



Just for the ASKing!

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators. This month readers are asked to pause and reflect on where they stand on important educational issues.

Where Do You Stand?



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

As professional educators, we often find ourselves on an educational treadmill. As we do our jobs, we must make sure to include an almost impossible number of standards in our curricula while adhering to a pacing guide. Simultaneously, we are asked to meet the learning needs of all students by differentiating instruction, collaborating with our peers on a regular basis, using data to inform our instructional decisions, and incorporating new research-based practices into our classroom delivery of instruction.

Because of the pressure on educators to show results, we rarely have time to reflect on our work and ask ourselves if what we are doing is making a true difference in student learning. It is time to stop, take a breath, and think about the important work we are doing. Unless we take the time to deliberate about the issues that impact our practice, we may find ourselves on automatic pilot doing what we've always done and hoping that what we do will elicit the results we are seeking.

Below you will see a series of questions; the purpose of each question is to pose an issue which can impact our practice as professional educators. When you can find a quiet moment – perhaps while driving to work, taking a walk, or simply finding the time to get lost in your thoughts – consider the different perspectives suggested by each question. For some, you may find validation in your current practice while for others, you may find yourself contemplating a different perspective that you had not originally considered. It may even prompt the desire to go in a completely new direction. Read on.

Question #1: Can our definition of fairness be inhibiting student learning?

Some educators feel that it is important to treat all their students in the same manner because this a fair approach to take. They adhere to the belief that it is important for schools to prepare students for the “real world” where employees are treated the same and competition is the name of the game. Other educators have reevaluated their thinking and redefined fairness as giving each student what he or she needs to be successful. They defend their stance by pointing out that there is often a vast difference in the knowledge and skills that students bring to the classroom and that if learning is the ultimate goal, it is necessary to treat students differently. Individuals who have redefined fair do not believe that we should “let students off the hook” but modify how we treat individual students. They maintain high expectations for student

performance by emphasizing that students must be responsible for completing their work, that ignored work does not simply vanish and that a poorly done job must be done again. By taking into account students' individual circumstances, they have concluded that some students learn quickly, some take longer, but all students can achieve success. By redefining fairness, are we coddling students or helping them in their struggle to learn?

Question #2: Is it important for students to learn to fail without feeling like failures?

Many students come to our classrooms with the belief that getting a good grade is the most important goal they can set for themselves. They often see any failure as a human flaw. Other students who are less competitive, and for whom learning is a struggle, often have low self esteem when they fail and eventually see themselves as deficient and inadequate. If our classrooms are truly safe environments, perhaps we should teach our students that it is perfectly normal to experience failure when encountering new learning or when attempting to solve a problem. As adults, we can actually model our hesitations and struggles as we are learning something new and thus demonstrate to students that failure is an important part of learning. As educational consultant Rick Wormeli writes, "Failure can teach us in ways that consistent success cannot." Our students should understand that most great discoveries or innovations came after multiple failures. Some educators, however, grade all work that students produce and students quickly learn that "everything counts." As a result, students often become discouraged when they receive a poor grade on a quiz or an in-class assignment, both of which fall into the category of formative assessments. Should our classrooms become safe havens where lack of success during the formative stages of learning does not negatively impact a student's standing or final grade in a course?

Question #3: How do we know if students are truly engaged in the learning process?

Educators often point to student engagement as one of the most important components of a learner-centered classroom. As educators look for data to determine if engagement is occurring, they point to students quietly paying attention as they listen to the teacher's instruction, the positive body language and facial expressions of the students, or the compliant behavior of students as they complete individual assignments at their seats. In fact, the reality is that these are not valid signs that students are truly involved or immersed in the learning experiences we provide. By examining our own behavior as teachers, we can watch for clearer signs that students are more engaged in their learning. We can ask ourselves: Are we asking students what they think or simply telling them what we think? Are we peaking student curiosity through surprising and interesting lessons or are we simply presenting factual information or straight-forward content? Are we asking our students to apply concepts in new ways, evaluate different points of view, or justifying their thinking? Are we requiring students to process and reflect on their own learning in order to determine where they are in the learning continuum? If our classrooms are more teacher-centered than student-centered, should we be reevaluating how we plan lessons to increase true student engagement?

Question #4: Are our students being over-tested and at the same time under-assessed?

As I interact with educators, I am continually struck by the fact that students seem to be tested at every turn. In classrooms, I see the words "quiz" and "test" again and again on posted agendas and curriculum calendars displayed for students. I watch teachers grading stacks of papers and recording grades either in their gradebooks or on their computers. Teachers often seem to be spending most of their time preparing students for district-mandated tests that will provide data to show if schools are progressing at the proper rate in preparation for the state standardized achievement tests that will show whether schools are making "adequate progress." As some professionals have espoused, testing is out of control. Should we be spending instructional time gathering more informal data to determine if students are making progress and adjusting instruction accordingly instead of trying to quantify everything?

Question #5: Are we employing a repertoire of formative assessment strategies to determine if student learning is occurring?

