

How Can Schools Prioritize For The Best Ways Kids Learn?

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The education world is full of incremental change — the slow process of individuals learning about new strategies and approaches, trying them out, improving on their skills, and hopefully sharing their learning with colleagues to continue growth. While that process is necessary and good, if the changes to education are all in the service of doing the same thing better, they may be missing the point. The world has changed since education became compulsory and the current moment necessitates an education system that isn't just better, but different.

"We are at a point in schools when we have to change our internal reality," said [Will Richardson](#), a former English teacher turned speaker and school consultant, at the 2016 [International Society for Technology in Education \(ISTE\)](#) conference, during a session. He was frustrated by the focus on using new technologies to educate children the way it has been done for years, without recognizing that the current context demands a [radically different vision of learning](#).

The internet has made learning more accessible than ever, and often outside of school, making school activities feel increasingly restrictive and irrelevant to students. In the current context, kids are finding teachers and mentors through their passions and are able to connect with them more easily than ever before. There are powerful search engines that spit back answers to questions that used to only be found in books. And kids know which apps will solve their math equations for them.

Educators know the world has changed and are increasingly acknowledging that it's time to be asking different questions about what it means to improve education. Richardson travels around the world for his work and can point to examples of schools and districts that are asking themselves difficult questions to propel change. The successful ones are letting the answer to the question, "How do kids learn best?" drive everything they do in schools.

He pointed to the Canadian province of [British Columbia](#) and its stated goal to offer education that is student-initiated, interdisciplinary and co-planned by students and teachers together. Ontario, Canada's Ministry of Education is [embracing collaborative inquiry through play](#). And [Albemarle County Public Schools](#) in Virginia are thriving under the visionary leadership of [Pam Moran](#). "If you go through and look at things they are valuing, it is based on a core set of beliefs and the world around them," Richardson said.

SAFE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
 PERSONAL INVESTMENT
 REAL WORLD APPLICATION
 FUN
 RELEVANCE TO THEIR LIVES
 SOCIAL
 INTERESTING QUESTIONS
 POSITIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT
Common sense
 PASSION
 TEACHERS/MENTORS
 FEEDBACK
 AUTONOMY AND AGENCY
 CHALLENGING
 CROSS-DISCIPLINES
 NOT TIME CONSTRAINED
 FLOW

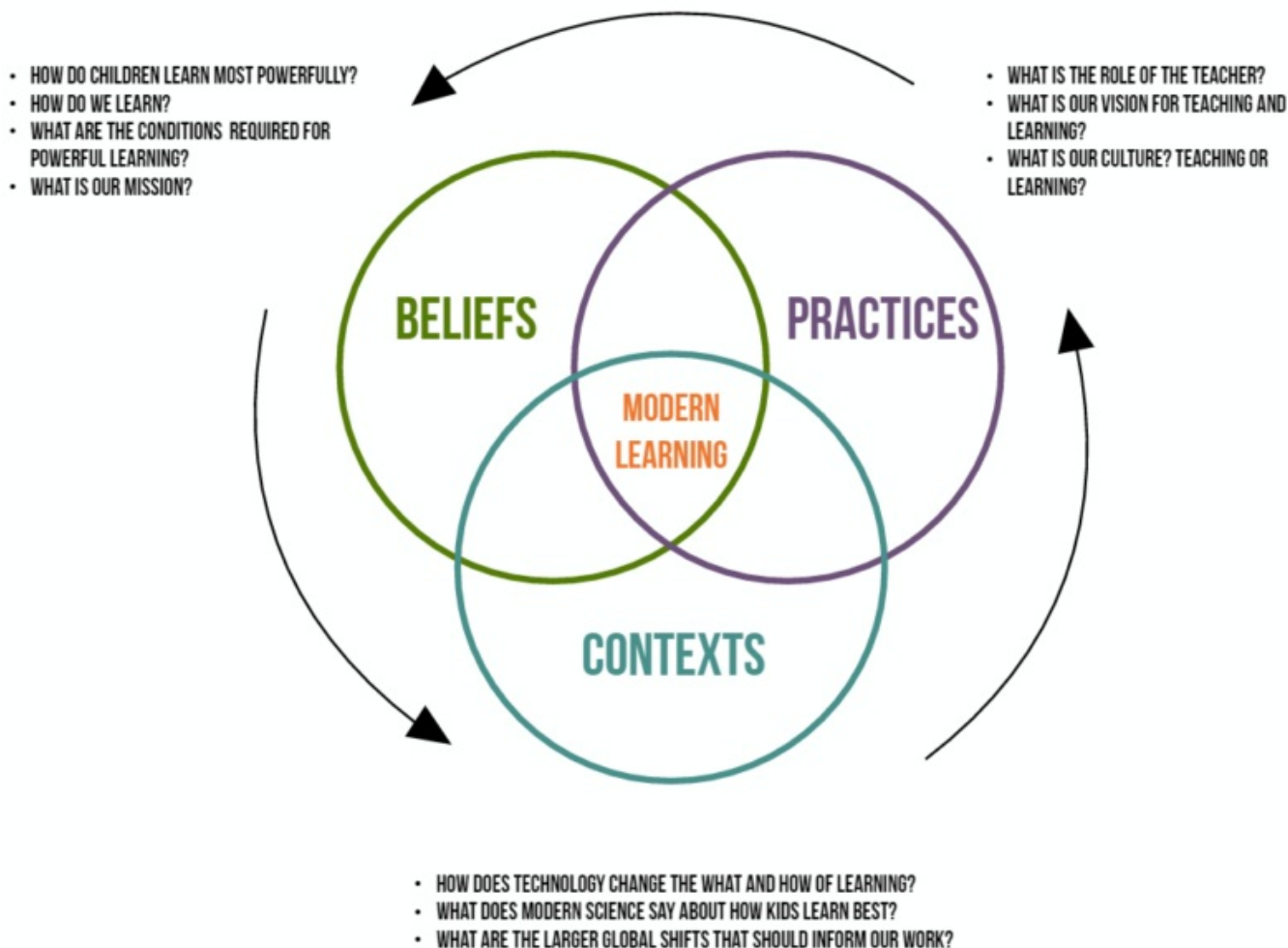
VS.

