Celebrating a Culture of Inquiry
On the quest for mindfulness & quality questions.

Innovative schools embrace inquiry as a game-changer. The elements of a culture of inquiry are celebrating diverse points of view, debating with civil discourse, and fostering a thirst for deeper understanding. Inquiry culture permeates the entire school—teachers, students, and administrators all share a quest for personalized and collective learning.

In such schools, children, even at the youngest ages, approach knowledge with scholarly inquiry. They are asked to delineate between “what we know” versus “what we believe,” and what evidence clarifies those differences. Students learn to confront inaccuracies, consult with each other, and develop subject matter expertise.

Quality Questioning
Art integration is based on the inquiry culture. This cross-disciplinary teaching strategy asks students to observe, be curious, and ask robust questions as they engage in the four artistic processes: create, present, respond, and connect. Shauna Kauffman, principal of Arnold Elementary School in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, focuses the entire learning community on art integration and quality questioning. Here, teachers start lessons with questions and frame the lesson outcomes as questions. They guide and assess students’ inquiry process. Students help peers elevate the level of questions and investigative strategies. “Quality questions take students beyond initial observations. They ask about evidence and distinguishing features that could be identity attributions. Then questions expend into an elaboration phase.”

“We start asking questions about the main ideas, then generate cross-discipline questions, investigate changes over time, and examine the topic from different perspectives. Art integration fits perfectly with this inquiry process,” Kauffman explained. “For example, students step into a painting and see layers of information beneath the surface. Then students apply this inquiry process to help plan, make, and present their original artwork that documents insights they have learned.”

An Improved Learning Environment
The learning environment changes—for the better—when schools embrace an inquiry culture. “Art integration and the related design thinking and visual problem-solving...
strategies gave us the opportunity to reboot our school,” said Aida Cruz-Farin, principal of Blair Dual Language School in Waukesha, Wisconsin. She outlined the mindset shifts that art integration and inquiry sparked in her teachers and students:

- **Relevance.** When students’ questions drive the projects, there is no doubt the topics are meaningful to them.
- **Empowerment.** All children need to feel empowered—yet it is particularly important for students who’ve grown up in poverty to know they can make a difference. Inquiry-based projects that ask how students can serve others build empathy and strength. This shifts the paradigm from “being needy” to “being helpful,” which empowers them.
- **Agency.** Students become agents of change. Teaching through inquiry and art integration is not an add-on program. It’s an innovative teaching and learning strategy that is woven through the entire curriculum. Giving students “agency,” or control over what they experience, changes their self-image from passive receivers to leaders who influence what happens to them.

As an application example of these elements, students at Blair Dual Language School create portfolios that document their personal “learning inventories.” Each child explores “how I learn best,” “what I’m most excited about,” “ways I could improve my work,” and “what I want to learn next”—fueled by their robust, personalized questions.

Bloomfield Elementary School in Skowhegan, Maine, also has seen changes since focusing on inquiry. Principal Jean Pillsbury challenged her faculty to reconsider the environment of inquiry, both as a physical setting and cultural context. Physically, they redesigned classrooms to create stations where students construct knowledge. The
relationship climate changed, too. Now teachers focus on listening to students, shifting the classic paradigm 180 degrees. Adults find out what intrigues students and that guides where they deepen investigation.

Pillsbury reported that “Visualization is a large part of this inquiry and knowledge-construction process. We use visual graphs, sketch ideas, and draw to help with knowledge documentation and classroom management transitions. We assess student understanding of concepts and vocabulary semantics from their sketches.” This shift came out of “what if...” conversations with teacher leaders when they agreed that a strong culture of curiosity would support the growth mindset they want. The art-infused inquiry process is deeply rooted in their desire to give students ownership of their learning and another voice to express themselves.

“Many of our students are dealing with high levels of stress. We help them understand and gain control over the way emotions impact behavior and learning,” Pillsbury explained. They teach kid-friendly neuroscience to help students understand how brains function and personal learning styles. They use authentic language and help children figure out what calming/focus techniques work for them. “Students know that good decisions come from leveraging the brain power that comes with controlled emotions. They know art can quiet them, give their emotions a safer voice, and get their mindfulness back on track,” Pillsbury said. Children asking themselves what would help their minds function optimally is a powerful life skill.

“Meta”—a prefix from Greek meaning “beyond” or “at a higher level” helps explain the transformation these schools experience. Schools that focus on inquiry and art integration describe a metamorphic level of change in their teaching and learning. Massey Street Public School, in Brampton, Ontario, is a model school for the Canadian Ministry of Education and an observational training site for the Peel School Board.

“Inquiry is key to the artistic process. Our challenge is to develop a deeper consciousness in children,” says principal Kathy Kozovski. “They begin to understand that artists innovate instead of imitate. When we teach children to inquire and showcase original thought, we are cultivating an innovation mindset that is more important than telling them answers to remember.”

Cheri Sterman is the director of education at Crayola.