

KEY AND ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS: FOSTERING EMPATHY IN GRADE 6 BOYS
THROUGH MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Gord Wotherspoon

Crescent School, Toronto, Canada

Abstract

The goal of this action research project was to assess how questioning techniques might enable Grade 6 boys to examine topics from multiple perspectives, thereby fostering adaptable thinking habits. After twenty years in teaching, I have found that boys at this age struggle with seeing different sides of an issue. One of the goals for the Ontario social studies curriculum is to get the boys to engage in conversations about global issues. Unfortunately, these discussions have often turned into sessions where boys try to prove their point rather than listening and hearing all sides of a topic.

To try and get the boys to think differently, I introduced the concept of developing key and essential questions, which I considered to be my intervention. By learning to differentiate between key and essential questions, the boys were more willing and capable of not only understanding what was being introduced in the articles on immigration, but also developing ways to look at topics from multiple perspectives. A comparative exploration was completed of students' work and their ability to generate questions and formulate opinions from multiple perspectives before and after the intervention, to gauge the effectiveness of this approach using a primarily qualitative approach. By teaching the boys how to ask essential questions I was pushing them to be curious. When you are curious you are less likely to be judgmental.

The boys demonstrated several areas of growth through the use of key and essential questions. Their ability to formulate questions that enabled them to delve deeper into an article became evident. Their comprehension of issues heightened every time they read a new article. With added opportunities to discuss and debate their thoughts and findings, the boys demonstrated increasing ability to empathize with differing viewpoints. Some students began applying their questioning techniques to other subjects, which got them to begin to see multiple perspectives in many different content areas.

Introduction

"Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers." - *Voltaire*

A quick search of the Internet yields many quotes by people extolling the virtues or the importance of questions. The idea stems from the belief that in order to find the right answers you must ask the right questions. In any classroom, questioning is an important tool that teachers use in order to stimulate learning and gauge what students know. Cotton (1998) asked in an article, *Classroom Questioning*, "What are the purposes of teachers' classroom questions?" According to Cotton, the objectives of teachers' questions include:

- To develop interest and motivate students to become actively involved in lessons;
- To evaluate students' preparation and check on homework or seatwork completion;
- To review and summarize previous lessons;
- To nurture insights by exposing new relationships;
- To assess achievement of instructional goals and objectives;
- To stimulate students to pursue knowledge on their own; and
- To develop critical thinking skills and inquiring attitudes.

Clearly, providing students with the tools to distinguish not only different questioning techniques, in addition to giving them the time and the guidance to see where their discussions lead, will help to create an adaptable mindset. Questions have long been used by teachers to tease out what students know and what they think. As teachers, we strive for our students to look deeper than the surface of any topic. I have found that in the past I have often fallen short in this goal and that a different approach was in order.

My goal was to develop a dedicated approach of teaching boys to ask questions that would not only reveal the key facts of what they are reading or what they are discussing, but also encourage them to go beyond. The idea was that these open-ended or essential questions would spur discussion and knowledge that would deepen students' understanding of what they were reading and also lead them to look more deeply at a topic and get them to explore where their questions and discussions might take them.

Literature Review

My action research project began with the idea that people (young people, in particular) form opinions quickly and often without looking at all sides of a topic, discussion, or argument. I wondered if there was a way to help them have a more open-minded approach when discussing challenging topics and forming opinions. I believe it is important for people, and young people especially, to be willing to explore topics and ideas from a variety of points of view.

According to James E. Ryan (2017) in his book, *Wait, What? And Life's Essential Questions*, "questions are just as important as answers, often more so. A good question inspires a good answer and, in the process, invites deeper understanding and more meaningful connections between people" (p. 10). My hope was to help my students develop a set of questioning techniques that would allow them to see a number of different perspectives when tackling challenging texts and complicated topics.

