



Constructivist Teaching by Heart

Newsletter, January 2026

"Putting children at the center of learning."

Just Curious...Are Your Students Curious?

I've been thinking about curiosity lately. I guess you could say that I (Dana) am curious about curiosity. What makes us curious? How do children become curious? Do we promote curiosity in schools these days?

Curiosity is a disposition. We wrote about dispositions in our book *Constructivist Teaching by Heart: A Child-centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3*. I describe developing dispositions as the easiest tool in our teaching toolbox.

Dispositions are acquired by seeing behaviors in someone that you admire; a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, or anyone that displays that disposition, the child then sees it as something worth doing.



You can develop a love for books, a passion for writing, an intrigue for history, or an appreciation for cooking when someone in your life demonstrates these interests. For example, when a teacher starts a new book by saying, "This is one of my favorite books," children are drawn in. Similarly, if a parent expresses their love for animals, the child might think, "I want to do that too." Children who help a grandparent bake a favorite pie may want to continue baking when they grow up, developing a lifelong disposition toward it. Once a disposition is acquired, it stays with you for life.

The Oxford dictionary defines curiosity as a strong desire to know or learn something. How important it is for our students to have a strong desire to learn! To explore curiosity further, I turned to one of our favorite educational thought leaders, Alfie Kohn. On his website, alfiekohn.com, I found articles and a podcast featuring curiosity. In one article, Alfie cited a 2018 study in *Pediatric Research* on curiosity that found it correlated with higher academic achievement across all children studied. The benefits of curiosity were even greater for economically disadvantaged students. This made me more curious.

So, how can we foster a disposition of curiosity in our kids? The solution is deceptively simple: by providing students opportunities to wonder and explore, and by asking questions. We ask students questions all the time, right? Asking open-ended questions is important, but I think how we ask the

questions matters more. I think constructivist teachers nurture a disposition of curiosity by asking questions as *if we don't know the answer*.

For instance, during a math lesson, we might say, "Name an equation that totals 15". Kids are used to teachers asking questions like that, and they assume we already know the answer. But what if we open that question up to, "How many ways are there to make 15?" You can answer, "yes, I agree that $5 + 10$ makes 15, but it has occurred to me that there are more ways to make 15. I'm wondering how many there are?" Now we've got them thinking, and we have also shown them that even teachers wonder about things. We've demonstrated the disposition to be curious.



While reading a book, you might stop and think aloud, saying something like, "I'm wondering how Stella is going to work out her dilemma. What do you think?" You could stop and jot what our class is wondering about during a read-aloud - just our questions at this point. In science, our inquiries can serve as the foundation for scientific exploration.

An even more open-ended approach may be to create a Curiosity Board in your classroom. This is where we capture compelling questions we don't know the answer to, but are curious to find out. Write the question and the name(s) of the students who ask the question onto chart paper or a section of the white board that is titled *Our Curiosity Board*, or *We Wonder About....* When a child discovers the answer, write it next to the question, along with the student's name and the source of the information. If multiple answers emerge, continue to add them alongside the original questions.

Another way I love to promote curiosity is through student-created surveys. Surveys help children explore what others are thinking. I introduced surveys to my kindergarten students early in the school year, and we continued to find new topics throughout the year to survey friends, the class, or other students at the school. Surveys are a great tool to help students learn to ask questions, listen to the answer, and think of another question they might ask. A simple question like: "Which school lunches are the most popular?" makes a great survey question. (My kids loved questions about lunch, and sometimes we took our results to the cafeteria staff to share them.) I print the question at the top of a sheet of paper and copy several pages to place in a learning center, with a clipboard for each survey taker. Older students can design their own survey forms and develop their own methods for recording data and compiling results.



Students can present their survey findings. A myriad of ways to follow up with the survey data can expand the lesson. Conduct discussions about what the survey results told you and think of follow-up questions for further investigation. You can create math problems with the information, and write a summary paragraph detailing the results.

Inspiring curiosity is less about the specific question and more about demonstrating curiosity. Children learn that wondering about things leads to more thinking, more discoveries, and more questions. Many of us are required to use a prescribed curriculum that provides the questions for learning. Many of these questions have one correct answer, but you can tweak the lesson to make them more curious and open-ended, thereby allowing curiosity while making learning more engaging.

We can commit to a renewed practice of fostering a culture of curiosity for children in our classrooms. I remember when a teacher once told me that she had a new student join her class, and he was from England. "He's a nice kid," she told me, "but he asks a lot of questions." "Ouch!," I thought. Curious children ask questions. How we respond to their questions is important because how we model our own curiosity may be providing our students with a lifetime of curiosity.



Citations:

Engel, S. (2026). *American Kindergarten*. Univ. of Chicago Press.

Kohn, A. (2024, September 23.) All Learning, No Questioning: How Schools Smother Curiosity. *Education Week*.

Kohn, A. (Host). (2025-present). *Kohn's Zone* [Audio podcast]. <https://www.alfiekohn.org/podcasts/curiosity-kz/>

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Just Curious: Are Your Students Curious? Reflection Questions:

-  What are you curious about? How do you demonstrate your curiosity to your students?
-  What dispositions do you have, and where did you get them from?
-  How can you adjust a simple question into one that encourages your students to think more deeply?

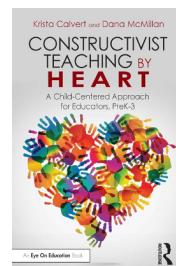
We want to hear from you!

Share your comments about this newsletter topic, Just Curious: Are Your Students Curious? [here](#).

POUNDER BOX

"According to Lillian Katz (1985), an early childhood educator from the University of Illinois, a disposition is a habit of the mind. You gain dispositions by seeing them displayed in someone (often older than you) that you admire. For example, when a parent or a teacher reads an excellent book aloud to a child and makes every character come to life. They read the story with joy and laughter and take time to admire the illustrations in the book. Teachers can wonder aloud about what may be coming up next in the story. These actions create a disposition to love books. The child will wish to read a book just the same way."

-Constructivist Teaching by Heart: A Child-Centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3, p. 11.



Teaching with High-Quality Children's Books

Here are a few imaginative, playful, serious, and inspirational books for exploring and promoting curiosity in the classroom...



Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here](#)!

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