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“The Practioner’s Best Friend”
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‘Critical Questions’ Series
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DO PARENTS SEE THEIR CHILDREN AS MATHEMATICAL THINKERS?

Change is Grand

In the book Sideways Stories from Wayside School by Louis Sachar, Miss Jewels the teacher struggles to help Joe, a student with his counting skills. Joe keeps getting the correct answer, but Miss Jewels tells him he is wrong because even though the answer is correct, he is counting wrong.

Last year I had a conversation with a parent about how frustrated she was with her child's math skills. She had no idea what he was doing when trying to accurately calculate 2-digit addition. She proceeded to tell me he always got the right answer, but he wasn't doing it correctly. What was his second grade teacher and I teaching him? He doesn't know how to do math the way he should.

Of course I had to ask, "What way is this?" This simple question branched into a great conversation about the state standards in math. Her son had been using a mental math strategy - deconstructing the numbers and reconstructing them in a meaningful way to accurately calculate the sum in his head. I pulled out the math GLEs, sat down with her and talked about her child's learning. I truly believe the time was well spent. She left with a better understanding of the changes in math instruction. She left knowing her child was a mathematical thinker.

It is important to remember the state frameworks help us guide children in their math learning, but many parents need this same guidance in understanding what their children are doing. Homework assignments as simple as, "Show two different ways you could solve this problem," allow children the opportunity to teach their parents about the math learned at school. These are powerful and meaningful opportunities for both children and parents.

At conference time this year, I was hearing the standard line, "Math is different then when I was in school." I have been hearing this for years from parents as we talk about what their children are learning. During one conference a parent and I were examining one of her child's problem solving work samples. She suddenly looked up with a smile on her face and said, "Wow! My child is a great thinker!" I have been waiting years for someone to tell me that about their child when looking at their math learning instead of the other way around.

We are teaching children to think mathematically, be smart about how they look at and use numbers and have a true understanding of how numbers work. We are giving them meaningful instruction in number sense, measurement, geometric sense, probability, statistics, and algebraic sense. They are using these skills in problem solving, logical reasoning, making connections and communicating their thinking.

The coolest thing about all of this is the children are learning it. The change in the level of mathematical understanding in my 18 years of teaching is incredible. I tell my children all the time that they are so much smarter than I was at their age. They are smarter than the children I worked with 18 years ago, and it is true. Change is grand.

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