

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

GROWTH PLAN END-OF-YEAR REPORT

Title: Exploring the Elements of Good Questioning Techniques in the Classroom

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SUMMARY OF CLASSROOM RESEARCH PROJECT

Context

I have been a sixth grade social studies teacher in the Byram Hills School District since 1992. There are approximately 275 students in the grade each year and I am assigned to half of them, while my colleague Sheila St. Onge is assigned to the other half. We have been co authoring/designing every lesson together for 20 years come this fall. Most of our lessons follow the Grant Wiggins backward design model, where we identify the much needed skill to be taught/learned, and then create activities and essential questions around these skills. Our essential questions are based on and even come from New York State Education Department's Core Social Studies Standards. An essential question that guides us for the year is: How do geography, economics, government, religion and/or belief systems, and history impact culture? By the end of each year, Sheila and I feel confident that every 12 year old child has the ability to think deeply about each term in the question.

Interestingly enough, the last line above is one of the critical conclusions I have arrived at this year conducting action research. It is the idea that a teacher needs to be sure that children understand the terminology/vocabulary that is used in the questions posed to them, and if they don't, it is important to trust that they have the innate desire or comfort level to take the time needed to define/discuss/own the words they do not understand.

My Plan, Actions Taken, and What I've Learned

The focus of my action research was questioning techniques. Questions I sought answers to included:

- What are the elements of a good discussion question?
- What are the elements of a good written question that is designed for more independent thinking and answering?
- What happens when I model questions that elicit critical thinking and how I go about answering them?
- What kinds of questions am I currently asking?

- Can my students make sense of the questions I'm asking and can they answer them critically and independently? If not, do they have a means of tackling the question using risk taking, embracing challenge, and the willingness to think deeply about something?*

*The idea of thinking deeply about things is another important skill that I discovered during my research, and the fact that children are doing less and less of this. It is almost counter culture in this day and age to slow down and think. It seems that America values doing things fast, now, getting it done, off the list, etc.

A third finding I had was rediscovering the validity and importance of using good essential questions.

My first piece of research involved video taping a lesson where I asked some essential questions that pertained to our economics unit. They were: How does the overall level of economic development of your nation impact life there? How does your nation's level of economic development compare and contrast to that of the USA's? I also had the students complete exit tickets, where they wrote down their answers to the essential questions I had asked. This allowed me to have a visual of the children listening and thinking in class and a way to cross reference what I observed with written pieces of evidence.

During my second action research day with our consultant, Diane Cunningham, I was able to analyze the video and exit tickets (codify them), receive feedback and guidance from Diane, and my colleagues. Analyzing the data was an interesting experience which allowed me to think more critically about what I was doing and attempting to do. For example, by codifying the written responses and looking at them at least 3 times, I noticed that by the 3rd time I began recognizing strong vocabulary usage and details in 23 of the 24 responses, whereas the first time I reviewed the responses I had concluded that most were very weak.

This observation led me to change my questioning approach to include revisiting some of my lessons of old. What I mean by this is that back in the days where I was designing and using good essential questions as the most important part of a unit, it empowered me, allowed for clear focus, and validated the importance of the entire unit. Over the years, however, I had begun to emphasize them less. The video and exit tickets made it clear to me that these questions need to be part of the beginning of each unit, revisited in the middle of a unit and asked again at the end of a unit. Essential questions elicit critical thinking, which answers one of my aforementioned research questions. They also need to be hung around the room on banners, as I had done in the past.

My new plan of attack had worked. I have video tape of children grouped by mixed abilities answering essential questions about the nation they are studying. The reason why I grouped the kids in mixed abilities is because new action research had indicated that it was the enrichment/high level kids who evidenced the ability to think critically, and so I wanted them to be models for other kids.

What was perfect about this activity is that each child had to think independently; he/she could not really "borrow" ideas from another because no two

students are studying the same nation. I observed on video children speaking more than they do in whole group, thinking critically more than they probably do in whole group, or on written assessments, and I even have evidence of how one girl, KA, verbalized how she needed to define and own the terms/vocabulary in the question, before she could go about answering it for her Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Another conclusion I arrived at by viewing the second video taping was that there is great importance in allowing children the time to think deeply, and with others, but first they should be granted the time to think independently before sharing/thinking with others.

A reference I used to support my research is entitled: *Quality Questioning*, by Jackie Acree Walsh and Beth Dankert Sattes, a researched-based book. I would say the most important idea that I have gleaned from it thus far is the idea of creating and allowing for “wait time” in the classroom. Students think at different processing speeds and if I don’t accommodate for this fact, then I risk losing students. Some students may conclude that it is not worth it to attempt to think of the answer, since the pace of the class is constantly too fast.

A Bit about the Future

Conclusions that I have drawn or can personally confirm about action research include that it is cyclical in nature. I went about wanting to know if I am effective in the art of questioning. In the process I rediscovered essential questions, their importance, and how they encourage/demand students to think critically and deeply about the terms in the questions themselves and how these terms relate to their worlds.

Action research encourages independent and ongoing research. It is a process in mindfulness: see something new in what we already know.

I am comforted by the idea that action research can/will drive what I do next, resulting in a constant search for the myriad of symbiotic relationships that are going on simultaneously in the classroom day to day, and year by year.

Finally, this current model for action research in the district, that includes staff development days built into the academic year, is great because it allows for windows of time, “while the bus is still rolling” for observation, revision, and more research to happen.