

5 Powerful Questions Teachers Can Ask Students

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Student Engagement

My first year teaching, a literacy coach came to observe my classroom. After the students left, she commented on how I asked the whole class a question, would wait just a few seconds, and then answer it myself. "It's cute," she added. Um, I don't think she thought it was so cute. I think she was treading lightly on the ever-so shaky ego of a brand-new teacher while still giving me some very necessary feedback.

So that day, I learned about wait/think time. And also, over the years, I learned to ask better and better questions.

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Many would agree that for inquiry to be alive and well in a classroom that, amongst other things, the teacher needs to be expert at asking strategic questions, and not only asking well-designed ones, but ones that will also lead students to questions of their own.

Keeping It Simple

I also learned over the years that asking straightforward, simply-worded questions can be just as effective as those intricate ones. With that in mind, if you are a new teacher or perhaps not so new but know that question-asking is an area where you'd like to grow, start tomorrow with these five:

#1. What do you think?

This question interrupts us from telling too much. There is a place for direct instruction where we give students information yet we need to always strive to balance this with plenty of opportunities for students to make sense of and apply that new information using their schemata and understanding.

#2. Why do you think that?

After students share what they think, this follow-up question pushes them to provide reasoning for their thinking.

#3. How do you know this?

When this question is asked, students can make connections to their ideas and thoughts with things they've experienced, read, and have seen.

#4. Can you tell me more?

This question can inspire students to extend their thinking and share further evidence for their ideas.

#5. What questions do you still have?

This allows students to offer up questions they have about the information, ideas or the evidence.

In addition to routinely and relentlessly asking your students questions, be sure to provide time for them to think. What's best here, three seconds, five, or seven? Depending on their age, the depth of the material, and their comfort level, this think time will vary. Just push yourself to stay silent and wait for those hands to go up.

Also be sure to vary your tone so it genuinely sounds like a question and not a statement. When we say something

in a declarative way, it is often with one tone and flat sounding. On the other hand, there is a lilt in our voice when we are inquiring and questioning.

To help student feel more comfortable and confident with answering questions and asking ones of their own, you can use this scaffold: Ask a question, pause, and then invite students to "turn and talk" with a neighbor first before sharing out with the whole group. This allows all to have their voices heard and also gives them a chance to practice their responses before sharing in front of the whole class.

How do you ask questions in your classroom? What works well with your students? Please share with us in the comment section below.