times better than what you had in a manila folder so, you have to readjust.” Another reported change is that the curriculum is beginning to shift from one of control of learning to one of invitation to learning. The students no longer depend on their classroom teacher to initiate their learning.

### **Teachers preparing for next year**

As their students changed in the eMINTS classroom, teachers also changed. As their training progressed, teachers gained confidence in their ability to use the eMINTS equipment to create new learning environments. Because they are more confident in their abilities teachers are preparing for more achievements next year. They are planning to take advantage of opportunities to expand their knowledge of curricular technology applications. One teacher remarks that if she can get her curriculum to tie in with all the technology, then she'll be ok. Her colleague also expects a better experience next year. With an additional 75 hours of training she exclaims, "We're going to be good!"

For their students, teachers are lining up opportunities and projects for the coming year. One teacher said that this was her year to get smart, and she felt she did most of the learning this past year. Her ultimate goal is to enhance the learning of the students and next year she can really apply what she's learned and get the ball rolling much sooner. Teachers were already planning for next year, "I'm anxious to get started with the web quests."

When reflecting on this past year, the eMINTS teachers described their biggest accomplishments. They say they are not afraid to try something new; they know they can learn new things; and that it's okay not to know everything. The change has been a good one for them and for their students. "If your students are excited, you're excited; and if you're excited, your students are excited," is how one teacher phrased it. Another said:

I've taught a lot of years, and this has been very good for me, the new teaching. I'm trying new things and doing things different. You kind of get in a rut, and [say to yourself] I know what I'm doing here. [But now] I've taught it this [new] way and now I'm sure that the kids are benefiting much more by me doing things differently.

## **Welcome change**

The continuing commitment of the teachers is key to the overall success of this project. The eMINTS teachers say they would not go back to their former way of doing things in the classroom. They describe their experience as positive, involving and, a welcome change. Many attributed eMINTS with reenergizing their teaching career. At the end of the school year, a teacher speaks of being exhausted, but qualifies it by saying "it's a good feeling." Teachers from all over the state agree that they were glad to have been a part of it; that it's like a 20-year shot in the arm and they are ready to go again; and teachers are so excited that are not ready for the school year to end. The feelings of one teacher makes clear what was heard in the focus groups about the changes in the classrooms:

Thank you. Relay our thanks. Truthfully, because we are very grateful, we said that repeatedly, we feel so grateful for the opportunity to participate in this. It's eye opening.

## **A few suggested changes**

At the end of the focus group sessions, teachers were asked for suggestion for the upcoming school year.

## **Suggested changes in training**

The face-to-face interaction in the Cluster trainings contributed to the building of group identity and cohesion. The training was appreciated; but the pace of learning new technology and new teaching strategies was taxing. The teachers made the following suggestions:

Pace the training throughout the year instead of cramming hours at the end of the year

Have a general trouble-shooting class as soon as equipment arrives

Save the WebQuest design until Year 2

Post a calendar of upcoming video conferences on the web

Provide a tape of an exemplary classroom

Allow some time working independently in classroom as training hours

## **Wish list**

The program is evolving. As one teacher said, “they’re building the plane as they’re flying it.” According to the teachers, here is what would make the project even better:

- Ready-made PowerPoint® presentation about eMINTS to be used as a presentation for civic organizations
- More classroom time with the CIS. Being excused from district-required professional development could free up time. “I would have liked some time in my classroom and I’m not talking about like Saturday mornings, or nights, you know, I’m not talking about weekends.”
- A CD burner. Beneficial tool for PowerPoint presentations too large for disc and for video portfolio of children’s work.
- Help break down some of the rigidity for obtaining college credit for eMINTS Resolve institutional barriers for full compliance with contract.
- Even at this date some schools are without phones and air-conditioning.
- Some teachers are not financially compensated for time, travel, or meals.

## **Summary**

Many of the eMINTS teachers were steeped in traditional teaching practices with many years of successful teaching experience to their credit. They were asked to take a risk and implement new methods and procedures in their classrooms. They were asked to be less textbook-bound and less directive. Although these teachers ended the year confident, almost all of them did not start out that way. The new strategies left them at times overwhelmed and doubting if they would survive the year. Now, they cannot see themselves going back to their former teaching practices. Each teacher responded to eMINTS in his or her own way at their own pace; we can confidently say, there have been massive amounts of teacher impact: “It’s so totally different and wonderful in my classroom.” Teachers spoke of eMINTS creating environments that motivates, supports, and encourage children’s learning individually and cooperatively. In their words, “We know it works.”