

Four Questions to Guide Teachers' Thinking About Their Practice

by Carol R. Keyes

Over the years, I have organized a series of activities for professional development that, rather than focusing on a particular topic, revolves around four questions related to teachers' values and beliefs:

1. What characteristics do I want to help the child develop?
2. What can I be teaching in this situation?
3. Why do I do what I do in the classroom?
4. Would I want to be a child in this classroom?

These questions are designed to help teachers become more reflective about their values and beliefs, more intentional in their teaching, and to improve the match between their beliefs and practices. The questions and discussion help teachers 'unpack' their own ideas and help facilitate self-awareness.



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Question 1: What kind of person do I want to develop?

This first question involves teachers in thinking about the characteristics they are trying to nurture in young children. Here's an outline of the steps for this activity:

- a) **State the goals of the activity:** To help teachers become more reflective about their values and beliefs, more intentional in their teaching, and to improve the match between their beliefs and practices.
- b) **Share the question.**
- c) **Distribute a list of characteristics to describe children.** Post them on a board or project them using an overhead projector:

Adventurous, affectionate, a good guesser, altruistic, always asking questions, athletic, attempts difficult jobs, self-starter, becomes preoccupied with tasks, careful, cautious, competitive, completes work on time, conforming, considerate of others, cooperative, courageous, courteous, creative, critical of others, curious, desires to excel, determined, domineering, emotional, energetic, fault-finding, fear-

ful, friendly, gets good grades, healthy, independent in judgment, industrious, intelligent, intuitive, likes to work alone, likes school, never bored, negativistic, obedient, persistent, physically attractive, physically strong, proud, quiet, rebellious, receptive to ideas of others, refined, regresses occasionally (playful, childish), remembers well.

- d) **Ask the teachers to choose the three characteristics they believe are the most important for children's development.**
 - Give them time to consider their choices.
 - Go around the group and ask each teacher to share one choice at a time.
 - When a teacher names a characteristic, ask all of those who have chosen that characteristic to raise their hands too.
 - Count the number of respondents and post the number next to that characteristic.
 - Continue to go around the group until all choices have been reported.
- e) **Discuss why each characteristic chosen is important.**
- f) **Ask for examples of how to help children develop those characteristics and abilities in the classroom.**

g) **Close the session with a quote from Marian Wright Edelman.** Take a few final minutes to compare what the teachers chose with what Edelman wrote:

"[Children need] adults to teach them how to struggle with complexity, to think through the short- and long-term consequences of their actions, to bounce back from life's inevitable failures, to learn how not to be lonely when alone, to think, ask the right questions, solve problems, sort out and synthesize reams of information, make informed judgments, and take effective action, to sacrifice to build a fairer and safer world." (Edelman, 2008, p. xv)

Question 2:

What can I be teaching in this situation?

This second question asks teachers to consider their role in responding to children's behavior as a way of facilitating their learning.

- a) **State the goal of the activity:** To help teachers become more reflective about their values and beliefs, more intentional in their teaching, and to improve the match between their beliefs and practices.
- b) **Post the following incident** on an overhead or a poster board or distribute copies to the teachers:
- "Imagine a teacher of 20 four-year-olds whose outdoor equipment only includes two tricycles! Squabbles will inevitably arise over whose turn it is to use them. A child named Robin goes to the teacher and protests, 'Leslie won't let me have a turn.'" (Katz, 1984, p. 1).
- c) **Ask the teachers to think about what they would do.**

d) **Have the teachers share their recommendations for how to respond to the incident.**

e) **Discuss the pros and cons of each recommendation.** Consider not only Robin and Leslie, but also the other children who, while otherwise engaged, are paying attention to what is happening.

f) **Describe what children might learn from their solutions:** social skills, verbal skills (assertive phrases, conversational phrases), social knowledge, social perspective, dispositional learning (empathy, altruism, disposition to experiment), elaborating on each category (Katz, 1984).

g) **Describe the unprofessional responses** (distraction, exhortations, removal, empty threats, bribery, time-out, preaching, sympathy, guilt) that some teachers use (Katz, 1984).

h) **Discuss all of the appropriate responses as well as the unprofessional ones.** Note that being conscious of these will help the teachers use the appropriate responses and reduce the times they might fall into the trap of using one of the unprofessional ones.

