

Understanding Learning: How Recent Research Supports Natural Affinities

By Natalie Tucker Miller

Fielding questions from parents about the best way to "teach" young children, I often revert to research that supports integrated and emergent education models. However, parents influenced by marketing trends and imprudent education mandates are often skeptical by what they view as hackneyed analysis. How thrilling to come across leading edge research, such as David A. Sousa's, "How the Brain Learns", which presents evidence of brain development in the first five years of life and the potential this has in the area of early childhood education and beyond.

An exciting revelation of brain research is that educators get to rethink the long-standing "tabula rasa" theory. This refers to the thesis that individuals are born with no innate or built-in mental content, and that their entire resource of knowledge is built up gradually. Researchers now know that children are ready and motivated to learn, not by being fed knowledge, but by discovering the world around them. It's up to the teachers, parents and caregivers in their lives to provide the inspiration and facilitation. And instead of a mandated curriculum, it's creativity and individuation that will best ensure a student's lifelong success.

Children's curious nature and natural motivation to learn, instinctively facilitate them to walk, talk, master manipulative tasks and do numerous activities that others, from whom they learn, are doing. Educational experiences that allow students to continue learning in the ways that helped them master these important skills are far more beneficial and sustainable than standardized academic programs.

Parents can be erroneously concerned about children learning "the basics". But what is meant by the "basics?" Sometime during the last century or so, a misguided theory of what is important for all students emerged. Perhaps this model was thought to be important during the industrial age when training people for the labor market was a priority. But we now know that the world is a fast-changing, increasingly open and global society where individuals need to be confident, flexible and independent thinkers and learners. The importance of nurturing these qualities cannot be understated. We're finally beginning to understand that a child is not "behind" or "learning disabled" if certain concepts do not emerge in a specified timeline. It's the teachers and parents that are "teaching disabled" when they believe this to be true.

One of the great detriments of current educational precepts is the idea that we compartmentalize information like ABC's and language and reading in the early years, or as we mature, math and writing and geometry, etc.. This is contrary to recent findings, and challenges our notions of the way people truly learn. Academic subjects that are presented as interrelated can be synthesized in a more meaningful way, thus retained and applied appropriately and in context. According to David Whitebread, author of *The Psychology of Teaching and Learning in School*, "This natural and powerful way of learning is vastly inhibited when we are presented with new information or experience which does not relate to what we already know".

Brain development research is confirming that allowing children to continue learning in ways that are organic and inspiring is what true education is all about. Imposing a curriculum with disregard for personal capacity and preferences is an outdated framework in education, parenting and training in general. It's thrilling to see

research support the benefit of fostering an individual's innate capabilities through a holistic, rather than pigeonholed, approach.

About the Author
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