EDUTOPIA

Harnessing Students’ Curiosity to Drive Learning

The inquiry-based model calls on students to develop questions to investigate and connect to other content.

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Inquiry-based learning, rather than presenting a set of facts, uses student inquiries, questions, interests, and curiosities to drive learning. This level of student involvement makes the learning more relevant, encouraging students to develop their own agency and critical thinking skills.

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The Inspiration

Wildwood was already using inquiry-based learning to some extent, but things took off for them when, in Principal Mary Beth Cunat's second year, the school put on an Inquiry Fair. The event was similar to a science fair, where students demonstrated their personal inquiries/projects and results, some of which aligned with unit content and some of which drew from their own personal interests. This event catalyzed the school's a deep dive into inquiry-based learning once the teachers saw how invested the students became in their areas of research and inquiry.

"All of the sudden, we see our students doing things that really matter to them, and they're excited and they're passionate, and they want to talk about what they're learning," says Cunat.

"[Teachers were] realizing that when you let the students take the reins," reflects Cunat, "you get even better results than when you try to plan every detail, and that if you give students real time, resource, opportunity, support, and feedback to explore something that matters to them, you end up with more than if you just assign a project." …

It All Starts With Questions

Moving to a more inquiry-based style of teaching starts with questions. "Teachers need to develop a standards-based essential question, then open the conversation up to students," says Cunat. "What do they already know or think on this topic? What do they want to learn? What are they wondering about?" The responses will then allow teachers to see what topics or angles students are really inquisitive about as they plan lessons to harness that curiosity.

Wildwood works to gradually acclimate students unaccustomed to the inquiry-based practice. Some, when asked what they want to learn, may not be used to these questions or ready for the freedom to drive their own learning. A good start, says Cunat, is to begin teaching students about the kinds of questions: factual, conceptual, and debatable. Teachers in the lower grades often spend time teaching their kids how to ask questions, question assumptions, observe and ask follow-up questions, and evaluate information.

But while seeking and encouraging student questions is important, teachers at Wildwood try not to simply answer them. Instead, they say, it's more important to model what it's like to be a self-directed learner. So rather than giving students an answer, a teacher will work with them to find the answer, showing the steps along the way. Once students know how to find the information, they can continue learning even when outside of a classroom.

"Students are learning a process," says Cunat. "They're learning to ask questions. They're learning what makes a good question versus a 'yes/no' question. So those kinds of scaffolded experiences help build the child's understanding of how to ask questions. Where do you find answers out? Eventually, how do you save searches? All the way up through the upper grades or making sure that they are practicing good digital citizenship as they're involved in this kind of inquiry, because kids can go in directions that are not safe for them." …

Clear communication between teachers and students also is an essential part of opening up learning to student inquiry. "Very clear learning objectives are communicated at the beginning of each day and each unit, so students know what content is being covered," says Jennings. "Figure out what your non-negotiables are for the lesson, and give everything else up to the creativity and ownership of the kids."

When individual students develop interests that don't fit in with content that the whole class needs to know, or want to pursue something not built into curricular inquiries, Wildwood gives students the option of making it a personal project.

"For instance, we have a student who's so completely obsessed with wolves," says Cunat. "And he talked to wolf biologists, he talked to all kinds of people who love wolves. He joined wolf advocacy groups, and he eventually did a wolf assembly for the whole school. So he's learning the reading and the writing and the speaking and the listening. And he's doing all kinds of important work, and he's producing something that's uniquely his and talking about that. And you'll never be able to replace that. It matters to the child, and they'll carry that with them for their whole life."…