

Do Children Ask Questions?

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It's commonly observed that as soon as children start learning to talk they start asking questions. Small children - children who do not yet go to school - may ask so many questions that their other family members get tired of hearing them! And they may ask such difficult questions that the adults have trouble trying to figure out answers.

For example, here are some questions we have heard small children ask:

- Why do we get thirsty?
- Where is nani?
- Is there anything for me to eat?
- Why do you have to go to work?
- What is god?
- Why do kites fly?
- Why are people of different colours?
- Do ants drink water?

Why do small children ask questions?

There are many reasons, but generally they ask questions because they do not know the answers and they want - or need - to know the answers. In other words, they ask authentic questions.

But we have noticed an interesting thing: in school, things are different. When children go to school they learn to stop asking questions. In school, the teacher asks questions, not the students.

What kinds of questions does the teacher ask, and why does the teacher ask questions?

Many of the questions the teacher asks are textbook questions. They are written in the textbooks - particularly at the end of each chapter. And they appear in the assessments and tests and examinations.

The teachers do not ask the questions because they do not know the answers and they need to find out the answers. They know the answers before asking. If the questions are from textbooks, the answers are usually given in the same textbook. The teacher or the textbook asks the questions and answers them also. The students merely try to remember the given answers.

For example, here are some typical textbook or classroom questions:

- What is the colour of the tree?
- What is the colour of the door?

If these are textbook questions accompanying a colour illustration, and the expected answers are clearly "green" and "blue", they are not the kinds of questions which anyone would ask in real life. They are the questions we find only when playing 'school-school'. The answers are known by both teachers and students before the questions are asked. A wrong answer will seldom indicate that the student does not understand what colours they are seeing. A wrong answer will indicate a problem in understanding the language or the spelling or the correct asking/answering procedure, or a reluctance to play school-school according to the rules of the game. For example, the children are not supposed to think about the shades of green or whether there is some variation in the colours of the leaves on the tree or that the trunk is a different colour from the leaves. The usual rules of the game do not allow this. However, if all students 'get the right answer' the question

will not be considered to be a very useful answer, because the function of school-school is also to sift the students into a hierarchy and getting 'wrong' answers will provide a rationalisation for the sifting. (It would also be a saving grace in case someone were to file an RTI!) Therefore, even though the answers are known to the teachers and are present in the textbooks, it should be tricky for the students to find the right answers.

After reading a story which includes something Meenu said, teachers may ask, "What did Meenu say?" This may be too easy. So a better procedure may be, after reading a chapter in which the word photosynthesis is defined, teachers may ask, "What is photosynthesis?" Teachers do not ask these questions because they do not know what Meenu said, or what the definition of photosynthesis is. Teachers seem to want the students to remember what Meenu said and what the definition is. But neither the teachers nor the students ask or tell **why** it is important that they should remember these particular things.

'Good' students learn very quickly that they are not supposed to ask questions in the classroom. They learn very quickly how to play school-school. For example, here is a page written by some young children who have been attending school for a few years. They wrote this while playing school-school at home:

The cat is in the hat.
Saca said to Maca.

There is the hat!
Nene said to Mene.

Is it in the hat?
Senea said to Henea.

I am not well,
Cona said to Gona.

Sene is in the hat!
Caca said to Naca.

Who is there?
Noco said to Loco.

Who is where?
Nnn said to Mmm.

What they have written shows that they were trying to understand the essence of school: playing a game in which the students provide the correct answers to inauthentic (and sometimes ridiculous) questions. However, in this home-made version, the questions and answers did not even refer to any text - nor to real life!

Some textbook questions may potentially be used to encourage students to think critically, analyse, evaluate, discuss, and try to understand. Here is an example from the present Class I NCERT textbook:

How do you feel - when you share your things?

But even for this question, the child may be asked to just choose between two possible choices for the answer: "happy" (a smiley yellow face) or "sad" (a sad yellow face). The teacher may tell the student which of these two answers is the correct one, and the student merely has to remember the correct answer without asking, understanding, analysing, or evaluating.

Here is another example of a textbook question from the same chapter:

Was the wolf good or bad?

This may appear to be an opportunity for an interesting discussion between the students. It may be an authentic question which may come to people's mind when they read the story of the Three

Little Pigs. Students could disagree with each other and offer different arguments and counter-arguments to support their opinions. But unfortunately, the students may just be expected to find the 'correct' answer in the text: "The wolf was big and bad."

Will students ever have opportunities to ask questions in school? Will students ever be able to analyse what their teachers say and criticise what they read in the text? Will they ever be able to ask questions such as:

How can you make a house fall down by blowing on it?

Can even a brick house fall down in heavy winds?

If children carry on relevant important discussions and ask each other authentic questions, their education may become more meaningful.

Different people have different ideas about what the purpose of education is - or what the purpose should be. If the purpose is for children to learn to accept their place in the world as it is, perhaps it is appropriate that children learn to stop asking questions in school. But if the purpose of education is for children to learn to take active roles in making the world more equal, just, and free - they need to be encouraged to ask questions.