

TEACHING OPINION

# All Learning, No Questioning: How Schools Smother Curiosity

Traditional policies and practices get in the way of the most effective learning

By Alfie Kohn — September 23, 2024 ⌚ 5 min read



— Michael Glenwood for Education Week

## Alfie Kohn

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When Susan Engel, a developmental psychologist at Williams College, decided to spend a few months observing suburban elementary schools, she had a specific goal in mind: to study variations in rates of children's curiosity. Which kids asked lots of questions? Which classrooms tended to encourage that? But

Engel discovered that it was almost impossible to make valid comparisons because “there was such an astonishingly low rate of curiosity in any of the classrooms we visited.”

What she kept encountering—during that project and since—were children who had learned not to bother wondering. If a classmate did volunteer a fascinated observation (“A bird flew right into my house!”) or a question (“Why would it do that?”), it was soon obvious that the teacher would probably offer a perfunctory response and then direct the child back to the planned lesson. In one classroom, Engel heard the teacher say, “I can’t answer questions right now. Now, it’s time for learning.”

For more than half a century, researchers have studied our desire to explore just for the sake of exploring, our itch to make sense of the unexpected. The eminent educator Seymour Sarason argued that education should be dedicated to stimulating the “intellectual curiosity, awe, and wonder that a child possesses when he or she begins schooling.” Or at least try to avoid killing it.

Curiosity is valuable in its own right—and not just for children. It’s a passport to a richer, more fulfilling life. But it also contributes to academic achievement and, more important, to intellectual flourishing. Conservative commentators like to emphasize the capacity to pay attention and delay gratification, but a [2018 study in Pediatric Research](#) found that pure curiosity promoted more effective learning regardless of the child’s level of “effortful control.”

In fact, not only was curiosity “associated with higher academic achievement in all children,” but the researchers discovered to their surprise that its benefits were greatest for kids from low-income families. (Sadly, such students appear disproportionately likely to face a regimented form of instruction in which compliance is prized over discovery.)

Left to their own devices, children will often seek answers to the questions that bubble up in them. But adults can help—less by providing answers than by reframing and building on those questions. They can call attention to connections between what different kids are asking. They can assist a community of learners in finding resources and thinking more deeply as they explore.



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How, specifically, should teachers nurture curiosity, taking advantage of what the late psychologist Jerome Bruner once called the “energizing lure of uncertainty”?

- Not just by welcoming students' questions when they diverge from the curriculum but by rethinking the curriculum itself, constructing it *with* students, not just for them, to address the topics that intrigue them. That includes questions to which the teacher doesn't know the answer—and, indeed, questions that don't *have* a single right answer.
- By offering readings that cover complex and controversial topics in genuinely interesting ways. (That's very different from depending on cutesy games or apps to start up unengaging tasks.)
- By “priming the pump” when necessary: suggesting questions or offering information that piques students' curiosity about things they haven't yet considered.
- By being curious themselves. [A study co-authored by Engel](#) confirmed that “the teacher's own behavior has a powerful effect on a child's disposition to explore.” Perhaps curiosity belongs on an administrator's list of qualities to look for in job applicants.
- By being keen to learn how each student's mind works. Outstanding teachers tend to do more listening than talking, in part because, as Harvard educator Eleanor Duckworth argued, the more intensely interested a teacher is in a kid's thinking, the more interested the kid becomes in her own thinking.
- By providing students with what psychological theorists call “autonomy support”—encouraging a sense of self-determination—which has been shown to heighten both intrinsic motivation (a concept that's similar to curiosity) and the quality of learning.

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Alas, these recommendations for teachers often run smack into structural constraints: an inflexible schedule that doesn't leave time for exploration; a principal who insists on quiet, orderly classrooms; a central office that imposes a standardized curriculum; a school board that cares more about test scores than about meaningful learning.

Other traditional practices have a similar effect. Among the most reliable extinguishers of the flame of curiosity are mandatory homework (making students work a second shift after school), grades and [rubrics](#) (which signal that success matters more than learning), a preoccupation with rigor (which often elicits anxiety, smothering curiosity), and the use of additional rewards or punishments to enforce this regimen.

Much of the problem comes from construing learning as a list of facts to be memorized or discrete skills to be practiced. This premise tends to promote teacher-centered direct instruction, which is often scripted or otherwise tightly controlled.

A group of University of California, Berkeley researchers found that when young children were shown exactly how to do something, they subsequently engaged in less exploration on their own than those who had received no explicit direction. Likewise, enthusiasm about reading—a key predictor of proficiency—tends to be lower when children are subjected to systematic phonics-based instruction rather than a literature-based approach, as Dominic Wyse and Charlotte Hacking explain in their new book *The Balancing Act*. Math teacher and research mathematician Paul Lockhart, meanwhile, wryly described the conventional curriculum in his field as “a proven cure for curiosity”—also an apt epithet for worksheets.

What Susan Engel discovered to her dismay in the early grades—a diminished desire to find out—only gets worse as kids make their way through traditional schools. Often, we don’t notice—either because, as Engel warns, we assume it’s enough for a teacher to be a nice, caring person or because we’re falsely reassured by high-achieving (albeit joyless) students. As education professor Lillian Weber once put it, too many kids start out as exclamation points and question marks, but leave school as plain periods.

Sure, everyone says curiosity is a lovely thing. But are we willing to oppose the traditional practices and policies that fail to nurture and even actively discourage it?



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