

Inquiry-Based Learning: Developing Student-Driven Questions

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Putting Students In Charge of Their Learning

Through inquiry, Wildwood works to ignite passion, inspire relevance, and develop ownership in their students. Using student inquiries and questions as guidance, teachers develop lessons that engage and excite, teaching their students to be active thinkers rather than passive learners.

Defining Inquiry

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.

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."

Student-driven inquiry is now the norm at Wildwood, as teachers regularly use student questions and lines of inquiry to drive their lessons. Students are also encouraged to pursue their curiosity through personal projects, lead school assemblies, work in one of the school's makerspaces, and more. Teachers are moving away from the "sage on the stage" style and facilitating or guiding students through learning subjects they are curious and passionate about.

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."

Student Curiosity Leads the Learning

Once teachers have teased out various lines of inquiry that capture the students' interest, they find avenues for channeling that inquiry and give students opportunities to explore. Inquiry-based learning is more concerned with the process of learning (how well the students learn how to learn) than the product of learning (a worksheet or correct quiz). If the students need to learn how to analyze a text, Wildwood teachers are more interested in teaching them how to analyze a text than the particular text that they choose to analyze.

"So kids are hitting the standards with the bigger questions and being able to create evidence of their understandings and their learnings in all kinds of ways that the kids get to pick," says Cunat. "If a kid wants to do a video about kangaroos, they can do a video about kangaroos to show they're learning about mammals. And then it's their job to show, 'What do I know about mammals, and kangaroos as mammals?' So a kid can take that content in the directions that they want to learn, and then it's their job to provide evidence of their learning."

A Willingness to Be Flexible

"Empowering students doesn't mean we're doing less planning," says Cunat. But it does mean that teachers must be willing to be flexible. Lessons can go anywhere. Depending on what the students are interested in, learning may go in a totally different direction than the teacher planned. "With inquiry, the teacher has a general road map of a possible end-result," says eighth-grade teacher Rebecca Braun, "but depending on the group of kids, that road map could be abandoned, tweaked, and/or revised. It makes it more interesting. This also requires the teacher to lean into the idea of allowing the learning to move in a different direction. Usually it's more fascinating and engaging than what I originally had planned."

Eighth-grade teacher Brigid Jennings believes that pacing is the key to ensuring that the curriculum is being covered. "It's OK to have fluid lesson plans, and to let things take off in whatever direction the students' love for learning takes them," says Jennings. "I would suggest for teachers to create a monthly and year-long pacing guide to make sure that everything that needs to be covered does get done."

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."

Students can pair up with a faculty sponsor to determine the learning goal and audience, and examine whether the project might lend itself to an event or assembly. "This year, the number of projects, events, and assemblies got to be so frequent that teachers asked me to develop a protocol to limit how many times per quarter their students are pulled out of the classroom," says Cunat. "I am turning the development and approval process over to the student government. I am expecting that we may have two days per quarter that are big 'event' days -- kind of like a conference with breakout sessions run by students for students."

Steering Inquiries Keeps Students On Track

While flexibility is key to success with inquiry, class time is not a free-for-all. Teachers always need to guide the inquiry toward further learning and keep students from being sidetracked.

Fourth-grade teacher Georgia Melidis sometimes has to be creative with matching the inquiries to curriculum content, but she finds that there is almost always a way to do so. "We teachers are the best at tying things in or connecting things," says Melidis. "It will almost always connect with what I need to teach. . . . In the event that it absolutely cannot connect or is taking away from what I need to teach, we compromise. I tell them if they want to keep going in the direction they took the inquiry, then they have to be held accountable for what I had in mind as well. I make it work by either telling my students to make the connections themselves, or by telling them to make it work their way. Basically, I tell them that we have to learn a certain skill/content, and I ask them to prove to me that they learned it, their way."

Teachers may also ask students to pursue some of their inquiries as private projects, or occasionally set boundaries when students broach a topic that is inappropriate or concerning. Teachers at Wildwood may discuss with parents and students why a particular topic has come up and what the boundaries are for their learning at that time.

"I was distressed this year because a line of inquiry and reading Number the Stars resulted in some fascination with Hitler and the Nazi party in one of my grades," said Cunat. "A few years ago, it was fascination with military weapons. This year a group of students wanted to examine genocide. Depending on the age, conversations have to occur with the students, parents, and teachers about what is developmentally appropriate for the learner at that time, and to assure them as they get older they will be able to explore those areas with more knowledge, experience, and perspective. We do not want to shut kids' curiosity down, but we have to frame some of the investigations into atrocity and human rights violations, animal cruelty, industrial massacre of the environment, in a way that is developmentally appropriate and solution-oriented."