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Literacy: Learning and Loving It!

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My former school's motto is "Learning and Loving It." Our Theme Learning approach (a form of inquiry learning) capitalizes on children's innate curiosity and desire to learn, and, moreover, aims to keep this curiosity alive throughout their schooling. Halifax Independent School is a small K–9 school where children learn in multi-age groups and in a setting where all the core subjects are integrated into the study of interesting themes such as Oceans, Nova Scotia, and Living Things. These themes last a whole year, involve the whole elementary school, and are designed to cover traditional subject areas such as language arts, social studies, and science. Teachers outline the broad areas of study each year, but students have a lot of say in the topics they delve into.

This inquiry approach grew out of one of the principles of the whole

language movement of the 70s: purposeful situations and authentic materials provide the best literacy learning. Children are motivated to learn to read and write when there is a real reason that makes sense to them to do so. Wanting to find out more about an animal that interests them, to read the caption on an intriguing picture, or to follow instructions on how to build a model boat are powerful motivators. Making signs for displays, writing letters to real people about topics students care about, or writing small books about the lifecycle of their favorite sea creatures encourages children to see the written word as essential for communication.

My experience is that children gain literacy skills as they are ready. They learn because they want to, because they want to keep up with their friends, and because they see

reading as a source of everything that is mysterious and fascinating in the adult world—a gateway to knowledge and mastery of skills, and a source of pleasure. When literacy is allowed to unfold in a gentle organic way, without pressure, children see learning to read as an exciting adventure, not an anxiety-producing chore.

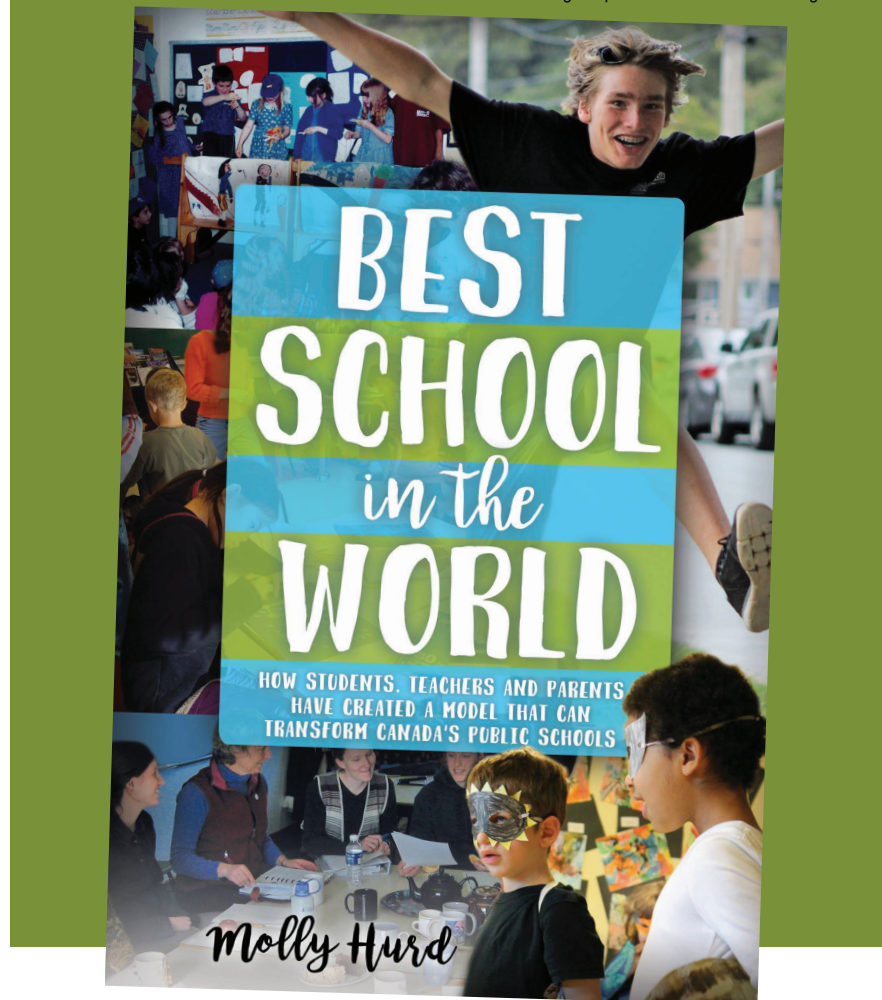
As cited in my book *Best School in the World* (Formac 2017), research shows that there is no long-term disadvantage to learning to read at later ages. Children who read later, especially in multi-age classes, still benefit from the hands-on activities that go along with theme studies. Even if learners are not ready to read yet, they are developing their imaginations, creativity, and verbal expression. These are crucial skills that can be crushed in classrooms in which the mechanics of literacy are drilled, and

where children believe mastering these mechanics is a measure of learners' worth.

