

Revolution in the Mishawaka Schools

The South Bend Tribune's recent commentary on the progress in the State ISTEP 7th grade science scores at Mishawaka was fine, but missed some major points: --

Two years ago, most of the children (and teachers) in the first 6 grades found science **boring, boring, boring...** Today with the hands-on, minds-on science classrooms, they find science **exciting, exciting, exciting...** These changes in attitude are what we should be testing, not, the old reactionary, fit-everyone-into-same-mold beliefs.

This healthy revolution must be seen to be believed. I was in Gina Marchi's 3rd-4th grade class at Twin Branch elementary school the day the crayfish arrived. Since science was the last part of the school-day, you could see and hear the impatience and anticipation of the children, until they would be allowed to interact with these strange lobster-like creatures. Finally, science time arrived! One of the 12 crayfish had died in transit to the school, but that was Ms. Marchi's chance to explain how to carefully pick up a crayfish at its back, without being pinched by its sharp claws. Sitting around in a group they passed the dead crayfish around - as they did so, checking out its legs, its feelers, its eyes and its pincers - some children (boys and girls) initially were too squeamish to touch it, but they soon wanted to touch it and pick it up.

Meanwhile (unnoticed!) Ms. Marchi brought out two large plastic wash-bowls, each with about 3 inches of water, plus the remaining creepy-crawling, swimming, eleven crayfish, six in one, five in the other. First, the children wrote down in their notebooks what questions they have about the crayfish; then it was time to look!!...the groups crowded around the wash-bowls, looking, poking, asking, even shrieking, while the crayfish scrambled and tried to hide behind each other. The children gave them some nasty-looking long, green seaweed to eat, and then it was the end of the lesson - time to go home to tell their parents what **real exploratory, guided inquiry science** is all about....

What would your questions be? How many legs? How old? Can they hear? Do they have ears? Do they breathe air or water? Do they change color?

You have to admire the Mishawaka administrators, the Mishawaka teachers, and the school board for their commitment to this revolution. It is hard work to organize a completely new system, deliver it to the teachers, and help the teachers switch from old familiar classrooms into using these guided inquiry techniques. The teachers especially need applauding for joining the revolution - there must be rewards for them in seeing the children so enthusiastic about learning! The reward for the rest of us is to find Mishawaka brim full of enthusiastic young scientists.

And, as a parent, I remember that I learned lots of new ideas from hearing about my children's activities - now that is how our learning revolution continues...

We need a test to measure enthusiasm and excitement - learning throughout life is through things we enjoy - that would be an ISTEP test worth taking, and with useful results.

You can answer some of your questions by a careful study of the crayfish picture below:

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Crayfish in Ms Gina Marchi's classroom at Twin Branch elementary school

