Have We Lost the Art of Curiosity?

From the desk of Jenni Foley, Deputy Head (Academic)

My son once asked me a question I have never forgotten: “What is a shadow made of?”

I had no answer. I could explain how shadows form, but that wasn't quite what he was asking. He had taken something utterly ordinary and made me see it anew. What *is* a shadow? Is it something, or the absence of something? Where does it go when the light returns?

His question was simple, perhaps even clumsy in its phrasing, but it opened up a world of possibilities. It reminded me that inquiry rarely begins with polished language or a perfectly formed hypothesis. It begins with a feeling that something is worth wondering about.

Inquiry is at the heart of our school. It may not always look tidy, linear or even particularly academic from the outside. It can look like a room full of questions, tentative ideas, unexpected connections and conversations that seem to wander away from the point. Yet beneath this apparent messiness lies something fundamental to both academic pursuit and the human experience: the desire to make sense of the world.

The question is not whether we have all the answers. It is whether we remain curious enough to keep asking.

Born to wonder, taught to answer

Research into children's questioning offers a striking reminder of how naturally inquiry begins. Studies have recorded preschool children asking around 76 to 107 questions an hour in particular conversational settings, while a widely reported UK survey estimated that four-year-old girls ask around 390 questions a day. These figures come from different methods and contexts, but they capture something familiar: young children possess an extraordinary appetite for understanding the world.

As children grow older, however, their questions can become less visible. The desire to understand does not necessarily disappear, but the willingness to voice uncertainty or pursue an unexpected idea may diminish. Students learn to recognise what is expected, search for the correct response and measure success by how well they meet the criteria.

Of course, knowledge matters. Students need a rich foundation of facts, concepts and disciplinary understanding to think deeply. But knowledge and curiosity are not opposing forces. Knowledge gives us something to question, while questioning helps us connect what we know, recognise what we do not and discover what we might learn next.

The danger lies not in teaching answers, but in allowing answers to become the destination.

Why curiosity matters to learning

Curiosity is more than an appealing personality trait. Research suggests it can influence how we engage with information, direct our attention and retain what we learn. Neuroscientist Matthias Gruber and colleagues have found that heightened curiosity can enhance learning and memory.

A good question can create an intellectual opening. *Why did the character make that decision?* invites interpretation. *What evidence supports this explanation?* asks students to evaluate. *What if the outcome had been different?* encourages them to explore possibilities and consider cause and consequence.

These questions do not replace explicit teaching or the acquisition of knowledge. They help students do something with that knowledge: examine it, test it, connect it and apply it in unfamiliar situations. And sometimes the most productive question is one for which neither the student nor the teacher has an answer. Learning to stay with uncertainty and discomfort, rather than rush to resolve it, is an important part of intellectual growth and human development that creates resilience in uncertain times.

When learning looks messy

Meaningful inquiry is not always easy to recognise. It does not necessarily produce an immediate answer, a neat page of notes or a visible outcome that demonstrates progress at every moment. Students may begin with questions that seem obvious, follow an unpromising line of thought or struggle to articulate an idea they are only beginning to understand.

But intellectual progress is not usually linear. Sometimes students must first expose what they do not understand before they can begin to make sense of it. Sometimes a tentative idea, challenged by another perspective, becomes the starting point for more rigorous thinking.

This is why learner-centred teaching places students' thinking at the heart of the learning process. Teachers remain essential: they introduce knowledge, explain difficult concepts, model expert thinking and guide students towards deeper understanding. They also create the conditions in which students can question, investigate, challenge assumptions and construct connections of their own.

That requires patience. It means allowing time for thought, welcoming different perspectives and resisting the temptation to fill every silence. It means asking not only *"What do you think?"* but also *"What makes you think that?"*, *"What evidence might change your mind?"* and *"How else could we interpret this?"*

Above all, it means recognising that the quality of learning cannot always be judged by how polished a student's first response appears. We must look at the thinking beneath it: the questions being asked, the connections being made and the willingness to reconsider an idea.

From asking questions to thinking independently

For young people of any age, inquiry has significance far beyond the classroom. They are developing their identities, forming their own judgements and learning to navigate a world of competing perspectives and increasingly complex information.

In an age when search engines and artificial intelligence can produce answers in seconds, the ability to ask meaningful questions becomes even more important. A fluent answer is not necessarily a reliable one, and access to information is not the same as understanding it.

Students need to ask where information comes from, whose perspective it represents, what evidence supports it and what might be missing. They need to recognise when a question rests on a false assumption, when a problem has no simple solution and when changing their minds is a sign of learning rather than failure.

These habits cannot be developed through instruction alone. They must be practised in classrooms where students can challenge ideas respectfully, explore uncertainty and learn that not knowing is not the same as being incapable.

Parents can nurture the same disposition at home. When a child asks a question, we do not always need to provide an immediate answer. Sometimes, “What do you think?” or “How could we find out?” is a more powerful response. Not every conversation needs to become a lesson. Sometimes, simply taking a child's question seriously is enough.

We don't need every answer; we need the courage to inquire.

I return to my son's question about the shadow because it captures something I hope we never lose: the capacity to look at the familiar and remain curious.

Inquiry may sometimes appear untidy, uncertain or unfinished. But beneath that surface is a philosophy that sits at the heart of academic endeavour: knowledge is not something to receive, but something to explore, interrogate and extend. It is also at the heart of being human. We wonder, we seek meaning, we imagine alternatives and we ask questions that take us beyond what we already know.

As a school, our responsibility is not only to equip young people with answers, but to nurture the curiosity, knowledge and intellectual courage to keep asking better questions. We want students who can think independently, engage thoughtfully with others and approach the unknown not with fear, but with a willingness to explore.

We don't need more answers for their own sake. We need the questions that make us think more deeply, see differently and discover what we could not see before.