Part of the problem in many of today's schools is that teachers are bound by yearly "outcomes" or standards that all pupils must meet on a rigid timetable. This "one size fits all" approach becomes especially problematic in the early years of elementary school where children's rates of development vary widely. A six-year-old who is more interested in building forts and Lego spaceships than in the printed word may not be able to "use commas in dates and to separate single words in a series" as a Common Core standard (2017) for grade one demands—she may not even know what a sentence is. If she is subjected to many lessons on the subject when she is barely writing simple words, she may tune out, and when she is developmentally ready to learn the conventions of comma usage, they may not be taught. When she is twenty-two does it matter if she learned to use a comma correctly at age six or at age eight? Research—and common sense—say no.

In a Theme Learning or inquiry classroom at Halifax Independent School, a group of six- and seven-year-olds in a multi-age class studying the geology of Nova Scotia are divided into groups to study particular minerals (which they have chosen). A typical class might have one group at a table with microscopes, rock samples, and samples of sand from Nova Scotia's beaches. Their task is to record some of what they see under the microscopes.

Another group is at the "research table" where the children look at the questions they had previously generated about their minerals and consult the assortment of illustrated nonfiction books scattered about. The first question, "What are the uses of coal?" has them all looking through indexes and scanning



What is noticeable when visiting a class such as this is that the children are engaged in what they are doing: chatting to each other about the subject matter at hand, helping each other, collaborating over shared inquiries, and comparing their findings.

through pictures, and when one finds a passage that looks interesting, he reads it aloud, with teacher help, to the others. After a brief discussion of coal-burning power plants that produce electricity for our houses, the children write up the information in their own words (and creative spelling).

The third group is writing a few sentences in their journals about pictures they have drawn. One child dictates a description of her picture to the teacher, who writes it down, so that the student can copy it. Another writes, "On the weknd I saw a moovee it was frzn. Anna savd Elsa the qeen. It was vry cold." The teacher suggests

to this child that there should be one more period there, and she quickly finds where to put it, capitalizing the following "I". The teacher is not correcting the children's spelling in their journals, but notices such things as when someone is ready to add a period to help clarify meaning. There is a fine line that teachers in this type of classroom walk—too much correcting might inhibit children's desire to write or at least try out new words, but pointing out ways to make their writing easier to read at the right time may be all a child needs to solidify a punctuation concept.

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subject matter at hand, helping each other, collaborating over shared inquiries, and comparing their findings. When it is time to change activities, some children are so absorbed they don't want to move—the teacher assures them they can come back to an activity later. Because learners get a lot of individual help, they accept each other's differences and always have something they can improve on. Smaller classes are necessary, but so, too, are standards that are used only as guidelines, assessments that are tailored to the needs of the children, and a curriculum that is inspired by what children are interested in.

Since this approach to literacy doesn't generally use textbooks or workbooks, teachers become the

gatherers of authentic materials, both from public and school libraries, community organizations, and institutions. Halifax Independent relied heavily on public libraries for good nonfiction children's books, literature, and teacher resources, but since the school moved into its own building ten years ago, it has been building its own collections. The school library is now a welcoming place where children go to research, to work quietly, and to read for pleasure.

This "sneaking the learning in," as one five-year-old described the teaching methodology at Halifax Independent School, has produced children who love to read, are excited about learning, and who continue to learn throughout their lives.

Molly Hurd's perspectives on education have been developed out of her wide variety of teaching experiences in northern Quebec, rural Nova Scotia, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Britain. She was a teacher and head teacher at Halifax Independent School for twenty years. She believes passionately that keeping children's natural love of learning alive throughout their school years is the best thing a school can do for its students.

Work Cited:

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