

Learner Competencies are the Key Ingredients

So what's the alternative to the conveyor belt? Mastery learning through learning competencies and content competencies. First notice that I have not replaced "belt" with another term, perhaps path, that implies a linear road. I do believe that within a given academic content area competencies usually line up with one leading to another, or one cluster being a prerequisite for another. Before we address content areas we must address what it takes to be a competent learner. When one has the competencies or behaviors or skills or intrinsic motivation to be a learner, content learning may proceed. When those learner competencies are absent or deficient, both learning and behavior suffer. The conveyor belt, with its reality reinforcing children's low expectations, forsakes learner competencies for pace. Students are constantly pushed along to ever increasingly demanding content without the required learner skills or prerequisite content knowledge. **The conveyor belt must be replaced by self-paced, learner centered mastery of both learner and content competencies.**

What competencies are required to learn the alphabet, to have number sense, to print legibly, to make observations about a photograph, to behave respectfully while waiting in line with one's peers? This is a short list that comes to mind as I think about a five year old. On second thought, these are also competencies that I asked my hiring managers to screen for in adult applicants when I was Chief Operating Officer of a large retail organization. I know from experience that many adults do not have all of these competencies, nor do many eighteen year olds with diplomas. (What does that tell us about the current value of a diploma?) Competencies as a learner must precede content competencies. Content competencies do not necessarily guarantee or affirm learner competencies. A child can learn to parrot the alphabet, recognize primary colors, and count to 100, but not be ready to learn to spell, add integers, or notice the difference between a rectangle and a rhombus.

Some would say that I am confusing maturity with competencies required for learning and that since children mature at different speeds we must stay with the paradigm, hoping the less mature will catch up to the conveyor belt at some point. Let me follow that logic for a moment. We take a student who is unable or unwilling to add 6 plus 2 in first grade and put them in second grade where he or she will need to learn additional content, but they have demonstrated that they do not have the learner competencies yet. Again, learner competencies, not content competencies. Yes, not knowing how to add 6 plus 2 is a deficit with arithmetic (content competency), but it also indicates that the student has not developed the necessary learner competencies. Piling on more content to learn, some of it requiring the prerequisite addition skills, does nothing to address the missing learner competencies.

We think that keeping them with their age group is more important than teaching them to learn? Really? Think about that. We know that the world will be a very different place in ten years, but we don't put a premium on learner competencies. We accept our failure. We failed when they did not develop learner competencies. We failed when they couldn't do the addition. We failed when we let the conveyor belt put them in the next grade without addressing the gap in learner competencies. They may get some content remediation in the next grade, but the missing learner competencies go unaddressed. Sadly, the result is fourteen year olds who cannot add 6 plus 2 and don't care. They learn to cope with their lack of learner competencies and failure to learn content with victimhood. "It's the adults with the power and the adults put me in this position."

A common victimhood strategy for children is stubbornness; it gives them back the power. "If the teacher or principal assigns me a consequence, fine, I accept the consequence passively, and do not change the behavior that got me the consequence (stubbornness). I won't do classwork, fine, give me whatever consequence you choose, my behavior will not change. You think I care about grades. I do not. You think I care about you and your power. I do not."

So now what. How does a learner competencies approach work? What does it look like?

At the core, mastering learner competencies puts choice in the hands of the learner. Certainly some learner competencies may be somewhat “age appropriate.” However, I submit that we fool ourselves into low expectations of learner competencies when we say, “He’s too young to learn how to pay attention.” Do we really think that paying attention is not an investment in learning? Do we really think that without attention learning will happen magically? Do we really think that 30 minutes of punishment in time-out will teach him to pay attention and become an intrinsically motivated lifelong learner? There is a wealth of evidence that shows children of all backgrounds can learn quickly and deeply when the environment supports the development of learner competencies, self-advocacy, and student agency.

The skills required to be a learner are also life skills. Developing learner competencies is an investment in a child that will pay dividends well beyond childhood. Yet, the current paradigm gives little attention to learner competencies beyond the earliest years in school. The time pressure to begin learning content pushes learner competency development aside, though we know that the learner competencies are what actually enable learning of content. We mistakenly see content as more important or more essential, when in fact, content learning happens best when the learner is prepared with a full complement of learning competencies. Ask a teacher what is holding back his or her students from success and the conversation will soon become one about foundational learning skill gaps; learner competencies.