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“Curiosity killed the cat....but satisfaction brought it back”

The first part of this proverb underlines the danger of questioning what is thought to be established facts. But the second part points to the importance of both listening to and challenging pupils on their own terms. Adults should be interested in the local and lived reality of children and youth.

Social scientists basically grapple with one question. Is today’s society different from yesterday’s? If YES- then how different? How is it possible to assess a lived reality we are part of? Is it even possible?

The world – as stated in the call for this Nobel Prize Teacher Summit – is complex requiring sharp navigating skills. But is the world more complex today than a decade ago, or a hundred years ago or a thousand years ago? If YES, then from whose perspective is the world more complex? There are no hard and fast answers to such questions. But lest we drown in a flood of facts, or succumb to a moral panic over ‘fake news’, or conspiracy theories, we need to agree that being allowed to pose question in an open manner is important. It is also a basis to create trust between people. Thinking and talking about such questions – as pupils, students, teachers, educators and researchers - is a way to manage the world and hopefully finding some solutions to our common problems of navigating in a complex world.

I am a researcher of education and educational institutions and I have over the past fifty years worked in different parts of the world. Education is organized very differently across the world. One classroom differs from another, relations between teachers and students differ from country to country and even from school to school. But in the last two or three decades there has been, as I see it, a systemic change on a global level affecting education in four different ways.

- 1) There has been a huge shift in in what policy-makers want from education. We have gone from accepting rote learning of already accepted facts to promoting new learning styles based on searching for new answers to old questions. This is a change from closed educational systems to more open ones in what is now called *the new knowledge society*. Power holders, policy makers and education experts claim that this shift is needed on a national as well as individual level in order for countries and persons to be competitive on a global market. The way this ideological shift is managed and applied nationally and even locally differs enormously. But even in the most authoritarian system I have studied, this shift is accepted in theory. Thus the first part of the proverb “*curiosity killed the cat*” is deemed as backward and even wrong.

However

- 2) This huge shift has not, on a global scale, been followed by more spending on basic education. The new more open and participatory educational ideal needs more resources. It is much cheaper to have schooling based on rote learning than schools based on more open-ended education. The gap between the new ideals and the lack of resources create tensions in most educational institutions in the world.

At the same time

- 3) The authority of teachers has decreased. Many, both inside and outside schools, lament this development. There are populists demanding that the authority and even the power of teachers and other adults must be reinstated. But such populism is often vague as to how to

actually do this. We frequently hear that “pupils are unruly and they show no respect” but we rarely hear if there are larger societal changes coupled with this. Many adults, in other words, fear that they no longer are able to control the young, simply by being older.

It is important to realize that

- 4) Schools cannot compete with goes on in the lives of pupils outside the classroom. This competition is not new. There has always been a rivalry between the attention demanded by teachers and schools and the claims of others. Pupils may have to work to help support their families. Pupils may prefer fun and games with peers. But in this competition formal education seems to be losing out more and more, partially linked to the decreasing authority of teachers. Social media has of course contributed to this. Although there is a digital divide in the world, cell phones have spread globally so that every child have access to some sort of digital game and digital communication devise.

What are we to do as educators and adults?

“Curiosity killed the cat”, is, as already stated, no longer a viable proverb. Instead we have to look at the second part of the sentence: “but satisfaction brought it back.” We, as adults and teachers, have to change our way of thinking, while keeping a few things in mind.

- Even if schools play a less central role for children today and teaches have less authority, they are still very important for a number of reasons. The Covid19 pandemic has demonstrated the detrimental effects to children’s health and wellbeing when they cannot go to school, or when school is on-line without face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers.
- Perhaps this pandemic can encourage you teachers to let society at large understand the still crucial role they play. But as teachers you must also realize that you cannot solve every task you are asked to solve or manage all demands put on you. Teachers cannot compensate for all the failures of society or the adult world. You must learn to form alliances with each other and with good forces outside schools. Co-operation and not isolation is the way forward. The Nobel Prize Teacher Summit can be an excellent base for such endeavors.

To conclude

In order to navigate in the flood of facts we need more curiosity as adults, as teachers, as educators and as researchers. We need to be more curious about the lives and ruminations of children and youth. We need to realize that they are the solution and not the problem. Curiosity will not kill us, but hopefully make pupils satisfied and thus build trust across generations.