Curricular Models

Learning Through Broad Based Themes

Kaplan (1986) uses broad based themes as a curriculum organizer. A theme can span several disciplines and give rise to the study of many topics. The content of the curriculum, the thinking and research skills used, and the end product of the investigation are taken into consideration in the development of the theme and related lessons. Examples of broad based themes are: change, cycles, structures and systems. Students at any level can take part in lessons developed around any theme. The work will vary in levels of sophistication.

Teachers Sharon Friesen and Pat Clifford used the theme "structures" with a multi-grade primary class in Calgary in 1993/94. (Clifford & Friesen, 1993). Throughout the year, all lessons were woven around this theme. Students were presented with two questions:

What holds things together?

What causes things to fall apart?

Everything the students studied was viewed through the lens of these two interrelated questions. For example, the questions were used to study friendships, families, communities, countries and economies. The same questions were used to examine plants, animals and ecological systems.

Students explored patterns in math and studied structures in literature. As part of a study of robotics, all students had an opportunity to experiment with building structures.

Although the two teachers established intended learning outcomes for the year, they did not decide on the precise content materials they would use. Instead, content emerged from the questions, interests and concerns of their students as they related to the topic of study. These lead to a variety of independent and group investigations. A final, important component of the program was the expectation of students to present the outcomes of their studies to parents and the community.

The design of this program follows a model often recommended for gifted students. Friesen and Clifford found, at the end of three years, that student's with average ability were functioning several years above grade placement. (Clifford & Friesen, 1994. Unpublished raw data.)


Learning Through Cases

In case study teaching students are presented with a realistic scenario that is woven around a dilemma. Students read the case and then work together in study groups to discuss questions about the case. After they have formulated some ideas about the issues.