

Schools are complex, diverse organisms. A school is no longer a place to simply attend class but includes endless options for extra-curricular activities, career opportunities, and college planning resources. At the end of the day, schools need to ask themselves: what really matters? Every school has programs, teachers, and productions they are known for but all successful schools share common, definable characteristics. First and foremost, meaningful learning must take place. How schools know this actually happens is a million dollar industry, however, all parties involved will agree that school is a place where true learning needs to happen. Second, students need to be actively engaged in reflection. When students are given time to reflect on their strengths, weaknesses and future goals, school and learning have more purpose and become more meaningful. Finally, students not only need to mature academically but socially as well. Students need to be taught how to get along with one another in a diverse community. This begins with discovering who they are as individuals. These three keys, meaningful learning, engaging reflection, and developing as citizens form the foundation of successful schools' curriculum.

To begin, it is important that meaningful student learning takes place throughout the school day. To achieve this goal, teachers invest time and energy in knowing their students and in differentiating instruction to teach students with an array of learning needs and styles. Preparation for the school day is critical to meeting the academic needs of students and balancing knowledge received, knowledge discovered, and knowledge constructed (Ellis, A.K 2001). In addition to teaching preparation and practice, meaningful student learning requires a trusting relationship between student and teacher, and as a result, a relationship that allows students freedom of choice in their learning. Tomlinson writes, "When I could give them options about how to learn and express what they knew, learning improved" (Canestrari & Marlowe, 2010). Providing students an opportunity to participate in decision-making allows students to take ownership of their learning, cultivates intrinsic motivation, and sparks student interest and enthusiasm. Last, meaningful learning has taken place when students have been empowered and are strengthened their self-efficacy as a learner.

In order for students to learn to their fullest extent, they must be allowed and encouraged to reflect on their learning and experiences. This is not a silent reflection, but one of discussion; discussion with peers, teachers, and family members. "Speech develops intellect just as intellect develops speech...you must give your students more time to talk to one another about the things they are learning, the school experiences they have, and the ways that they perceive value in what they are learning. (Ellis. A.K. 2001) Another aspect to effective student learning is students must understand why they are learning what they are being taught. They must see a real world application for the knowledge they are receiving and creating. Subject matter must not be isolated to the classroom alone but also must include real world application of the subject. When students see a need in their lives for information, they want to learn and are eager to acquire knowledge. Finally, in order for a classroom to be reflective, students must be able to step back from what they have learned and feel a sense of accomplishment. "Reflection involves stepping back from what you're doing in order to achieve some measure of perspective. It means thinking, talking, and otherwise expressing your feelings, the things you've learned, the growth you've achieved, and the sense you have of accomplishing something" (Ellis, A.K. 2001) By allowing students the opportunity to reflect, teachers empower students to develop valuable life long skills such as reflection, accomplishment, and a thirst for knowledge.

One of the most overlooked aspects of the school day is moral education. As important as it is to instruct students in core subjects, it is of equal importance to instruct them how to be good citizens in society. There are two parts to this: self-consciousness and empathy. Students need to learn self-awareness or "a fully realized sense of one's self, that 'I' exist as a being separate from the world around 'me', but am at the same time connected to others and the world." (Ellis, A.K. 2001) In order for students to become good citizens, they must first understand themselves as an individual. The classroom is an ideal setting for this because students are surrounded by a diverse group of peers. "The sense of individual identity takes on meaning only in the context of others. This is the beginning of respect, responsibility, and caring." (Ellis, A.K. 2001) This sense of consciousness is formed through meaningful and respectful dialogue. The teacher serves as guide and mediator while the students learn to state their opinions in a way, which doesn't attack or harm others while listening to differing views from their classmates. This focus on the individual's sense of identity also develops empathy and social competence (Goleman's Emotional Intelligence), which benefits the greater

community. Students can relate to one another with empathy because the confidence that comes with knowing who they are makes opposing ideas less combative. A classroom that is a safe place for dialogue and introspection will help to develop both self-consciousness and empathy for others.

In conclusion, throughout the school day it is essential that students experience meaningful learning, are engaging in reflection and are developing as responsible citizens. When the preceding goals are effectively being met, the result is an environment that values students, their individuality, as well as their responsibility to one another. In addition, this environment is respectful and interactive, encouraging all students in their growth and development as lifelong learners. In the end, when the school day comes to a close, educators hope students want to return in the morning.

Bibliography

Ellis, Arthur K. Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Together: The Reflective Classroom. Eye on Education. 2001.

Canestrari, Alan & Marlowe, Bruce. Educational Foundations: An Anthology of Critical Readings. Sage Publications. 2004.

I. Introduction: At the end of the school day, what really matters?

- A. Meaningful learning has taken place
- B. Students have engaged in reflection
- C. Students are developing as citizens

II. Meaningful student learning has taken place

- A. Students have grown academically through knowledge received, discovered and constructed
 - 1. It is important that the teacher knows his/her students and is able to differentiate their instruction and teach to an array of learning styles for academic achievement
- B. There is trust between teacher and student, and students have been given choice in their learning
 - 1. "When I could give them options about how to learn and express what they knew, learning improved" (Tomlinson in Canestrari and Marlowe, p. 189).
- C. Students are learning responsibility
 - 1. Self-efficacy: Students have been empowered in their learning

III. The classroom is a place of reflective practice

- A. Students have been given opportunities to work and reflect on their learning with one another (group learning)
 - 2. Quote: "Speech develops intellect just as intellect develops speech...you simply must give your students more time to talk to one another about the things they are learning, the school experiences they have, and the ways that they perceive value in what they are learning" (Ellis, p. 54).
- B. Students understand a real world application for the knowledge they are learning
 - 1. Quote: "Reflection involves stepping back from what you're doing in order to achieve some measure of perspective. It means thinking, talking, and otherwise expressing your feelings, the things you've learned, the growth you've achieved, and the sense you have of accomplishing something" (Ellis, p. 5)

IV. Students are developing as moral citizens

- A. Raised consciousness
 - 1. Self-awareness or "a fully realized sense of one's self, that "I" exist as a being separate from the world

around "me," but am at the same time connected to others and the world" (Ellis, p. 54)

a) "The sense of individual identity takes on meaning only in the context of others. This is the beginning of respect, responsibility and caring" (Ellis, p. 54)

B. Students have engaged in meaningful and respectful conversation

1. The teacher and the students have asked hard questions and explored individual and corporate moral responsibility in a world that is growing more and more diverse every day.

C. Social Competence (Goleman)

1. Empathy and social skills (Ellis, p. 51)

V. Conclusion

A. What really matters; meaningful learning and reflection, and the development of student as moral citizens

1. These are all interconnected

2. We want students to find meaning in being at school. We want them to want to be there!