

On the Core Competencies of the 21st Century (Part One of a Two-Part Article)
By Janet Stork

I know it can seem difficult to define our pedagogy, now that we have moved away from a primary focus on Montessori. When parents hear Montessori, or Waldorf, or Walden, they feel secure because they have a succinct label to embrace; but I actually think that we have adopted a simpler pedagogy, not a more complex one. Alternative pedagogies like Montessori or Waldorf give a clear sense of existing *in reaction to* mainstream practice. But all of those pedagogies start with their own assumptions and biases that contain some myth and folklore, and are not necessarily grounded in the best of what we know now, in 2009-2010, about the relationship of teaching to learning, and what practices support learning for most children. They make assumptions about teaching and learning that don't always stand up to research tools which are now readily available, but couldn't have been known in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Certainly, our understanding of the brain and of learning and social/emotional differences was much less developed then. I am reminded of current books like NurtureShock by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman, that are disproving assumed truths about child development with real evidence-based research.

At TBS, our focus is to ensure that students learn and understand, have opportunities to pursue their interests and passions, and practice habits of mind and heart that will serve them well regardless of what path they ultimately choose. In our case, we have intentionally put learning and understanding at the center of our pedagogy. Within those parameters, we have a set of core values that speaks to our image of the child, the teacher, the physical classroom environment, the school community, the role of parents, etc. Sounds simple? Sounds like that is what schools are about ANYWAY, so why would we say this pedagogy is distinctive?

It is true that schools have always said that they are about learning, but we know that millions of students come out of school without having really developed a thirst for ongoing learning or embedded productive habits of minds and heart; worse, they have been turned off to school and learning. Why? The problem has been that most schools cannot explicitly articulate what they think learning looks like, and have not connected the motivation, relevance, student interests, and social networking that students crave. Learning what? Learning *for* what? How do we decide what is worth learning? How do we know when students (or teachers, for that matter) are learning? What are the underlying processes and skills that most likely lead to learning?

Most schools adopt programs---a whole-school program like Montessori, or elements of programs (a math program, a reading program, etc.) -- but they are not necessarily evidence-based, or growing out of an overarching framework about learning that can inform why certain math, writing, reading, science, etc. programs make sense. Nor do they start with seemingly simple questions about the processes and diversity of learning, to determine what are the best bets of teaching practices, and how best to train teachers to create the optimal conditions under which many/most children have the tools for learning. Whatever programs (TERC, and so on) TBS chooses to adopt must first pass the litmus test of growing out of research about children's understanding (in this case, math) and the need to address a range of learners.

So when TBS decided to adopt a framework called Teaching for Understanding (developed at Harvard Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education), we committed ourselves to investing in it over time, so that its roots would grow deep and wide throughout the school. It's not something that teachers can just begin to do overnight. We made a decision that the framework about learning is the most important piece, the foundation on which everything else is built; and that in order to for it to support our whole school, we must provide ongoing scaffolding, so that teachers and parents can begin to understand the theory, questions, and teaching practices that lead to learning and understanding.

The Teaching For Understanding framework is the scaffolding that gives teachers the structure, tools, and common language to work through these fundamental questions: 1) how does a teacher go about picking the areas and skills that are important to learn at a given level; 2) how does a teacher make explicit for himself/herself and (equally important) for the students the purposes of learning about a given topic or long-term study; 3) how does a teacher develop ongoing assessment tools to determine whether students are in fact learning, and understanding the stated purposes of learning; and 4) how does the teacher offer students opportunities for demonstrating their understanding, which means using their acquired foundational skills, concepts, critical thinking routines, etc. to solve problems that use academic skills in straightforward ways (as many schools do) as well as more novel ways that push children's thinking beyond the obvious and given (as we want to do).

What we are trying to do at TBS is educate children for *their* future, which many leaders across fields believe will continue to require competencies in all the

literacies (math, written & oral communication, technology, media), with a focus on the development of critical inquiry, imagination, creativity, collaboration, and other high-level intellectual skills. In addition to this, we aspire to continue TBS' focus on nurturing qualities like persistence, being open to a challenge, purposeful engagement, kindness, respect, community and environmental stewardship, and doing one's best on problems you love and problems you don't.

So, what is our pedagogy? The answer is very simple. We want children to develop the skills, tools, and habits of mind and heart to become well-educated, well-intentioned, happy, creative, respectful people, who are likely to be a combination of followers and leaders, and whom we hope will work towards the common good, making a positive difference in their own lives, the lives of others, and if possible, the larger world. We want our children to really learn and understand; through those successes (and only through them) can children develop the spirit of becoming lifelong, internally motivated, independent, inquisitive learners, interested in the world and the people around them, as well as themselves. And we want to do these things using methods, based on sound research, that have been proven to work.