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Are Kids Curious?

In The Hungry Mind Susan Engel argues that schools do not often foster curiosity
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Young children deluge their parents – and others – with questions about the world around them. A recent study that followed four children from fourteen months old to five years and one month of age revealed that each individual on average asked 107 questions per hour. The kids sought permission to do something, clarification about ongoing activities and the whereabouts of other people, new information, and a deeper understanding of a phenomenon they observed.

By the time children are in school, however, expressions of curiosity are far less frequent. In a study conducted by Susan Engel, a senior lecturer in psychology at Williams College, episodes of curiosity – defined as questions, intent and directed gazing, and manipulating objects – occurred 2.36 times in a two hour stretch in kindergarten and 0.48 times in a fifth grade classroom.

In The Hungry Mind, Engel draws on the latest social science research and incidents from her own life to understand why curiosity is nearly universal in babies, pervasive in early childhood, and less evident in school. Although most children learn more when their curiosity is piqued, she argues, “schools do not always, or even often, foster curiosity.”

Based on temperament and a secure attachment to a primary care giver, an early disposition to engage new objects, sights, sounds, and strange situations with enthusiasm and equanimity rather than anxiety and alarm, Engel notes, tends to become a stable characteristic that casts a long shadow. That said, she makes a compelling case that the cultivation of curiosity “rests in large part on the people and experiences that surround and shape a child’s daily life.” Children are far more likely to ask questions and explore when they observe their parents doing so. Interaction with peers, Engel indicates, can beckon timid boys and girls into inquiry – or lead otherwise inquisitive kids into intellectual listlessness. Although she acknowledges that at their best autonomy and self-regulation go hand in hand, Engel emphasizes the salutary impact of unstructured, “free time,” which provides space for self-guided activity, “false starts, consideration of new data, and new possibilities for inquiry.”
Engel’s most important finding is that most classroom environments discourage curiosity. She points out that teachers balk at giving students plenty of time to explore and ask questions because they are under pressure to make sure that children achieve learning goals “that are obvious, explicit, and measurable.” They are more comfortable teaching the skills and established facts in their lesson plans than inviting questions that are “irrelevant” or to which they don’t know the answer. Engel agrees that making learning objectives explicit can contribute to a more durable and enduring understanding of facts and concepts; she insists, however, that “some of the most important learning happens at an implicit level, and is discovered by children on their own.”

Engel struggles, not always successfully, to identify ways to alter the classroom environments. Her recommendations, however, are aimed at individual instructors and not at the structural context (including “teach to the test” expectations of principals, and parents) now firmly in place in American schools. To identify a salient dynamic that may be invisible, Engel suggests that teachers should audio record lessons, count and categorize the questions students ask, and be more open to “serendipity, the unexpected insight or accidental data.” They should give students plenty of time to explore problems, encourage them to use the Internet “to ask any question that occurs to them,” and make clear “that getting an answer is not the most important goal.” And principals should put curiosity at the top of their list of the attributes of good teachers.

Engel is surely right that curiosity should be cultivated. But these days, in schools throughout the United States, whether or not they have adopted “the common core,” getting the right answer is the most important goal. In an era that prizes quantifiable results, a pedagogy that privileges curiosity is not likely to be a priority.

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