Question 3:

Why am I doing what I am doing in the classroom?

The third question asks teachers to reflect on their role in extending children's learning through their responses to different categories of child behavior.

- a) **State the goal of the activity:** To help teachers become more reflective about their values and beliefs, more intentional in their teaching, and to improve the match between their beliefs and practices.

b) **Post the category system** that helps teachers monitor their own responses to children (Keyes, 1985) on an overhead, pad, or chalkboard or distribute copies to the teachers.

c) **Introduce the category system for describing adult responses to children's behavior:**

- *Stop:* The adult halts or limits a child's actions verbally or nonverbally.
- *Change:* The adult redirects the child through verbal means, directions, or materials to a new activity or behavior.
- *Sustain:* The adult makes a neutral comment or a brief response or participates without influence.
- *Extend:* The adult extends or expands a child's activities through such actions as giving information, challenging, or adding new materials.

d) **Discuss the different categories and share examples,** noting that in most cases sustaining and extending children's behavior is preferable to stopping or changing their behavior.

e) **Have the teachers take turns sharing examples** of when they have stopped, changed, sustained, or extended children's behavior as well as what they might do in the future and why.

Question 4:

Would I want to be a child in my classroom?

The fourth question asks teachers to reflect on all of the children in their classroom, with particular attention to those who present special challenges to them in their teaching role. This activity is divided into two parts. Begin by stat-

ing the goals of the activity: To help teachers become more reflective about their values and beliefs, more intentional in their teaching, and to improve the match between their beliefs and practices.

The teacher is reflecting. "Then I began to ask myself, 'Does Michael feel worthwhile: Does he feel respected? Do I make him feel accepted as an individual?'" (p. 91)

Finally, ask the teachers who described the children with too many negatives or extreme language if they would want to be children in their classrooms and what they need to do to correct this.

Part One

a) Read an excerpt from "Except for Michael" (Buckley, 1996, p.89):

"Except for Michael, I thought, stirring the yellow paint in preparation for the day ahead, this group of fives would be such a joy. Somehow, I don't feel strong enough for Michael today. Maybe he won't come!"

b) Ask the teachers if they have any "Michaels" in their classrooms.

c) Have each teacher make a list of the children in his or her classroom.

d) After a few minutes ask them if they are missing anyone.

e) If they now remember them, have them add them on the bottom with an asterisk (*).

f) Share with teachers that the children that they forget, almost forget, or that are at the bottom of their list, are what Elizabeth Jones calls 'invisible children.' They are the ones the teachers pay less attention to than others in the class.

g) Ask the teachers if they would want to be in their class if they were at the bottom of the list or like Michael.

h) Read a second excerpt from "Except for Michael" (Buckley, 1996):

i) Talk about strategies teachers could use to make sure they acknowledge and pay attention to all of the children in their classrooms.

j) Suggest to the teachers that they occasionally make the list when they are away from the classroom. Following this activity they can acknowledge or spend some time with the children who appear at the bottom of their lists. If teachers do this regularly then there will be no 'invisible children.'

Part Two

a) Ask each teacher to write a short profile about one of the children in his or her classroom (Wasserman, 2000).

b) Have them examine their profiles, looking for positive and negative value judgments.

c) Tell them to mark all the positive judgments with a plus (+) and the negative ones with a minus (-).

d) Ask them to read what they wrote again to identify words that are labels (L), words that are generalizations (G), words that are extreme (E), and words that are qualifying (Q).

e) Ask the teachers to consider if they are being fair to those children or if their perceptions are being influenced by their own biases.

Concluding Thoughts

While teachers may follow different curriculum models or accreditation standards in their classrooms, values underlie all of the choices they make with regard to children. Their behaviors and attitudes, as well as the ideas they have about how children should behave, what experiences they should have, and what goals they have for their future, are based on those values. Rarely do they realize how much those beliefs influence their actions. Using the questions as starting points at staff meetings or professional development sessions will help teachers uncover their values, beliefs, and biases and discuss the underlying purposes of the activities they choose and the interactions they engage in with children and families. When teachers think about what kind of adults they want to help develop, what they can be teaching in particular situations, why they're doing what they are doing, and whether this is a classroom that the child wants to be in, they become more reflective and intentional and more effective in accomplishing their charge.

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