I divided the types of questions into key and essential questions. Key questions are questions that can be found in the passage or can be easily found by another resource; these are fact-based questions. Essential questions deal with more than just the facts. McTighe and Wiggins (2015), in *Understanding by Design*, describe essential questions "as being important for stimulating student thinking and inquiry" and that "education should strive to develop and deepen students' understanding of important ideas and processes so that they can transfer their learning within and outside of school" (p. 106). Steve Denning (2015) writes:

In education, there is often more emphasis on teaching than learning. The current test-driven system, which views teaching as imparting the right answers to the students, often does a poor job of equipping students to find the right question. If, as I suggest, the true goal of education is inspiring students with a lifelong capacity and passion for learning, it is at least as important that students be able to ask the right question as it is to know the right answer (para. 2).

I have found in my teaching, more often than not, that I have required my students to pursue the answer without thinking about the question. I wondered, therefore, if I could flip this idea on its head and see what might happen to my students' level of critical thinking. According to Banks (2009), in *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies*, "the transformative approach to exploring

multiple perspectives expands learners' thinking abilities about how they relate to the world" (p. 16). My hope was that my students would look at a text and begin to formulate the questions that would let them see and understand not only the key facts, but a variety of different viewpoints as well.

By looking more deeply at a number of different viewpoints, I hoped that the boys' empathy would be developed and nurtured. Mary Gordon, founder of Roots of Empathy defines empathy as "the ability to understand the other" (Gordon 2013). Roots of Empathy is a classroom-based program, which brings an infant and his/her parents into a class, along with an instructor trained in a focused curriculum. The instructor guides the children to give labels to the baby's feelings and discuss what they think the baby is thinking and feeling. The idea is that through experiential learning, children come to understand the baby's feelings and perspectives, which is the basis of perspective-taking and emotional literacy. According to the Roots of Empathy website their evidence-based classroom program has shown significant effect in reducing levels of aggression and bullying among school children while raising social and emotional competence and increasing empathy. Sorrenson (2014) further describes empathy as, "the ability to understand how someone feels because you can imagine what it is like to be them" (para. 1).

By introducing and teaching the boys to develop a set of questioning techniques, the hope was that they would be able to delve more deeply into a topic and begin to see a variety of points of view. Getting them to generate their own questions on the topic and allowing them time to discuss those questions and the answers would give them a fuller understanding as well as compassion and empathy for more than one point of view. More and more of the information and the news we get is geared to our "likes." If we are only seeing information that we agree with then we never get a chance to see, understand, and empathize with different perspectives.

Hoerr (2017) writes:

Consider that it wasn't that long ago that Americans had a choice of a few national television channels to watch, resulting in a relatively homogenized culture. Today we have so many media sources that are all too easy to tune in only to those that reinforce our preexisting biases. (p. 40)

By giving students a way to tackle challenging questions or giving them the tools that not only generate different thoughts and viewpoints, but encourage them to see other perspectives, I believed they would be able to look beyond their own experiences and be open to a variety of perspectives. My hope was to give the boys the ability to ask not only basic questions, but also the ability to see an argument from a variety of perspectives that would have them see, understand, and care.

Research Context

Crescent School is an independent non-denominational day school with students from Grades 3 to 12. The school is located in Lawrence Park, a high socioeconomic area of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Crescent School was started in 1913 as a boys' junior school. Crescent School's mission statement, "Men of Character from Boys of Promise," guides the entire school community to help boys develop into the best type of men possible.

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. Although I only gathered, recorded, and documented research data from one class, I did perform "the action" of the action research project on another two classes.

Twenty out of the 21 boys in my home form signed on to participate in the action research, and written permission from parents/guardians was obtained. Each student participating in the project and a parent filled out the Parent and Student Consent Form as provided by the IBSC.

Anonymity was maintained throughout the action research, with the boys being assigned a number rather than a name. No reference was made to any individual's name throughout the research or during the filming of a class discussion.

The Action

My action took place over a four-week time frame and was divided into four components: the introduction of reading and dissecting an article; the lesson on key and essential questions; the application of the questioning techniques; and the opportunity to apply the questioning

techniques to an article of their choice. Throughout the process, time was given for the boys to discuss their findings and opinions.

The boys were initially given an article and were asked to read it in groups and answer a set of questions provided for them. Some of the questions were fact-based questions and some were open-ended questions. The boys were also given an opportunity to ask questions of their own.

The second component looked at introducing and teaching about the ability to generate both key and essential questions. The focus of this lesson was to create a process that helped to unearth different points of view. The boys were given opportunities to create open-ended questions and discuss different points of view from the original document.

