

Education Specifications

Learning in Inquiry-Based Environments

Teachers are Facilitators and Mentors

Imagine an inquiry-based environment where the curriculum is framed as a project such as a sixth-grade class divided into groups and tasked with designing and marketing a new surfboard. To complete the project, students learn physics, material properties, business, and communication skills. Projects are open ended and designed using themes or essential questions that students cannot answer or complete with prior knowledge alone. Students must construct knowledge while working through the project either alone or in groups. The project requires students to draw upon and make connections between multiple subject areas.

Real world problem solving offers opportunities to work alone while others may require collaboratively working together. Working independently in self-directed study, students learn to make decisions, solve problems, and ultimately form their own positions. Working together in a collaborative group, students learn how to share their position with others and how to evaluate the position of others. They learn to see the world from multiple points of view. By focusing on investigation and decision making, the responsibility of learning rests with the students. Working this way shapes students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Students learn how to think, and more importantly, they learn to reflect on the process, and how that process results in a solution. Therefore, classrooms and schools today, design is conducive to inquiry-based learning experiences.

This project-based, student-centered approach to learning does not discount the important role of the teacher. As facilitator and mentor, the teacher is more important than ever. Curriculum design, instructional scaffolding, and maintaining an intimate connection with the learning style and pathway of students are but a few of the aspects to consider when creating an inquiry-based learning environment that fully engages the student in the process.



Creativity is Integral

Returning to the surfboard project mentioned above only highlights or scratches the surface of the qualities and characteristics of an inquiry-based environment. It suggests and encourages the possibilities of embracing creativity and innovation. By integrating art with science and math, students engage with different subject areas, utilize a variety of thinking processes, as they learn to naturally move more fluidly between them all. Working in one mode not only informs the other, it makes developing more creative solutions all the more possible.

Presented with the right tools and information, students are able to make discoveries. They learn to actively form their own thoughts, feelings, and impressions in response to the tools at hand. When students are given a degree of discovery, choice, and creativity, the work becomes more meaningful, and the learning becomes more robust.