

Ask children this question: Do you want to be a student?

07 September 2016

Are children really given a choice? Do children even consider that there *is* a choice? If a school believes in creating life-long learners, why are they testing them at certain ages and why do these exams eliminate so many children from the opportunities to learn?

Do you want to be a student?

I don't think I was ever asked that question...and in twenty years as a teacher I don't think I ever put that question to a single student either.

But it strikes me as a fundamental question.

You might hear children say that they want to be a journalist, a doctor or movie star or football player. And no one would expect anybody to become a policeman unless they wanted to be one. You would never hear of a child who went to football training three or four times a week but didn't want to be a football player. People decide whether or not they want to get married or have children. They may have a desire to go and live in a specific place in the world. All our dreams and desires.

But I've never heard a child ever say that they wanted to be a student, even if it is the dominant thing that they are going to be, like it or not, for a good quarter of their life.

And I have never heard of this question being asked of the children.

In fact, I would point out that this is indeed *the question less asked of...*



It is an interesting question which I believe should be considered and asked more frequently. I recently asked it for the first time as a teacher to my two teenage children who are studying with me at the moment - and I discovered the power of this question, because it truly is a novel, yet fundamental question.

It is an interesting question because it implies that there is a choice (which the child assumes there is not) and it also begs the follow-up question: *What is a student?*

If a student is someone who has a quest for learning and new knowledge, a desire to find holes in his own misbeliefs and misconceptions and a desire to gain ever-increasing understanding of who and where he is and how he got there - then surely a student is something that any intelligent human being might want to be.

Schools invariably pay lip-service to the ideal of creating 'life-long learners' - while at the same time they talk about preparing children for a competitive world of employment and boast of excellent exam results at age sixteen. This is anomalous. Come on, seriously, you want these kids to be learners their whole life but then you test them at sixteen and that determines whether or not they can continue studying or have to go out and get a job? This is hypocrisy.

But if this ideal of life-long learning were truly delivered by formal education and not perverted and distorted by this desire or belief about competing and getting as big a piece of the finitely-sized pie as possible, then wouldn't every child leaving school have the desire to be a student? A life-long learner, rather than a life-long earner?

And yet you could ask a thousand teenagers what they want to do in life and few if any would tell you that they want to be a student. "I want to spend the rest of my life studying and learning." How many children think that?

And what does that tell us about the education system?

As a parent or as a teacher, what more could you want from a child than a desire to spend the rest of their life learning? But the system is set up to fool everyone into thinking that learning is done at a certain age and then tested and assessed at certain ages - you move through the system, primary to tertiary or even post-graduate, and then you 'go out' and work. It is always stressful and pressured. Children may be assessed as inferior or retarded in their learning as early as five years old - still with their whole life-long life of learning ahead of them. The clock is ticking, the panic is on. Yearly assessment, key stage exams, GCSE, A-Level. Always the pressure is on. Even at post-graduate level there is time pressure. In fact, the pressure mounts as you progress through the production line.

(But wait! I thought you had your whole life to learn - that is, if you are life-long learners...)

And then you finally shoot out the other end at whatever stage and then you will be busy finding then keeping a job. There is never time to really think and learn at your own pace and in your own way.

People don't learn or think clearly in such circumstances. People make realisations and think clearly when they have space to relax and time to think. Without pressure or constant distractions. A few weeks here and there for holidays is not enough. When the pressure is off, that's when people become creative and really think about things deeply. When you have time in your day, every day, for leisurely exercise, meditation, read a book or two, cook yourself a nice meal, write some emails, crosscheck your learning, potter around in your garden, go for a ride, think some more, watch a documentary, discuss things for hours with friends.

This is being a student - and it doesn't sound too bad, does it? In fact, the word school comes from the Ancient Greek meaning 'leisure'. Boy, how that has been inverted!

There are two news stories in the past few days from the UK relevant to this topic. One story is about the increasing amount of anger that parents are having towards their children because their children are uncooperative and are finding the real world boring compared to their devices and games. The second article was about how disaffected boys are in schools in the UK and how the answer to this is to make schools more masculine and boy-friendly.

In both of these, I would qualify these issues as cases of where the children do not want to be students. If I am right, then I would suggest there are two reasons for this which are actually two sides to the same coin: 1) Schools make being a student an inferior experience and 2) The children don't grasp how wonderful it actually is to be a student.

My own children are similar - which is why the question *Do you want to be a student?* is so powerful. They have enjoyed studying with me, but the residue of 10 years in a school has left them still half-reluctant students. As they are reaching a more mature age, they will need to decide if they want to be students or not because no teacher wants to keep teaching students who don't want to learn. So make your choice, buddy!

Most children, if not all, never consider the idea of wanting to be a student as their main goal in life. Partly because they have never been asked, but mostly because their experience of being a student was so authoritarian, imposed upon

them, confusing, boring, distorted, pressured and stressful. To be fair, for many of course, at times it would have also been humiliating, traumatic and confidence-destroying.

We need to stop imposing education on children. Freedom, choice, ownership, self-led, independent, inquiry-based - these are all terms which find favour (or lip-service) in mainstream education. So does life-long learning.

Yet schools by their very existence represent imposed learning and the absence of choice. A child who doesn't want to go to school is a nightmare scenario for a parent - rather than just a smart and independent life-learner.

Schools wouldn't base their mission around creating life-long policemen or life-long football players so why impose being a student on children. And then the same schools market themselves as providing an education which will give the children an advantage in a competitive workplace. It's hypocrisy on top of hypocrisy.

Much better: let the children choose and show them the beauty and privilege of having the ability and the time and space to really think and learn. Assuming you have to eventually work to earn a living, childhood is the one time in your life when you really have that time to think and learn. But we take it away from them and put them under extreme pressure to compete.

We need to give children time and space. We need to show children the joy and rewards of thinking and deep learning. We need to give children freedom and choice.

In other words, we need to ask children the question: *Do you want to be a student?*

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