The third component was giving the boys the opportunity to apply what they had been taught with articles provided for them. The focus was on getting the boys to generate the different types of questions as well as discussing the different points of view that the essential questions would unearth.

In the final component the boys were asked to create both key and essential questions and were given the task of finding an article of their choice, reading through it, creating a list of key and essential questions, answering a number of their own questions, and then sharing their thoughts and findings with a small group of classmates.

Data Collection

The collection of data was primarily qualitative in nature in order to give the boys' voices the attention they deserved. Data collection included a pre-survey, questionnaires, feedback forms, and reflections, in accordance with practices outlined by Stringer (2014). I focused on gathering data that would show the boys' understanding of key and essential questions, as well as their insights into what the discussions uncovered.

Before the first lesson on key and essential questions, the boys were asked to read and take notes on an article. The boys summarized the article and were given the opportunity to ask questions on anything related to the article. After this exercise, the boys completed a survey that included Likert scale questions, as well as short answer questions. I chose to use open responses as part of my surveys because I wanted the boys to be able to explain their thinking and give a

truer picture of such thinking. According to Stringer (2014), the benefit of a rating response is that it gives participants more options to tell what they think. The purpose of this survey was to gauge the boys' understanding of the article and to see what type of questions that they would generate on their own.

Throughout the action, the boys were asked to complete worksheets that allowed them to create their own questions and answer them. In their small groups, boys had the opportunity to share their questions and discuss the different sides that were brought out by their essential questions. The questions invariably sparked debates and gave the boys the opportunity to share their views and hear other viewpoints. I enlisted a rotation to allow all participants to share their viewpoints, but also give them a chance to let their conversation go wherever their discussion took them.

Post-it notes (acting as exit tickets) were given to the boys at the end of each discussion and at the end of the action to allow them to share their thoughts on the questioning techniques. These small insights allowed me to gauge what the boys were thinking throughout the action.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the qualitative data that the boys provided through question sheets, notes, and my own observations. I made every effort to ensure that the boys' thoughts and ideas were honoured and heard throughout the experience. The use of technology, including Google forms, photos and video recording allowed for a comprehensive collection of the data. Giving the boys the opportunity to write down their thoughts and questions on Post-it notes provided an invaluable window into their thoughts and helped to drive the findings. Relying on my colleagues to scribe some of the discussions was another way to get invaluable qualitative data. I recorded observations of some of the students' thinking and their reactions to the new process of creating their own questions. In doing so, Stringer's (2014) comment rang true:

All analysis is an act of interpretation that clearly represents the perspective and experience of the stake holding participants. Those involved in data analysis must bracket their own understandings, intuitions, or interpretations as much as possible and focus on the meanings inherent in the world of participants. (p. 139)

By combining student opinion and student work with my reflections, I attempted to ensure that the results of my data analysis were credible and valid.

Discussion of Results

After looking over the survey, the notes, the handouts and the interviews, a couple of themes emerged from my data. By introducing the Grade 6 boys to key and essential questions there were several areas of growth experienced during my research:

- A greater understanding of the types of question;
- An increased overall understanding of the article by the majority of the students;
- A development of multiple perspectives; and
- An empathetic outcome.

There were some wonderful insights and growth in my students over the course of my action research. The practice of introducing both key and essential question techniques gave the boys tools to look more closely at an article or an idea.

A greater understanding of types of questions emerged

One area of growth that occurred for my students was the ability and willingness to ask a more wide-ranging and a greater variety of questions. Initially, before I introduced the boys to the difference between key and essential questions, the boys' tendency was to ask very factually-based or lower-order thinking questions. The questions were often a "how-" or "what-" type question.

To start my action research, I gave the boys an article detailing the experiences in Canada of an immigrant from the Philippines. After reading the article and answering questions that were provided for them, the boys were given a survey eliciting their responses. The last question in the survey asked, "What are you curious about or what would you like to ask?"

Eighteen out of 20 respondents asked a "how" or "what" type question. The majority of questions were similar to Student 2's question; "I would like to know how many people immigrate to Canada each year?"

