Key and Essential Questions: Fostering Empathy Through Multiple Perspectives

Gord Wotherspoon
Crescent School, Toronto

Introduction
The motivation for this project stemmed from an observation that young boys when discussing an issue or arguing a point of view often only see one side of the issue. I wondered if there was a way that I could teach boys to see a different perspective and feel for a different viewpoint even if they didn’t agree with that viewpoint. Were they able to create questions that went beyond the facts of a text or an article? Could they become more adaptable in their thinking?

Research Context and Participants
Crescent School is an independent non-denominational day school from Grades 3 to 12. The school is located in Lawrence Park, a high socioeconomic area of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Twenty Grade 6 boys participated in this action research. These boys were chosen because they were part of my home form and I taught them both Social Studies and Science. I had daily contact with the participants either through class time or through home form time.

The Research Action
- My action was to formalize and differentiate the way questions were taught.
- The boys went through a process where they had to identify types of questions and discuss their answers.
- In small groups and whole class discussions, the boys debated the different viewpoints that were brought forward from their essential questions.
- The boys wrote their observations and thoughts after each article.

Data Collection

Surveys
Likert-style and short answer questions allowed the boys to think about the types of questions they asked and created.

Written Reflections and Exit Tickets
The boys were given opportunities to reflect on their findings and discuss differing points of view. Prompts allowed students to think about how they got to their point of view.

Interviews
Students were asked questions in a controlled environment to reflect on their participation and were asked to describe their thoughts on the process.

Data Analysis
I analyzed the qualitative data, including field notes, handouts and my own observations, looking for different types of questions, different points of view and recurring themes. Emphasis was given to ensure that the boys’ voices were front and centre. The data were then categorized into major findings which were used to inform the results of the project.

Key Findings and Discussions

The boys demonstrated increasing ability to empathize with differing viewpoints and became far more adaptable in their thinking.

- The empathic and thoughtful responses demonstrated with their arguments and feelings for the perspectives of both sides of the argument.
- Some students began applying their questioning techniques to many other subjects which got them to see multiple perspectives.

Conclusion
As the boys became more and more comfortable creating key and essential questions, they were willing to embrace different points of view and be more adaptable in their thinking.

- The boys’ ability to formulate questions enabled them to delve deeper into the article.
- Their comprehension heightened every time they read a new article and with added opportunities to discuss and debate their thoughts and findings, the boys demonstrated increasing ability to empathize with differing viewpoints and became far more adaptable in their thinking.

Key Readings


Further Information
This poster and further information is available at: www.theibsc.org

Researcher’s Email: gwotherspoon@crescentschool.org