

# "When I ask questions my teacher gets angry"

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How sad would it be to hear this comment from just one child? What a tragedy to hear it, as I did recently, confirmed by approximately ninety students from twenty or more schools in one afternoon at a children's conference! Other student comments expressed that afternoon included:

*"When I don't understand I keep quiet."*

*"Usually when I put my hand up it is to answer a question, not ask one."*

I find these comments disturbing because education is about learning and therefore school should be a place where learning is fostered. Curiosity is a driving attitude of learning so school should foster and nurture curiosity. Questioning is a foundational and central skill for learning and school should not only encourage learners to be questioners, but should facilitate students' questioning ability. Hearing students say *"When I ask questions my teacher gets angry."* indicates that we have a problem of epic proportions in our classrooms, it indicates three major disconnects happening in our schools. Firstly it indicates that there is a monumental gap in some classrooms between the process of learning and the practice of teaching. Secondly it indicates that there is a major disconnect between learner and teacher. Thirdly it indicates a disconnect between the management and leadership aspects of a principal's role.

## **The disconnect between learning and teaching:**

We talk much in education these days about 'life-long learning' and 'independent learners'. In fact these two concepts have become a central goal of much of our curriculum documentation. The statement *"When I ask questions my teacher gets angry"* indicates a disconnect between learning and teaching in relation to each of these two concepts.

One of the prime skills of a learner is their ability to ask relevant and effective questions, for learning is driven by questions.



**Life long learning:** I qualify myself as a life long learner, for I am still learning. As a life-long learner, I see that learning is all about change. Learning is when my world view is enlarged or enriched. Learning is when my knowledge and understanding is deepened. Learning is when I have a new insight into something. Learning is when one of my beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviours or skills is in some way altered. Learning is when my curiosity is satisfied and when my desire to understand has been fulfilled. Learning ultimately is when my questions are answered in some way that enables me to retain, apply, understand and transfer that learning. One of the prime skills of a learner is their ability to ask relevant and effective questions, for learning is driven by questions. Learners ask questions for a variety of purposes. Questions are asked to clarify vocabulary. Questions are asked to acquire information. Questions are asked to clarify concepts and deepen understanding. All these questions emerge from a cognitive activity that we call

thinking. Thinking itself is generally a process of asking and answering questions. When we are faced with a decision for instance, we will internally ask and answer questions like:

- What are my options?
- If I take this option what are the possible consequences?
- What would be the best choice?

Jamie McKenzie expresses this centrality of questioning to thinking very clearly with the statement that "Thinking without questioning is like drinking without swallowing". It is when we find gaps in our knowledge or understanding, gaps in our vocabulary, weaknesses in our knowledge, or a need for further information that we pose questions to take to external sources. This indicates that questioning plays a dual role as we learn. It plays a key central role in thinking and it also plays a vital role in obtaining further information that we can add to the thinking process. Neil Postman encapsulates this well with his statement that "questioning is our prime intellectual tool". If classroom

interactions do not encourage and facilitate the skill of questioning then we have a disconnect between learning and teaching.

**Independent Learner:** I also qualify myself as an independent learner. This does not mean that my learning happens in a void uninhabited by other people. Far from it! My world of learning is inhabited by many significant others. My independence comes because I learn with and through these

significant others. They are the people who allow me to bounce my ideas and thoughts off them. They are those who challenge my thinking and ask me probing questions. They are the ones who encourage me when I am ready to quit. They are the ones who foster and fuel my curiosity and ignite my spark of scepticism. They are the people who encourage me to think deeper and wider. They are the ones who help me find answers to my questions. These significant others are the ones who unconsciously and unknowingly fill the role of teacher in my world.

It is on this basis that I see the student statement "*When I ask questions my teacher gets angry.*" as being an indicator of a disconnect between learning and teaching. I think we have teachers in our classrooms who have become so focussed on curriculum delivery, assessment, and meeting school based requirements that they are stressed, tired and pressured to the extent that fundamental aspects of learning are being lost. The act of teaching should never impact negatively on learning, yet the statements expressed by these students indicates that there are classrooms, maybe more than we think, where the act of teaching is not meshing with the very nature of learning. Teachers are the significant others in

student's daily learning and interactions with teachers should foster learning rather than impact negatively on it. If we are developing independent learners we need teachers who are effectively fulfilling the role of significant others in the life of the learners they interact with. When teacher/learner interactions impact negatively on learner attitude then we have a critical disconnect between learning and teaching.

A genuine student question is an indicator of engagement, it is the flag waved by an inquiring mind, and it is the smoke signal of the fire of curiosity

### **The disconnect between curriculum and learning:**

The classroom is an environment where teacher, learner and curriculum come together. Most teachers I meet share that they are teachers because they love children, love learning and love those wondrous 'aha moments' when a child gains understanding, insight or a new skill. Teachers do not choose this occupation because they want to place ticks against vast lists of curriculum content they have covered.

