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The Case for Curiosity

In my eight years as a teacher, I have had the pleasure of interacting with many high achieving students. These students often have many traits in common including diligence, perseverance, creativity, and insightfulness. We encourage these characteristics in our students because we know how important they are for academic and career success. There is one trait, however, that I believe we often overlook and therefore neglect to foster in our students: curiosity.

An old education mantra posits there are no stupid questions. I can confirm that stupid questions have never been an issue or concern in my classroom. However, the moments I truly dread are when there are no questions at all, when what I thought would be fascinating, mind-blowing information is to my chagrin met with nothing more than a compliant crowd who is quietly counting down the minutes to when the bell rings. My role as a teacher is to get my students excited about learning, but the most exciting moments for me are when my students ask questions. Why did the author choose not to give Beowulf any children who could have inherited the throne? What is the best way to write a hook for the introduction of this essay? Why have people throughout history questioned whether Shakespeare wrote his own plays? I even love the question, why are we doing this?

Why is curiosity important?

The best questions start with why. “Why?” is the sound of the mind stretching itself to the farthest corners of understanding. If we encourage “Why?” and if we encourage students to question the answers, we will see students blossom into independent thinkers who demonstrate agency in their own learning. Curiosity is important because it is the beginning of the critical thinking process.

Curiosity is also the foundation of the research process, which is a key aspect of Arizona’s college and career readiness standards. This process begins with students posing a question and continues as their curiosity drives them to discover the answer. Thus, their hypotheses for science classes and thesis statements for English classes are direct results of their curiosity and their ability to formulate their own ideas based on the insight they gained through research. These skills will benefit them in both academic and career settings.

What can parents do?

Encourage curiosity in your kids. Expose them to new ideas. Ask your kids questions and make it an expectation for them to ask you questions in return. Do not be afraid of not knowing the answer. Learning should be an adventure. Your child’s smartphone has more than just social media capabilities. Ask questions together and google the answers, staying cognizant of collecting information from reliable sources. Sit together and research everything, and be confident that you are helping your child practice important skills for his or her future.

What can students do?

Ask questions. Then ask more questions. Do not accept information at face value. Make “why” the most prevalent word in your vocabulary. Never be satisfied with “I don’t know.” It is easy not to know, a little harder to know, and harder still to question what is known. Never accept easy from yourself.

Reflect on what inspires your curiosity. What are your interests? What knowledge do you crave? What skills do you seek to acquire? How will you find this knowledge and gain these skills? Reflect on what you are learning in your classes and always ask for more.

As a school community including parents, teachers, students, and administration, our job is to ensure that education does not end when the final bell rings after the last period of the day. Instead, we must encourage our students to look outside their textbooks and participate in real world inquiry. Students who are curious about the world, through their quest for answers, will become the world’s leaders and the world’s problem solvers. Every student has the potential to take control of his or her learning by asking questions. All it takes is a bit of curiosity.

Thank you for reading,

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