This question is a logical follow-up to question #4. In order to adequately assess student learning, we need a repository of strategies to determine if students are making progress. These strategies may include a quick write where students explain their understanding of a newly-learned concept or write about problems they encountered as they learned. Students might also complete practice problems, create new problems, devise a graphic organizer, generate metaphors or analogies related to the new content, or respond to questions on a ticket to leave. Students might also be asked to respond orally to a summarizing question or participate in a think aloud as they put their thoughts into words. If assessing the progress of student learning along a continuum is important, if we want to stress learning and not grading, and if we want students to develop the habit of self-assessing their progress, shouldn't we be making use of varied informal assessment practices to reach this important goal?

Question #6: How influential are positive interactions between teacher and student in the learning process?

Perhaps this question is a no-brainer and the answer is obvious. It is, however, an important question to pose since relationship building between teacher and student comes up again and again in the literature related to student achievement. A speaker recently pointed out that "being a great teacher is a contact sport, so don't just sit on the sidelines." What is especially important is how teachers interact with their students. When teachers offer timely feedback or acknowledge progress with specific data, students will often conclude that the teacher's interest in their learning is not false or phony. Conversely, if teachers are overly critical or quick to punish, students may view interactions as negative experiences and withdraw from asking for help. As one student pointed out, "I don't remember the many positive interactions I have with teachers, but the few negative encounters still resonate with me." As we interact with our students, do we see ourselves primarily as confidence builders who promote in students a sense of self-efficacy by providing growth-producing feedback?

Question #7: Why is it important for teachers to never give up on a student?

In a recent presentation, the speaker posed the question, "Who is going to volunteer to call a parent and tell them that we've given up on their child?" A hush fell over the audience because no one wants to be put in that position. Although the official call may never be made, is it possible that some teachers quietly abandon their belief in a student's capacity to learn? Students who struggle to learn often exhibit negative behaviors and their teacher operates under the misguided conclusion that the student is being purposely disruptive and avoiding responsibility. In fact, there may be much more percolating below the surface. Some students feel inadequate, confused, and ashamed; they show their frustration when they can't keep up; they believe that it is safer to avoid the work than to fail and be embarrassed. Other students make attempts to complete their work but they receive negative feedback or failing grades and conclude that their efforts are futile. As professionals and believers in children, should we be constantly looking for signs of progress and student investment in learning and build upon those instances with the goal to keep the students moving in a positive direction?

Question #8: Why is it essential for all educators to be lifelong learners?

If we want to improve student learning, we must continually evaluate our practice and ask ourselves if what we are doing is the best use of our instructional time. To determine if we are open-minded, we can ask ourselves a series of questions:

- Am I using proven research-based strategies that result in increased student learning or am I applying techniques that are convenient and work for me?
- Am I open to new ways of thinking or do I quickly resort to the "yes, but" response when alternative approaches are suggested?
- Am I using data to evaluate my instructional delivery and its overall impact on student learning or do I plan my lessons without taking into account how and if students are learning?

If we examine behaviors in other professions, we find over and over that practitioners abandon conventions that have been proven to be less effective, do not impact their work in a positive way, or do not lead to the desired results. More specifically, author Jim Collins suggests that it is more important for educators to make a “stop doing” list rather than a “to do” list. As we self-assess our beliefs and practices, should we ask ourselves how willing we are to keep an open mind and adjust our instruction to meet the needs of all our students?

Question #9: As educators, do we have a solid world view in order to help our students make real world connections?

It is often mindboggling to think about how rapidly the world around us is changing. No sooner do we feel comfortable with something new, than another innovation comes along to take its place. As educators, we often struggle to make sense of all the things that are happening around us. With four distinct generations teaching our children, it is quite possible that a student might have a completely different educational experience than their peers depending upon the mindset of the teacher. My personal observations of teachers in action over the past decade have shown that many teachers are savvy about the world around them and can incorporate this knowledge and insight into the lessons they provide for students. Others, however, seem to be teaching in a vacuum and are bringing very few modern perspectives to their classroom environment. We all know that change is inevitable and that it is a process and not an event. Should it be the professional mandate of every educator to keep up with the many changes impacting our world and bring a 21st century perspective to the learning environment they provide for today’s students?

Question #10: Are we preparing our students for graduation and at the same time for life beyond school?

Public schools are under extreme pressure to provide data that clearly show that student achievement is improving and graduation rates are increasing with each passing year. Hence, we are going to great lengths to ensure that our students are passing state-mandated standardized tests while at the same time providing high-interest learning experiences that will result in more students completing high school. Some writers have argued that we are under the erroneous assumption that knowing the right answer on a standardized test is a way to judge future employees. Putting it another way, it has been suggested that some people believe that higher test scores and more diplomas will lead to greater prosperity in the future job market. We do know that statistically high school graduates will have significantly higher earnings over a lifetime than someone who does not graduate from high school. As we contemplate the purpose of a strong, solid, well-rounded education, should we be endeavoring to address both the current academic needs of our students while also preparing them for the life they will face when their formal education is complete?

Reflective questions often lead to new ways of thinking. As professionals, we must always keep open minds, reevaluate our current practice, and change the course of our instruction when circumstances dictate that a different approach is necessary. Our goal is have each and every one of our students experience a “senior moment” during which they successfully contemplate their graduation day and optimistically look forward to the next steps they will take in their young adult lives.

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