Curriculum is about providing teachers with a framework within which they have flexibility to creatively craft engaging learning experiences which support their students in gaining skills and understanding. Curriculum should provide teachers highly relevant contexts within which they can interact positively with learners, fostering their learning. Curriculum is construed to provide contexts for learning that fit with the needs of the pupils. Curriculum was never intended to be a cudgel held threateningly over the head of teachers forcing them into rushed lessons where vast quantities of ideas, concepts and information are delivered and covered. Curriculum should not be about placing a huge load of material to cover on the backs of teachers.

A genuine student question is an indicator of engagement, it is the flag waved by an inquiring mind, it is the smoke signal of the fire of curiosity and, as such, a student question should bring delight to the teacher and as such should be the initiator of a powerful interaction that results in learning. Yet we see teachers reacting with anger and frustration when student questions inhibit time frames, distract from the immediate goal or disrupt a planned lesson. This

speaks of a disconnect between curriculum and learning, where the coverage and delivery of curriculum content has a higher value than student minds engaged in learning. If teachers' days are pressured by the demands of curriculum the school has a moral responsibility to re-examine their curriculum, re-establish what their learning goals are and clarify the role of the teacher within the learning experiences provided within the classroom. Curriculum should be supportive of these aspects not competitive with them.

### **The disconnect between managing a school and leading learning:**

If there is any legitimacy in the disconnects outlined above, then ultimate responsibility for this lies in the hands of the school principal. It seems to me that we have principals who have their hands so full with the issues of managing a school, with all the pressures entailed, that it has become very easy for them to lose sight of the more nebulous aspects of leading learning. Leadership and management are two integrated aspects of the complicated role of principalship. To fulfil their role well, every principal needs to operate effectively across both aspects. Management is to do with the day to day running of the school. Its focus is on the details, on

ensuring the details are attended to. When the details are managed then the organisation functions effectively as an organisation. Management, simply put, is about keeping the

organisation functioning and moving. Leadership is focussed on direction and

relationships. Leadership, simply put, is about keeping the organisation moving somewhere. Effective leadership of any organisation will be focussed on the core purpose of that organisation and will be ensuring that the organisation is continuously striving to achieve its core purpose. The core purpose of a school is unarguably learning. This would mean that effective leadership of a school would have a continual focus on achieving strong positive learning outcomes.

When we see teacher/learner interactions that dull a learner's curiosity, minimise learner questioning and disengage students from learning, ultimate responsibility must rest with the principal. When we see these things happening in a school they indicate leadership that is mired in the busyness of management and has lost contact with the very base concepts of learning and their application in daily classroom life. If this is happening and the leadership team is unaware of it then the principal needs to be taking a far stronger role as leader of learning. Leading learning is more than ensuring that curriculum aspects are covered and literacy scores are equal to, or above, national benchmarks. Leading learning means ensuring that pupils are engaged with learning, that students are supported and encouraged, that the foundational attitude of curiosity is encouraged and fuelled, that students are learning how to learn and that curriculum

provides rich exciting contexts within which these things can happen. Outside of this we have a disconnect between curriculum and learning.

If teacher responses to learner questions are dousing curiosity, minimising learning and creating disengagement then there is a fundamental issue of professional malpractice in the classroom.

#### Challenges:

Based on the statement "When I ask questions my teacher gets angry" I would like to pose some challenges to teachers and principals.

The first challenge would be to teachers. The challenge is to be aware of how your reaction and response impacts on a learner. Every little thing you do, everything you say, every reaction has an impact on the learners entrusted to you. You are the significant other in their learning lives so be aware that the coverage of curriculum, the completion of planned work and the keeping of timetables is of no significance if you douse the attitude of curiosity in a single learner in your room. If you are so pressurised and stressed that you react with anger or frustration to learner questions then something is seriously amiss in the learning environment you are responsible for. If critical self evaluation shows that you evidence this behaviour, even occasionally, then it is time to change something at personal, classroom or school levels. Education is about igniting the fire of curiosity.

The second challenge is to school principals. Principalship is a complex role where you need to balance management, and leadership aspects. It is important to manage effectively but a school can be managed well and turn out learners who are disengaged, and or achieving

below their real capability. A school needs more than effective management, to fulfill its potential for its students, a school needs effective leadership.

The ultimate measure of effective leadership within any organisation is surely found within the core purpose of that organisation, and the core purpose of a school is learning. Central to learning is the attitude of the learner. The essence of your role is to lead and manage in a manner that cultivates learners' positive attitudes to learning, and the thing that impacts the most on this is the small minute by minute interactions between teacher and student. Where these interactions lead students to develop attitudes and behaviours that are not learning orientated then you have issues that need to be identified and sorted. The only way to keep your finger on the pulse of learner attitude is to have a high level of contact with the learners and to critically examine the detail of teacher learner interaction. Listen to your teachers and listen to your students, for it is in their comments that you will find the messages that indicate the reality of school effectiveness. Listen carefully and I hope you never hear statements like "When I ask questions my teacher gets angry".

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<http://questioning.org/nov04/why-question.html>

Postman, N. (1979) Teaching as a Conserving Activity. Dell Publishing Co., New York.