A MESSAGE FROM THE HEAD OF SCHOOL

# Considering the Issue in Question: An Inquiry-Based Approach to Learning

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When you were young, did you ever disregard your parents' advice on a particular issue only to have a profound personal revelation (that was surprisingly consistent with your parents' counsel) when you experienced the same issue for yourself? Did you ever wonder why your children seem destined to repeat this same pattern? There is a Chinese proverb that speaks directly to this point: "What comes in through the gate is not family treasure." Stated differently, being told something by someone else simply does not resonate with the same power as arriving at the same conclusion on your own.

This principle applies to education, too. If you want to help students understand something deeply, you can't just tell them what you think they need to know. Ideally, you need to help them figure it out for themselves. To be sure, there is an important place for explicit instruction. However, as much as possible, we need to embed explicit instruction within activities students recognize as purposeful and interesting and that involve the students taking control of their own learning, thinking, and problem solving.

One such instructional model is an inquiry-based approach to learning. The essence of an inquiry-based approach is getting students to ask questions that direct their explorations of content. However, asking questions is just the beginning. In an inquiry-based approach, questions lead to: the consideration of how best to approach those questions, the collection and analysis of data, the summarization of findings, the communication of conclusions, and the emergence of new questions that initiate the whole process again.

To provide a better understanding of what an inquiry-based approach looks like in practice, let me share a few examples from the Jamestown unit I am currently teaching in Mrs. Spirokostas' class of second and third graders. I opened the unit by providing the following introduction intended to initiate a series of questions from the students: On December 20, 1606, three small ships carrying about 100 passengers and 40 crew members quietly left the docks of London, England. They were headed to the New World hoping to start a colony in Virginia. The people who organized this venture gathered all the information they could find about previous explorations to the New World, but they still didn't know much about Virginia.

What they did know is:

- *It was a long trip across a big ocean to get to the New World and not every ship made it there safely.*
- *There were two attempts by England to establish colonies in North America in the past 25 years and both failed.*
- *The last group of English colonists disappeared entirely and no one knows what happened to them.*
- *The land was filled with native inhabitants who were not always friendly to new settlers.*
- *Spain was the most powerful empire in the world and the Spanish claimed all of North America as their own.*
- *When a group of Frenchmen tried to establish a colony along the east coast of North America in 1564, the Spanish sent 500 soldiers and destroyed it completely.*

After hearing all of this, what questions are raised in your mind?

The students began working in small groups and generated a long list of questions. For example, "Why didn't the Spanish wipe out Jamestown (as they had the French colony before it)?" "Why didn't the Spanish let them have a little space?" "Why did the English come?" After reviewing all of the questions, I shared that we would answer many of their questions together in the unit. But, I asked them, if they had to pick one question that was the most important question for us to answer at this time, which would it be? They agreed that the key question at this point in time was: "Why did they come?" This initiated an investigation of what was happening in the world and in England leading up to 1607 that would help explain this precarious expedition that seemed at best risky and at worst ill-advised.

Once we established this foundation and explored how the native people in Virginia lived before the English arrived, I showed the class a map that outlined the roundabout route the original colonists took across the Atlantic. Without any prompting from me, a hand shot up, and a student asked, "Why did they go that way? Why didn't they just go straight across?" Once they finished predicting the reasons, we explored the answers to those questions. Then, we looked at a map of the spot the colonists chose for the settlement they soon christened Jamestown. The location is 60 miles up the James River and not an obvious choice at all. After a bit of inspection and discussion with their partners, they asked, "Why did they choose to settle there?" This is the pattern we have followed again and again throughout the unit. I provide descriptions, texts, visuals, and/or scaffolding that prompt the students to ask questions. They predict the answers to those questions based on what they know, and then they explore the answers to those questions.

While inquiry has generated enthusiasm, engagement, and deep understanding in the classroom, the approach's greatest benefit is in how it prepares students for the future. To be successful in the 21st century, you need to be adept at seeing beyond what is currently known. To move thinking forward, you need to be a flexible and creative thinker. It is about innovation, and that starts by critically evaluating what is known and asking what is possible. That type of generative thinking is nurtured by getting in the habit of asking and answering questions while reflecting on multiple perspectives and collaborating and communicating with others. All of these qualities, skills, and practices are facilitated within an inquiry-based approach to learning.