After the explanation and implementation of key and essential questions techniques, the boys' ability to generate a variety of different types of questions grew enormously. For example, after

Student 20 read an article on the environment, he and his group's essential question was, "What are the best ways to stop pollution and why don't we do it?" They spent time thinking about what could be done to help the world and why more is not done to stop pollution. Student 3 read an article about the design of a droid-optimized home. He and his group pondered whether or not giving up the control of running the house would lead to something bad happening. They talked about what controls could be put in place and whether or not they should.

I am not saying that answers aren't important but in order to get an answer with depth, one needs a question that sparks something inside of you. In this regard, I found Ryan's (2017) comment very appropriate:

This is not to say that answers are irrelevant or unimportant. Instead, it is to suggest that questions are as important as answers, often more so. The simple truth is that an answer can only be as good as the question asked. If you ask the wrong question, you are going to get the wrong answer. (p. 12)

An overall understanding of the article

One of the greatest differences that I noticed throughout the action research, and especially at the end, was the boys' ability to look more fully at the whole article. In the beginning, when I gave the boys an article and asked them a set of questions, the majority of the boys could answer the questions efficiently. However, if I asked them questions that were different from the original questions they were not able to answer as easily. When I asked them about this they readily admitted that they often simply try to answer the questions provided and not focus on understanding the whole article.

One outcome of the introduction of key and essential techniques that I did not foresee was the boys' growth in their overall understanding of what they read. By allowing the boys to generate their own questions and then asking them to answer these questions, the boys were better able to articulate what was happening in the article. Student 12 said, "I think it is better to make us find the question on our own. It makes us read the article attentively and we get more interested." Likewise, Student 3 noted, "If you look for the questions, not the answers, then you build a deeper understanding about the article by looking for different vantage points for all the facts," while Student 10 reflected, "I think it makes you think more because you have to look

through everything.” I was excited to see the enthusiasm that the boys had for generating their own questions and the learning that came out of it. I did not foresee that creating both factually-based key questions and open-ended essential questions would lead to a far better understanding of the articles.

A development of multiple perspectives

One of the goals of introducing and implementing essential questions was to see if this would spur the boys to see different points of view from an article or discussion question. When the boys were initially asked to create their own questions or asked what these articles made them wonder, their responses were very straightforward and basic. They were fact-based questions that had specific answers. The discussions that the boys had revolved around “what” and “how” type questions.

By the end of the process, the boys were generating questions that did not only have one right answer but allowed them to explore and discuss the topic at hand. The boys were able to generate all different types of questions. The essential questions got the boys to look at arguments from a number of different perspectives. When the boys were asked what do essential questions do, they came up with a number of different responses that helped to show what they thought of the different types of questions. Student 7 stated that, “essential questions make you think and can help you have a different opinion on things,” while Student 4 said, “essential questions open up two sides to the argument and make you think about the other side of the argument.” The boys could see that these types of questions were getting them to look deeper into a topic and look at a topic from more than one perspective. Student 3 summed it up best, saying, “essential questions make you dive deeper into the question and debate ideas while building a deeper understanding of the info.”

Empathetic outcomes

What was exciting about introducing the questioning techniques to all three of my classes was seeing the boys’ ability to look at an article more critically and more comprehensively. I was worried that gauging the boys’ empathetic response would be one of the most challenging aspects of my action research. I was pleased to see that the discussions that came out of their creation of essential questions demonstrated a deeper understanding of a variety of perspectives. As well, when I asked the boys about whether empathy was a by-product of

essential questions, 17 out of 20 boys responded in the affirmative. Notably, one student said, “essential questions let you look at both sides and creates empathy because you see a different point of view and puts you in another person’s shoes.”

The use of questioning techniques to enhance learning was beneficial to all involved. I was pleased to see how the essential questions helped to unlock the boys’ willingness to truly discuss and argue different sides of a discussion. I believe that my research showed me that getting the boys to intentionally look at and discuss a variety of perspectives led to greater empathy.

Conclusion

Throughout the process of action research, I knew where I hoped to get but I struggled to come up with the action and the path to get there. As my action went along and the path became clearer, I was still not sure whether or not the research was going to be successful. However, the boys became more and more comfortable creating key and essential questions and they were willing to embrace different points of view. The empathy and thoughtful responses demonstrated with their discussions and written response convinced me of the power of a structured approach.

