EDUCATION MATTERS "**BACK TO THE BASICS"**

Concern over Manitoba students' declining scores on standardized mathematics and literacy tests has raised questions about the recent emphasis on "inquiry based teaching" and has sounded the battle cry to go "back to the basics" in education. The result of this debate leaves the impression that educators must choose between these two methods of teaching. Media and popular opinion oversimplify the debate causing educators to overreact. The idea that "Back to Basics" and "Inquiry Method" cannot be complementary makes the education policy pendulum swing wildly in one direction or another. We frequently get ourselves into difficulty by treating complicated concepts as though they are "black and white". But in the case of basics versus inquiry debate, these two concepts can be reconciled to form a firm foundation for successful education.

First of all, what does teaching the basics and the inquiry method mean? Teaching the basics is a belief that there are core ideas and facts that every student needs to master. This is accomplished by rote practice and memorization without necessarily understanding why each step must be done as directed. Teaching becomes following a recipe. The inquiry or discovery method is essentially the student finding answers to questions by investigating and discovering. Students explore options and possibilities. Giving them the opportunity to do critical and creative thinking should allow them to better adapt in the 21st century where conditions are changing and unpredictable.

But these two methods do not need to be treated as polar opposites. There is value in a critical inquiry method that moves forward with the basics. Students cannot possibly discover everything we want them to learn. Expecting students to invent everything for themselves is inefficient and unrealistic. So supplying basic knowledge and facts can enhance the students' learning and empower them to be better problem solvers. However it is important to keep in mind that understanding why they should memorize the facts enhances their learning. "The more we help students comprehend what we want them to remember, the less students need to learn by memorization" (CEA "The Basics and Inquiry Teaching" Education Canada). Most students must remember many basic facts and sometimes that can only be mastered by repetition. But without meaning or understanding why these facts need to be memorized, repetition is unlikely to increase understanding. For example, a student may have memorized formulas and be able to recite them but without understanding where and how to apply them, the knowledge becomes useless. Mindful practice would involve demonstrating where basic facts help to solve more complex problems.

Adopting inquiry teaching that nurtures and builds from the basics can lead to improved results. It strengthens student engagement and proficiency. It would be unfortunate to discontinue inquiry based learning because some interpretations of the concept are ineffective. And it would be equally unfortunate to return to rote learning as in the past if proved ineffective in preparing students for an increasingly complex world. A middle ground that draws upon the best of both approaches will make our students successful in the classroom and the 21st century.

Submitted by The Board of Trustees of Beautiful Plains School Division
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