**[Prevalent pedagogy and the misfit twins](https://nation.com.pk/02-Mar-2020/prevalent-pedagogy-and-the-misfit-twins" \t "_new)**

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A few years back, I was working as a program coordinator at a school. One day, a teacher came to me with a case of curious twins who had just joined grade 3. They had bombarded the teacher with so many questions that she complained that they were disturbing the classroom environment. Interestingly, the school had recently started practising inquiry-based learning. When I investigated the matter, I found that the twins’ parents had so far homeschooled them. I went to observe whether they were asking questions for the sake of teasing the teacher or if they were actually curious about the world around them. The nature of their queries showed a hunger for learning. Their questions were not acts of mischief but the inquisitiveness of tiny faces with cute glasses. It surprised me that their parents had managed to keep their inquisitiveness intact. The attitude of teachers drives me to question whether schools as hubs of learning are actually providing a space to expand students’ knowledge or shut off their bulbs of curiosity.

Questioning is a human instinct driven by a sense of wonder. Thanks to questioning that motivated Newton’s mind to probe the falling of an apple rather than thinking of it a natural phenomenon that he discovered gravity. Children are packages of questions and explorers of curiosity; if the instinct of questioning is kept intact, it can lead to surprising discoveries. However, by insulting or becoming angry at children who ask questions, the inquisitiveness of tiny minds dies. A study conducted in Britain and published in the Telegraph found that an average four-year-old girl asked her poor mom almost 390 questions a day. Then it is not wrong to say that questioning is just like breathing. A Harvard child psychologist, Paul Harris, found that a child between the ages of two and five asks approximately 40,000 questions. Schooling starts at the age of five in most of the countries around the globe. And the number of questions falls dramatically with every school-year. Why do schools seem to fail to nurture children’s natural curiosity?

Have you ever been in a classroom where your mind was brimming with questions that you did not dare ask for fear of annoying the teacher? Those who ask too many questions are commonly chastised, and this behaviour is thereby discouraged. The authority dynamics in Pakistani classrooms are a reflection of our society. In most cases, the teacher is in control and sets the pace of a class. Questions disrupt and challenge this power. If we observe our schooling and examination system, we know that we answer questions with explanations that are not even our own. Have you ever taken an exam that tests you on asking questions instead of reproducing unoriginal answers? Why don’t schools encourage students to think differently and distinctively? Perhaps, the most obvious answer is: questioning challenges authority and interrupts long-established power structures.

Paulo Freire writes, “If the structure does not permit dialogue then the structure must be changed.” Today, the industrial model that demands compliance influences the school system. In such a system, asking a question might be considered disobedience. David Hackett Fischer argues, “Questions are the engines of intellect – cerebral machines that convert curiosity into controlled inquiry.” Rothstein believes that questions do something—he is not sure precisely what—that has an “unlocking” effect in people’s minds. Posing questions stimulates our thinking process, touches our more profound levels of cognition and drives us to deal with complexity. The importance of this objective is easy to understand if we pause to entertain an intriguing question.

Substantive questions are ubiquitous in our surroundings. People debate and discuss even outside the schools. Queries bear in discussions, and they bring new possibilities to the lovers of inquiry. Then why do schools (K-University) discourage them? Warren Berger describes this phenomenon in his book, A More Beautiful Question: “questioning isn’t taught in most schools — nor is it rewarded (only memorised answers are).” Sadly, this is not just confined to schools; our daily lives also reflect this attitude. We keep repeating our behaviour, scarcely pausing to question whether we are on the right track.

From our classrooms to our workplaces, it is rare to find those who are interested in engaging thoughtfully with questions. In classrooms, students are asked to provide answers; at workplaces, employees are required to find solutions. This attitude reflects the absence of inquiry in our schooling culture. The answers that are provided in classrooms are mostly factual and do not lead to in-depth investigations. As if that was not enough, even our universities’ research culture follows a similar pattern. Students struggle when they are required to do a thesis/dissertation at the higher education level. Plagiarism is often their only way out since they have been trained to reproduce ready-made answers rather than engaging with the questions. The prevailing culture in our schools expects students to memorise the provided solutions; they do not connect with the questions raised by people centuries ago. We should, instead, encourage students to pursue their own questions instead of reproducing the same answers.

Quality education is a lifelong quest; the questions that make you think are more important than definitive answers. A Chinese proverb defines this maxim: “Ask a man a question, and he inquires for a day; teach a man to question, and he inquires for life”. Biologist Stuart Firestein notes, “One good question can give rise to several layers of answers can inspire decades-long searches for solutions, can generate whole new fields of inquiry, and can prompt changes in entrenched thinking”. He further describes, “Answers, on the other hand, often end the process.”

As John Seely Brown, a researcher focusing on organisational studies, writes, a questioner can thrive in these times of exponential change. “If you don’t have that disposition to question,” Brown says, “you’re going to fear change. But if you’re comfortable questioning, experimenting, connecting things—then change is something that becomes an adventure.”

A few months after the case of the curious twins, I was facilitating a class during which a girl lobbed a lot of why-questions. I tried answering them but had to admit my ignorance after 10 to 15 questions. “Sir, why don’t my questions irritate you,” she asked. I replied that I don’t mind asking questions because they should not be left unexplored. We should appreciate questions and extend the inquiry process by becoming sound investigators.