Over the course of this action research, the boys in my study began to not only recognize the difference between key and essential questions but began to eagerly discuss and debate the positions of a variety of different perspectives. It was neat to see these discussions go on far longer than class. I was excited to see them argue which question was a key question or an essential question. One boy stated that, “I feel like I can get inside someone and feel what they feel.” This ability to see a topic from more than one side or one point of view gave the students a willingness to look beyond the facts or the argument and brought emotion and passion into the discussion.

Through my data analysis, I am able to confidently state that the introduction of key and essential techniques gave these boys the ability to look more deeply at an issue, have the ability to see at least two differing perspectives, as well as gain empathy for those perspectives.

Implications for Future Practice

One of my favourite parts of the key and essential techniques is how easy it has been to use in both science and social studies. Even now, months after we have finished the action research, I am able to ask the boys in all three classes what type of question we're dealing with or whether they can create an essential question, and invariably they can.

I have begun to think about ways in which I can break down the questioning technique even further, as I wonder whether not dividing the categories even further will help to give my students even more tools in their questioning toolbox.

Reflection

I took on this research project because I wanted to extend my teaching and myself beyond what I was previously doing. I have taught for over twenty years and I truly believe that in order to be one's best, one must constantly look at ways to improve and grow. I was confident about what I wanted to accomplish, or at least attempt, but I struggled with how I was going to achieve it.

One area that I found very challenging was balancing classroom teaching, coaching, mentoring, and extracurricular commitments with some of the due dates of work associated with this action research project. At times it was very stressful trying to manage all of these moving parts and this caused me to fall behind with some of the deadlines. Prioritizing and organizing my time more efficiently along with relying on advice from colleagues who had already been through the process was very helpful.

There are a few people that I need to give a special thanks to. I would like to start with the IBSC community led by Margot Long. The professionalism and the support provided has been top notch. I was very fortunate to have as my team leader Janetta Lien. I loved the camaraderie that she fostered with all the team members. Her support, advice, and edits were invaluable throughout this process.

I felt very grateful for the support provided by the leadership of my school - thank you to Mike Fellin, Sandy Boyes and Ryan Bell. A special shout out has to go out to three individuals; in particular, as I am not sure that this project would have been completed without their assistance. Thank you to Isabelle Moore, Trish Cislak and Martha Miller for providing ideas and

encouragement and for always being there when I needed someone to talk me off the edge. You three rock.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge and thank the boys of 6W who brought their energy, their ideas and their enthusiasm throughout the project. Thank you for putting up with my endless questions and my constant prodding for clarification. I could not have done this without you.

References

- Banks, J.A. (2009). *Teaching strategies for ethnic studies*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Cotton, K. (1998). *Classroom questioning*. North West Regional Educational Laboratory.
- Denning, S. (2011, September 11). Learning to ask the right question. *Forbes Magazine*. Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2011/09/11/learning-to-ask-the-right-question-2/#20cf2061167a>
- Gordon, M. (2015). *Roots of empathy*. Retrieved from: <http://www.rootsofempathy.org/>
- Gordon, M. (2013). *An interview with Mary Gordon*. Retrieved from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/lennon-flowers/roots-of-empathy-interview-with-mary-gordon>
- Hoerr, T. R. (2017). *The formative five*. Alexandria: ASCD.
- McTighe, J. & Wiggins, G. (2005). *Understanding by design* (2nd edn). Alexandria: ASCD.
- Morgan, H. & York, K. C. (2009). Examining multiple perspectives with creative think-alouds. *The Reading Teacher*, 64(3), 307-311.
- Paul, R. & Elder L. (2016). *Critical thinking: Concepts and tools*. Retrieved from https://www.criticalthinking.org/files/Concepts_Tools.pdf
- Ryan, J.E. (2017). *Wait, what? And life's other essential questions*. New York: Harper One.
- Sorenson, B. (2016). *Developing empathy in the classroom*. Retrieved from <http://corwin-connect.com/2014/06/developing-empathy-classroom/>
- Stringer E.T. (2014). *Action research* (4th edn). Los Angeles: Sage.