

**Focus Groups Report on
Students' Perceptions of Student Questions in Year 3-6
December 2012**

Background

On Monday 3 December Sue Clarkson met with four focus groups, each with students from Years 3, 4, 5 and 6. Each group responded to a series of questions exploring the results arising out of the 3-6 Students' Perceptions of Student Questioning Survey. Teachers selected students to ensure a mix of academic ability and verbal and conversational skills. The conversations took place in the art room for approximately half an hour with each year level group of four or five students.

Table 1 Gender of Students in Focus Groups

	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
Male Students	2	2	2	2
Female Students	2	2	3	2

A Summary of Findings

A Value of Questions.

Students across the grades had a general appreciation of the importance of questioning in the learning process. A Year 5 student commented on the importance of taking ownership of learning, "Most of the kids ask questions because it's good for learning. I think it's really an important part of life because you're putting your learning forward." Another Year 5

student commented, “It’s actually part of the curriculum that you have to be involved in your school learning. If you’re not getting involved than you are not learning anything.” A Year 3 student contributed, “We ask questions of other students to get their different opinions.”

A Safe and Trusting Community of Learners.

An overarching theme throughout the focus groups was the role of trust in establishing a safe and secure base to venture questions. While students from across the year levels described students who rarely asked questions as ‘shy’ they quickly identified in great detail their own fears and the fears of their peers of social exclusion as a result of question asking.

A growing anxiety was present for students as they progressed from Year 3 to Year 6 about the social consequences of questioning. One Year 4 student said, “You think about whether your question is dumb or not because you don’t want to be silly.” A Year 6 student commented, “Everyone thinks in their mind that everyone will think that they are dumb. People don’t ask questions because they’re scared in their own way.” One Year 6 Student said “It’s not that you think others will laugh at you it is because you know it. You can’t trust.”

Some Year 5 and 6 students were not only fearful of peer ridicule but also feared the public correction from their peers. A Year 5 student expressed their frustration that, “Some students actually correct other students when they ask questions. They comment on the question. They make it hard, particularly if you are shy or don’t have too many friends.”

This fear was not only evident in whole class discussions but also in asking questions of peers. A Year 5 student stated, “I don’t ask questions of others. People are scared to ask a question that is really simple. Some just tell you the answer without teasing you but other kids laugh at you.” Another student reflected, “I think we need to gain more trust between

people because you always feel that you can't ask a question because people might think something."

Evidence from the Year 3 to 6 Survey suggested that students considered it was easier to ask questions at home than at school. A Year 3 student explained, "You can get shy asking your teacher but they're not family and family are really important. When you are with family you are free to talk." One Year 5 student pointed out "You don't get teased at home about the question you are asked." A Year 4 student suggested that, "Teachers keep telling you stuff but parents don't, so you have to ask." Two Year 6 students emphasised the importance of trust in asking parents questions, "They are easier questions at home because you trust them [parents]." Another Year 6 student agreed stating, "The people at home know where you are at."

Questions as a Transfer of Information.

Students' comments on questioning focussed on their quest for knowledge or the teacher's role as an imparter of knowledge. Questioning was seen as a mode to access and transfer information. There was no discussion of wondering arising out of internal contradictions. Information came mostly commonly from the teacher, however, peers were also considered sources of information, particular in the senior years. The year 5 students explained that one of their group, known for his academic ability, did not need to ask questions because he was, as one of his peers described him, 'the go to man' knowing all the answers. One student explained, "If you are one of the smarter kids you wouldn't ask other kids."

Teacher Focussed Robbed of Question Posing - Teacher Centred Approach Excludes Opportunities for Question Posing.

The teacher seemed very much at the centre of student perceptions of questions. One Year 4 student commented, "You kind of don't think about the people around you as much

and you think of the teacher and asking them questions and you're not realising that there are a lot of people around you saying things that you can ask them questions about."

One Year 4 student expressed regret at not being given the chance to ask questions. She explained that concepts in her class were taught in many different ways over and over which helped with her understanding. She explained "My teacher goes over stuff again and again so I don't need to ask questions. The questions are answered before I ask them." One female reflected almost to herself, "I enjoy asking questions before I'm told the answer." It was interesting to note that a year 5 student recognised the power of problem posing stating, "Sometimes asking the question can provide a prompt to answering your own question."

Differentiated Questioning.

While each group suggested they knew a range of question types students found it difficult to verbalise what these were. A Year 5 student stated, "'How can I do this maths problem?'" is different to the type [of question] that asks to go to the toilet." Another student contended that many of the questions asked by students were of lower cognitive demand. He pointed out "Most questions are "How do you spell this?" or "I don't understand that" questions. Getting a drink type question is not very strong at all."

All Year 3 students exclaimed "Yes!" when asked if they think harder about the questions they ask a teacher. They contended that, "The questions you ask your teacher are always harder than the questions you ask your friends." Another Year 3 student again hinted at the fear of venturing a question adding, "If you don't ask it right than you might get embarrassed."

Possible Strategies To Continue Students' Questioning

Throughout the discussion a range of ideas were suggested to improve student questioning. These are recorded below.

Building Trust.

Students in Years 3 and 4 believed it important for teachers to get to know students by developing bonds of trust. As the interviews took place in mid Term 4 it was not surprising to hear a Year 3 student suggest, “Students could get to know their teachers a bit more. You should spend more time with the teacher from the next year. Getting to know them.” It would seem logical in consideration of the earlier reflections that the strengthening of trust relationship between students would also play an important part in building a secure base for student participation.

Philosophical Circles.

Year 3 students also held up Philosophical Circles, introduced midyear in Years 3 and 4, as a way to affirm the participation in questioning by all students. One student commented, “Philosophical Circles has started this year and that is helping because there are no right or wrong answers everyone puts up their hand.” Students in Years 5 and 6 saw the value in Philosophical Circles although they had not participated in them during the semester.

Practising Question Posing.

Younger students pointed to the importance of practicing question asking and working in small groups. One Year 3 student contended, “Students could practice if they are not confident. You could practice with friends. I wasn’t confident but since I have practiced it has helped. We should ask questions in small groups. Ask one person and then in a group with two people.”

Writing Questions.

One strategy that received some mixed responses was to encourage students to spend time writing questions. A Year 4 student pointed out, “I prefer writing down questions and not saying them and then having my teacher saying it rather than me reading it. In my class there are a lot of quiet students and they would enjoy putting it on paper.” A Year 4 student

reflected, “We need to think about the question more. Instead of randomly coming out with a question.” A Year 3 student agreed, “Because then you wouldn’t have to say them out loud.” Other Years 5 and 6 students felt that writing questions would not be useful.

It is important to note that due to the restrictions on time one of the characteristics students were chosen to participate in the focus groups was their verbal confidence. Further interviews with other less verbally confident students might elicit different responses.

Giving Time to Consider.

Some students felt the pace of lessons denied them the opportunity to pose and shape quality questions. One student lamented, “Sometimes when I’ve really thought of a good question they have already moved on to something else.” A Year 5 student noted, “It would be good to have a little more time thinking about the question rather than just asking about it. It would be good to have a certain amount of time to think about the question. Even just 2 minutes would be good.”

Grouping and Spaces.

Students in Years 3 and 4 suggested providing quiet private spaces for quieter students to ask questions. Another strategy to consider is to group students and invite the question asking to occur in these small groups. A Year 4 student suggested, “Small groups, where we know each other really well, are good to encourage everyone to ask questions.”

Student Action Research Team.

Students in Years 3 and 4 demonstrated more interest in establishing a student action research project than student in Years 5 and 6.

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