

Wondering Out Loud

Teaching My Primary Classroom Community How to Wonder, Ponder, and Question

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Primary students are considered to be naturally curious and overflowing with questions about their world. Primary classrooms are often depicted by pictures of excited children waving their hands in anticipation of asking a question. For the past 33 years, my primary students have begun the school year filled with energy and curiosity, yet it seems their ability to verbalize questions, or even interest in doing so, has begun to weaken. I have always used the opening statement, “I wonder” to begin questions, begin a prediction of a story, or open up a classroom conversation. I have also asked my students to use the sentence frame of “I wonder” at our morning meeting times or when reflecting on a reading or academic job. When looking over my personal journals from the last 15 years, I have noticed that my students’ “wonders” have gone from imaginative and large-reaching wonders about how long it will take their newly built snowman to melt or wonders about discovering a new star or planet to everyday wonders about scores on video games, winning computer games, or wonders that are really more like

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worries about violence or family money problems. “The search for meaning is at the very heart of motivation. Students must be inspired to wonder, develop intellectual curiosity, and desire to understand and find answers for themselves” (Hopkins, 2010, p. 19). I know my students were ready to be learners, but I wanted them to be motivated, engaged, inquisitive learners who wanted to learn more about each other and our units of study as we built our classroom community. “Engagement is active. It requires the student to be committed to the task and find the inherent value in what he or she is being asked to do. The engaged student not only does the task assigned but does the task with enthusiasm and diligence” (Schlechty, 2001, p. 64).

As a doctoral student, I discovered I became a more enthusiastic, engaged learner when I wrote down my wonders in a journal, pondered the readings and conversations, and constructed questions helping me to delve deeper into my studies. I noticed my doctoral cohort members learning more about each other as professionals, learners, and friends as we built our community of learners through the sharing of our wonders; our dialogue and conversations became filled with questions that begged for more discussion and/or research. As a primary teacher, I began to reflect upon my teaching to see how to encourage my students to become engaged learners, as well as through wondering, pondering, and learning to construct thoughtful questions. I also wanted my students to feel an ownership of their learning because this becomes their motivation for learning something new. Chouinard (2007) considers the ability to ask questions is an influential tool that encourages children to gather the information they need in order to learn more about the world around them.

I believe that good questions are more important than answers, and the best children's books ask questions, and make the readers ask questions. And every new question is going to disturb someone's universe.

—Madeleine L'Engle,
from *Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?*

As I began to question my own teaching strategies, one of my 1st graders also began thinking about his learning. I had asked one of the literacy groups in my primary multiage classroom to read a short nonfiction book about animals. On the second day, I asked a few questions about the features of the book that led to a discussion about nonfiction text features we had been learning about as a whole class. One of my 1st grade students, Ben, wanted to ask his peers a question about the book. He asked his classmates if bears like honey. The question was easily answered by his peers, as they had all read the page with illustrations of a cartoon bear eating honey from a tree. At independent reading time, I sat with Ben to listen to his thoughts about the book he was currently reading, and he revisited the question that he had asked his reading group. Ben told me that he thought his question was too easy as his friends knew the answer and did not even have to think about it. He also voiced his disappointment: “All they had to say was one word, yes, to answer my question.” As a busy teacher with five more students to meet with that day, I wrote down his thoughts on a sticky note and stuck it into my classroom journal to look at, at a later time.

A few weeks later, I was reviewing my notes in my journal and I came across Ben's words and realized that I had missed an amazing teaching moment to not only talk to him about questions and questioning, but to build a literacy lesson using my students' natural inquisitiveness as my guide. I decided to go back and reread a familiar and loved text that includes questioning, *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop* (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). As I revisited the authors' ideas, I remembered one of my journal entries from a few years ago; I had read an article about a workshop led by Keene and Zimmerman and they asked the group of educators, What it would take to create a group of public schools that would be places where the children and adults were deeply engaged and passionate about their own learning? This powerful question has lingered with me. I want my students to be not only deeply engaged, but to ask powerful questions. This led me to more research, as I wanted to learn more about the role of questioning in the classroom.

Rothstein and Santana (2011) believe the skill of questioning rarely is intentionally taught to students. More often, questions are asked only by teachers. Rothstein and Santana have found that teaching students to wonder and to craft and ask their own questions will excite their curiosity to guide their learning while teaching a critical lifelong skill. Jelly (2001) notes it is important for educators to build a community that encourages students to construct and ask questions and also inspires all students to ask questions. She feels it is vital that every child feel comfortable to ask questions in their classroom environment. A classroom where

questions are celebrated will create a community of creative and critical thinking, yet when teacher feedback is discouraging, student achievement decreases (Marzano, 2007).

A study by Walsh and Sattes (2005) indicates that research conducted for more than 100 years on teachers' use of questioning strategies showed very little has changed in this classroom practice. A common classroom strategy is to ask students closed questions that have only a single correct answer (Sigel, 1990). Yet a recited answer can be a relatively poor indicator of a student's true understanding. As a teacher, I too was guilty of asking simple questions, looking for my students to have instant success by answering my questions correctly. I was not modeling the type of questions I wanted my students to ask, questions that would deepen their learning process. Students who only hear closed questions are not going to learn how to ask deeper questions, ponder an unknown, or verbalize a wonder. "It is very easy for us as teachers to recite our own knowledge, get assent at each point from students, but never let the students think even a bit on their own" (Morse, 1994, p. 277). Quality questions engage students in thinking and constructing their own answers because the questions are clear, reasonable, and connect to students' prior knowledge. Furthermore, the questions are interesting and thought provoking to students because they connect to not only the other content areas but, whenever possible, to the students' lives and interests. These types of questions prompt student responses that supply teachers with the immediate formative feedback needed to show where students are in their learning progression (Walsh & Sattes, 2005). I wanted a classroom community filled with children who wonder and question on their own and with each other; therefore, I believed equally important, quality questions for me were, How do I develop a classroom that encourages students to wonder? How do I create a classroom community where the students are asking and pursuing their own deeper questions?

