

Education? It's also about attitudes

In August and September there have been two powerful columns written by Gary Matthews, the Superintendent of Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools. He questions what it is that creates successful learners.

Yes, it is the quality of the teaching. Yes, it is the background knowledge the students bring into the classroom. The work of educational researcher Robert Marzano has demonstrated that these are highly significant factors in student achievement. But successful education must also address the preconceptions and attitudes of students.

In its report "How People Learn", The National Academy of Science ('How People Learn', edited by the Committee on Developments in the Science of Learning, National Academy of Sciences, National Academy Press, Washington, 2000) identifies three findings that are necessary for successful learning. One of these is stated thus: "Students come to the classroom with preconceptions about how the world works. If their initial understanding is not engaged they may fail to grasp the new concepts and information that are taught, or they may learn them for the purpose of a test but revert to their preconceptions outside the classroom."

Students do not come into the classroom devoid of ideas about how the world works. They have preconceptions based on the information and ideas they have gleaned from their experiences in the world. The trouble is, while these preconceptions may not always be correct and they can be deep seated and difficult to change. What may seem obvious – that a pound of feathers will fall more slowly than a pound of lead, or that it's warmer in the summer because we are closer to the sun, – are also incorrect. These preconceptions need to be uncovered and addressed by teachers. Sometimes unlearning needs to be done before effective learning can take place.

It isn't just a matter of increasing students' background knowledge. It is also a matter of uncovering and dealing with the preconceptions they have as they walk into the classroom. Many of these preconceptions involve attitudes. Wise teachers know that reading books is about far more than just decoding the text and analyzing the content. They know it is also about how students feel about books and reading. If we want to develop students who are lifelong readers and learners, we need to work on attitudes, not just skills.

Our standardized testing programs are casting a blindingly strong light on the development of easily measured skills that can be economically tested with forced choice, 'bubble the right answer' test questions. The light is so strong we are being blinded to the real complexity of education.

In the recent PBS News hour program (October 11th) examining the experiences of Parker Land, a Virginia 'turnaround principal', two teachers discuss their views of schooling today. One teacher states "The goal is that they've got to pass the test. Some of the kids aren't going to learn all the concepts, but if they have some of the strategies, they

still can pass.” Her colleague isn’t so sure “I can’t go along with that, no. I can’t support that. The goal for all of our schools -- and I guess it’s the goal for schools across the country -- is to pass standardized tests, but the goal of educators is to prepare children to become responsible, contributing adults.” Our schools should be developing life long learners not just successful test takers. Life long learning thrives on the right attitudes.

Robert Marzano describes the use of “direct approaches” for the development of background knowledge. Taking students to new, interesting places such as art galleries, concerts and museums does more than provide background knowledge. It nurtures attitudes in ways that “indirect approaches” such as classroom based vocabulary instruction will never do. These attitudes are the foundation for learning that lasts.

Perhaps the sorry state we are finding ourselves in with education is demonstrated by the frustration of the elementary school principal who wanted to take students from a high poverty school to an international tattoo performed locally where they would see music being created by people from around the world. The opportunity was denied because it was seen as an inappropriate use of “instructional time”. The opportunity to change and enrich attitudes was lost because of a single minded focus on the teaching of testable skills, at the expense of the broader goals of lasting education.

At a workshop for Girl Scouts co-sponsored by the Girl Scouts, NASA Langley and Christopher Newport University it was disturbing to see the reaction when the girls were asked to answer a question that had more than one possible correct answer. As soon as one answer had been given and accepted, they stopped thinking! Why? Because they have been well trained to believe that there is only ever one right answer in a test. There is an attitude being fostered here that denies curiosity, ambiguity and creative thinking.

We need skilled teachers in our classrooms. We also need to do what we can to broaden the background knowledge students bring to each new learning experience. Our teachers must engage that background knowledge and uncover the preconceptions that our students have as they enter the classroom. We must not to lose sight of the fact that a large part of those preconceptions is about attitudes.

Building attitudes in the educational program is just as important as teaching skills. Students who know the skills and factual knowledge can forget it all when they leave the testing room. Students with attitudes of curiosity, persistence and creativity will remain lifelong learners.