

Effective questioning to promote social competence

A yMIND case study by Colin Isham, external evaluator

One of the elements of effective teaching identified in the evidence review carried out for the external evaluation¹ was 'Effective questioning'. This can be defined as questioning which:

- Causes students to think
- Facilitates high standards of learner outcomes
- Provokes responses that inform the teacher about what to do next

Importantly, effective questions create the space for young learners to explore the complex issues that are the focus of yMIND. When they are framed well, open questions guide young people through the ambiguities that discussions on cultural norms inevitably raise.

'Effective questioning' is not necessarily in the form of a question. Many yMIND activities represent effective questioning in the way they prompt students to think in detail about their perspectives and behaviour. The examples from sessions in Berlin below show how this can happen and invite you to consider how you would help young people address problematic behaviour and attitudes while strengthening their social skills.

Scenario 1 – Eliciting and addressing relationship norms

A simple activity to get pupils thinking about their feelings and behaviour towards others is *All those who*. Here, the practitioner reads out a statement, such as: 'in order to feel good in this class, I need to be: listened to / not offended / not shouted at' etc, and students should stand up if they agree, remain seated if they disagree. The teacher then asks the students to explain why they have stood up or remain seated.

In one Berlin primary school, some boys reacted with indifference to statements about what makes them feel good in class: 'I don't mind if someone insults me'. Other boys reacted agitatedly and made gestures as if they were hitting someone who had offended them.

Where would you take this as a practitioner?

In this case, the activity revealed problematic behaviour and attitudes, and the need to address these if relationships in the classroom were to improve. What follow up activities might you implement to help the pupils in this class address this? Returning to classroom rules, for example, may prompt young people to re-evaluate certain behaviour, while also making the rules meaningful in a real context. You may also build consensus over what problematic behaviour and attitudes is, in this case, asking pupils to write down insults they

¹ <http://www.youth-mind.eu/images/products/evidence-based%20principles%20for%20effective%20T&L%20for%20website.pdf>

have heard in class. These could then be shared in small groups, asking pupils to explain why they might upset a class mate, and how it feels to be at the receiving end.

Scenario 2 – Exploring the issue of bullying and the need to feel safe

In a second primary school, pupils engaged in the *Exclusion* activity. Here, a volunteer leaves the room, while the rest are briefed on how to behave on their return (staring at the volunteer silently, crossing arms). After the exercise, the volunteer is asked to explain how it felt. The following discussion explores the nature of bullying and the different roles in it. .

After this exercise, the pupils began sharing their experiences. One pupil described how others had taken their bag and turned it upside down so all the contents fell out.

Where would you take this as a practitioner?

The information about classroom behaviour elicited in this example may seem innocuous to the pupils, but for the victim, having your school things turned out of your bag is likely to be very unsettling. How could this anecdote be turned into a focus of learning for improved behaviour for these young people? It could be developed, for example, to explore in more depth the theme of security. ‘What does a sense of insecurity mean for your day-to-day life, for your learning?’ ‘What needs to be in place for you and your classmates to feel safe?’

Scenario 3 – Developing confidence to explore sexuality in depth

In a Popular Opinion Leader (POL) session at a secondary school, seven female volunteers engaged with a series of open questions about sexual relations, eg: ‘What is sex?’, ‘Why do some boys fall in love with boys and girls with girls?’ To speak openly in a group about these issues took these girls out of their comfort zone, but once in discussion they themselves raised and explored additional questions, eg: ‘How can I know the moment is right to have sex?’, ‘Can a man who is homosexual have sex with women?’

Where would you take this as a practitioner?

How ready are your students to broach topics of sexuality that for them could be embarrassing or even a taboo? How might you organise a session so they have the support to do so? Practitioners leading on POL worked with volunteers, in the expectation they may influence the way peers think and talk about gender and sexual issues. An alternative might be to provide choice of a range of open questions with varying degrees of sensitivity, so that young people not ready to broach very sensitive questions, might discuss some of a more general nature instead.

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