PRINCIPLES OF BEST PRACTICE LEARNING

Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools
By Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, 1998

The Best Practice model of education is characterized by the following thirteen interlocking principles, assumptions, or theories.

Student-Centered. The best starting point for schooling is young people's interests; all across the curriculum investigating students' own questions should always take precedence over studying arbitrarily and distantly selected "content."

Experiential. Active, hands-on, concrete experience is the most powerful and natural form of learning. Students should be immersed in the most direct possible experience of the content of every subject.

Holistic. Children learn best when they encounter whole ideas, events, and materials in purposeful contexts, not by studying subparts isolated from actual use.

Authentic. Real, rich, complex ideas and materials are at the heart of the curriculum. Lessons or textbooks that water-down, control, or oversimplify content ultimately disempower students.

Expressive. To fully engage ideas, construct meaning, and remember information, students must regularly employ the whole range of communicative media-speech, writing, drawing, poetry, dance, drama, music, movement, and visual arts.

Reflective. Balancing the immersion in experience and expression must be opportunities for learners to reflect, debrief, abstract from their experiences what they have felt and thought and learned.

Social. Learning is always socially constructed and often interactional; teachers need to create classroom interactions that "scaffold" learning.

Collaborative. Cooperative learning activities tap the social power of learning better than competitive and individualistic approaches.

Democratic. The classroom is a model community; students learn that they live as citizens of the school.

Cognitive. The most powerful learning comes when children develop true understandings of concepts through higher-order thinking associated with various fields of inquiry and through self-monitoring of their thinking.

Developmental. Children grow through a series of definable but not rigid stages, and schooling should fit its activities to the developmental level of students.

Constructivist. Children do not just receive content; in a very real sense, they re-create and reinvent every cognitive system they encounter, including language, literacy, and mathematics.

Challenging. Students learn best when faced with genuine challenges, choices, and responsibility in their own learning.

"Following all these principles means that school is challenging. Students are expected to take considerable responsibility, monitor their own learning, be sure they apply the abilities they've acquired, keep their own records, and elect new projects when they're finished with something, rather than just fill in an extra ditto sheet. As the students in a classroom gradually assume more responsibilities, the teacher attends to the needs of individual children, provides a safe space for experimenting with newer and more difficult tasks, and adds challenges as kids are developmentally ready for them." (Pg. 15)

"But while it is harmonious with and descended from past progressive eras, this new movement is not identical to the open classroom of the 1960's. While still rooted in the characteristic view of children as fundamentally good, self-regulating, and trustworthy, today's movement is driven by more than an optimistic conception of children's nature. This time around… we are blending a positive view of children with our commitment to certain curriculum content and our improved understanding of how learning works. In the 1960's, many progressive innovations failed because they were backed with more passion than with practical, well-thought-out procedures for implementing them. Now, a generation later, we return to the same basic ideas, with the same fundamental understanding of kids' capabilities, but equipped with much better ideas about how adult helpers can make it work." (Pg.15)