SITTING IN ROWS
 45/60/88 MINUTE BLOCKS
 DISCRETE CURRICULUM
 ONE SUBJECT AREA FOCUS
 AGE GROUPED CO-LEARNERS
 NO REAL WORLD APPLICATION
 TEACHER CONTROLLED
 SOME(???????)STIONS
 STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS
 EMPHASIS ON GRADES
 CARROTS AND STICKS
 NO CHOICE/NO AGENCY
 LACK OF RELEVANCE
 "HANDING IT IN"
 LIMITED ACCESS

On the left are qualities many people list when describing meaningful learning experiences. On the right is a list of things done in schools. (Will Richardson)

Schools need to have a clear vision, rooted in today's context and a set of practices that reflect those two things. When he consults with schools, Richardson said he most commonly sees a lack of vision based in how students learn. In his many talks he shares a list of things educators know intuitively about how kids learn best alongside a list of things schools do because it's easier for adults. He says if educators want to shift education to the modern context, they need to prioritize things that help students learn best.

"It's about doing work that matters," Richardson said. "It's about connections. It's about play. It's about cultures where kids and teachers are learners." When schools have a set of beliefs about learning and enact those beliefs through practice, but don't anchor what they are doing in today's context, they may be doing something progressive, but also a little irrelevant. Beliefs and contexts without practice leads to ineffective teaching. The sweet spot for a very different type of education system lies in the Venn diagram of all three: beliefs, context and practice.



“Kids deserve consistency that is grounded in a belief system,” Richardson said. He has talked with students who hate that they have to adapt to completely different expectations, structures, and rules in every class. When a school isn’t [unified around a vision](#) the experience for students can be very disorienting.

To begin moving towards what Richardson calls a “modern education” system, he says educators need to learn, educate, articulate, and then do it.

LEARN

It’s no longer enough for teachers to get a credential and then sit back and teach the same content year after year. Richardson says to be part of modern learning, teachers need to actively educate themselves about the context students live in and how they can improve as educators.

“There’s never been a more amazing time to be a learner,” Richardson said. “How are we in education not running towards that in our own personal lives and embracing that?”

It’s not just about connecting on Twitter with other educators or asking for professional development about technology. If teachers are waiting for a planned PD about something they are probably already stuck. “You have to have the disposition of an eight-year old to find your own learning,” Richardson said.

EDUCATE

“You probably aren’t going to be able to do this by yourself, so go out and build capacity,” Richardson said. Parents, community members, students and school board members can be allies for making the shift. Richardson points to [CCSD59](#) as an example of a district that reaches out to all parent populations, communicates about vision and practice through [a blog](#) and educates with its [Facebook page](#). “They are constantly putting practice in front of people to build their capacity to engage,” Richardson said.

ARTICULATE

Articulating a mission statement about where students should be when they graduate and actualizing it with a vision that lays out how to get there, is a key step in slowly making the shift Richardson describes. It can be difficult to interrogate longstanding policies and choices, but if districts, schools and individual educators can't reflect on what's working and what isn't, articulate a change, and begin doing it, the education system as a whole will become irrelevant.

DO IT

"This is really hard, but I think it's worth it," Richardson said. Teachers can start by picking one area of the curriculum and letting students own it. Then advocate for that practice, and connect with other educators who are doing it. There comes a point when talking about the need to change is no longer enough; educators who resonate with Richardson's message, have to jump in and try it.

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