These wonders made me rethink my everyday questioning techniques, and I began to purposefully model questions asking for deeper understanding and I guided my students to formulate quality questions for the inquiry part of their literacy groups. We began to look at different types of questions: ones easily answered, ones that required thinking and reviewing, and then the questions that needed time to ponder over—the open-ended questions. I posted Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) and added a list of higher-order thinking verbs for each level. Ben, who was now a student in my 2nd grade classroom, began to be known as the king of the thinking questions as he always frontloaded his question with the words, "Remember, I am not looking for a quick answer; take some time to think." Ben's questions were often revisited by his classmates later in the day and week as they

spent thoughtful time with his words. Students began to use Ben's questions as a springboard to formulate their own questions and to ponder the answers given to their questions.

Sometimes questions are more important than answers.

—Nancy Willard

These lessons became scaffolding into other parts of our day; the share portion of our morning meeting began to reflect deeper thinking. At our daily morning meeting, three students share two days a week. They can bring in a special item, share a writing piece or art piece, or tell a story about something they have done. When the sharers are done, they ask for comments or questions from their peers. In the last few years, I noted in my journal that the questions were close-ended, requiring *yes* or *no* answers, or the comments were about themselves: "I went to Storyland too" or "I read that book." Consequently, I began asking my students to ask deeper questions and I explained this using a pond as an analogy. If you are looking at the top of the water in the pond, the shallow part, you see your reflection or an insect or a plant floating; but if you look deeper, you can see new things, like rocks, animals, and plants, and you can feel the sand or mud. So if they ask a question that is reflective to themselves, they are asking a shallow question, whereas if they ask a deeper quality question, they will discover more about their friend's story or share. Often, the questions were answered quickly with one-word answers, but slowly the questions began to reflect our work on constructing good questions. I could see children looking at the poster of higher-order thinking verbs as they formulated their questions. I began hearing children ask their peers to explain, compare, and describe. My journal from that school year was filled with the amazing quality questions and conversations across the curriculums led by my students.

During my pursuit for more research and information on questioning, I found many educational experts were also concerned about the lack of importance placed on encouraging students to wonder and question in our classrooms. In his book *The End of Education*, Postman (1995) describes education with an old saying: "All children enter school as question marks and leave as periods" (p. 90). If our students begin school asking lots of questions, why do they stop? Do students stop asking questions because they are rewarded for having the correct answer, not for asking follow-up questions? If so, this might explain why students gradually ask fewer and fewer questions as they progress through grade school. Bronson (2010) shared his thoughts about children and their tendency to ask or not ask questions in his article "The Creativity Crisis," published in *Newsweek*:

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Preschool children, on average, ask their parents about 100 questions a day. Why, why, why—sometimes parents just wish it'd stop. Tragically, it does stop ... They didn't stop asking questions because they lost interest: it's the other way around. They lost interest because they stopped asking questions. (para. 28)

To build a classroom community filled with interested, engaged learners who would continue to ask questions, I knew I needed to continue to shift my way of thinking; however, I also was aware of the need to move toward more instruction using techniques to encourage higher-order thinking because of implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) within our current curriculum. Two learning structures typically considered when creating curriculum that requires higher-order thinking and active student engagement are the previously mentioned Bloom's taxonomy and the more contemporary Webb's depth of knowledge (Webb, 1997). Both of these structures encourage educational activities that take student thinking past basic recall. Engaged students who interact with and question their learning help to construct their own learning through active dialogue, not rote responses (Bruner, 1996). I discovered that active dialogue between two students—sitting knee-to-knee and eye-to-eye—led to more questions and more wonders. Cazden (2001) noted, “If the potentialities of classroom discourse, in which students talk more and in more varied ways, are significant for all students, then we have to pay careful attention to who speaks and who receives thoughtful responses” (p. 5). I began to encourage my students to write down their questions, wonders, and ideas in their journals to refer to later for writing ideas. My students often see me writing in my journal during and after lessons and discussions, so this became an easy transition for them.

Wondering, pondering, and questioning continue to be important dynamics in the building of my classroom community. As an experienced teacher, I believe in the strength of the classroom community, as students who have a dynamic relationship accept each other's differences and strengths and work together as they learn. As my classroom community is constructed, my students feel comfortable taking the time to wonder, ponder, and ask questions to advance their learning and the learning of their classmates. As my students end the school year and get ready for the summer vacation and 3rd grade, they often write letters and draw pictures for me. One of my favorite gifts is a simple black and white illustration of a snowman looking down at a flower growing out of the snow; the snowman has a question mark in a word

bubble above his head. The 2nd grade boy, who resembled Calvin of the famous comic strip, handed it to me and said, “You know what it means—just keep wondering and just keep asking questions.”

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