



**THE SCHOOLS WE REMEMBER
WERE FULL OF WONDER:
WHY CURIOSITY, AWE,
AND IMAGINATION
STILL MATTER**

“I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious.”
— Albert Einstein

A few years ago, I found myself reflecting on a simple question:

Why do we remember some educational experiences for the rest of our lives while others disappear almost immediately from memory?

Most of us have spent thousands of hours in classrooms. We have completed assignments, sat examinations, attended lectures, listened to presentations, and worked through countless pages of textbooks. Yet when we look back years later, very little of this remains vivid.

What we often remember instead are particular moments.

A teacher who introduced us to an idea that changed how we saw the world. A book that opened a door into an unfamiliar reality. A science experiment that transformed something abstract into something tangible. A discussion that left us thinking long after the class had ended.

These memories rarely survive because they were assessed. They survive because they awakened something. They sparked curiosity and made us wonder.

And perhaps that is why I have become increasingly interested in a question that receives surprisingly little attention in contemporary educational discourse:

“What happens when schools lose their capacity to inspire wonder?”



Curiosity is Key

The question feels especially relevant today because we are living in a period of extraordinary educational change. Conversations about artificial intelligence, workforce readiness, twenty-first-century skills, learning analytics, assessment reform, and educational technology dominate conferences, strategic plans, and policy discussions across the world. These conversations are important. Schools must prepare students for a future that is becoming increasingly complex and unpredictable.

Yet amid all this discussion about the future, we may be overlooking something fundamental about learning itself.

Human beings do not begin learning because they are assessed.

They begin learning because they become curious.

Long before children encounter examinations, grades, and curriculum standards, they display a remarkable desire to understand the world around them. Anyone who has spent time with young children has witnessed this phenomenon. Questions emerge constantly and often without warning. Why do stars shine? Where does the wind come from? Why do birds migrate? What happens beneath the soil when a seed begins to grow?

The remarkable thing about these questions is not simply their frequency but their sincerity. Children are not asking because someone told them the answer would appear on a test. They are asking because they are genuinely fascinated by the world.

Wonder, in its purest form, is the recognition that reality is larger, stranger, and more interesting than we previously understood.

Learning often begins there.



In Rigorous Pursuit

Yet as students move through educational systems, something subtle sometimes occurs. Curiosity does not disappear entirely, but it can become increasingly overshadowed by other concerns. Performance begins to matter. Correct answers become important. Academic success becomes more closely associated with efficiency, productivity, and measurable outcomes. Over time, some students become exceptionally skilled at navigating educational systems while gradually becoming less inclined to ask questions that fall outside established expectations.

This is not an argument against standards, assessment, or academic rigor. Schools have important responsibilities, and students deserve strong intellectual foundations. Knowledge matters. Expertise matters. Discipline matters.

The challenge is that educational systems occasionally behave as though curiosity and rigor exist in opposition to one another when, in reality, the relationship is far more complex.

Many of history's greatest intellectual achievements emerged not from compliance but from curiosity. Scientific discoveries, artistic movements, technological innovations, and social reforms often began with individuals who were willing to ask questions that others overlooked. The history of human progress is filled with examples of people who looked at familiar realities and wondered whether something different might be possible.

This is one reason I find contemporary conversations about future-ready education so fascinating. We often discuss the competencies students will need in a rapidly changing world—critical thinking, collaboration, communication, adaptability, digital literacy, and problem-solving. These are undoubtedly important. Yet beneath many of these competencies lies something more foundational: the willingness to remain curious. After all:

“Critical thinking begins with questioning.

Creativity begins with imagining alternatives.

Innovation begins with wondering whether existing solutions are sufficient.”

Without curiosity, many of the capabilities we celebrate become increasingly difficult to develop.



Information versus Answers

The emergence of artificial intelligence makes this conversation even more interesting. Never before have learners had such immediate access to information. Questions that once required hours of research can now be answered within seconds. Facts, summaries, explanations, and analyses are available almost instantly.

At first glance, this might suggest that curiosity has become less important because information is so readily available.

I suspect the opposite may be true.

When answers become abundant, the value of good questions increases.

When information becomes easier to access, curiosity becomes more important, not less. The educational challenge shifts from helping students find information to helping them decide what is worth exploring, questioning, and understanding. In such a world, intellectual curiosity becomes less about obtaining answers and more about developing the habits of mind that sustain lifelong learning.

This has implications not only for classrooms but for educational leadership itself.

School leaders often spend significant time discussing improvement plans, achievement data, curriculum implementation, staffing, accountability, and organizational effectiveness. These responsibilities are necessary and important. Yet leaders also shape something less visible: the intellectual culture of their schools.

- **Do students feel permitted to ask difficult questions?**
- **Do teachers feel encouraged to experiment with new ideas?**
- **Are mistakes treated solely as failures, or are they viewed as opportunities for learning?**
- **Does the school communicate that education is primarily about performance, or does it also communicate that education is an ongoing process of exploration?**

These questions matter because culture influences curiosity just as profoundly as curriculum does.

Some schools create environments in which inquiry feels natural. Students are encouraged to investigate, explore, discuss, challenge assumptions, and pursue ideas beyond the boundaries of prescribed content. In such environments, learning feels alive.

Other environments, often unintentionally, communicate a different message. Students learn that speed matters more than reflection, completion matters more than exploration, and certainty matters more than questioning. The result may be efficiency, but it can also diminish some of the intellectual energy that makes learning meaningful in the first place.

Perhaps this is why the schools we remember most fondly are rarely those that simply provided information. Information is important, but information alone rarely transforms people.

“What transforms people are experiences that change how they see the world.”

A teacher who introduced a new perspective. A question that challenged an assumption. A project that revealed an unexpected interest. A conversation that opened a new intellectual pathway.

Years later, many of the details may fade, but the feeling remains.



Our True Legacy

The feeling of discovery. The excitement of understanding something for the first time. The realization that there is still more to learn. That feeling is not incidental to education.

It may be one of education's most important outcomes.

As schools continue preparing students for an uncertain future, we should certainly continue discussing technology, innovation, assessment, and workforce readiness. These conversations matter.

But perhaps we should also make room for a simpler question:

“How do we ensure that students leave school not only more knowledgeable, but also more curious than when they arrived?”

Because education at its best does more than help students understand the world as it exists.

It invites them to remain fascinated by it.



Future-Ready Schools is an exclusive feature by Javeria Rana on The Worthy Educator. Check back regularly for new insights on education transformed!