How can we develop analytical, self-assessment and critiquing skills amongst greater depth writers?

Southwold Primary School, Upper Phase

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to establish the basic ability of our children to meaningfully analyse and self-assess writing and to subsequently put in place the initial framework by which they could begin developing their analytical and critiquing skills. Using a focus group model, the study at the outset utilised a select group of higher ability writers (3-4 per year group) in a workshop setting, where their ability to purposefully evaluate writing was established. Subsequently, based on the results of the initial meeting, the children returned for a further workshop session, where explicit teaching and modelling was used to demonstrate and familiarise children with the identified fundamental skills. Further to this, a new self-assessment for writing grid was developed for the purpose of allowing the children to implement these skills in selected pieces of their own writing throughout the year.

Children who attended both workshops and who regularly utilised the new self-assessment rubric showed a perceptible improvement in their ability to analyse and critique their own writing; both in order to suggesting meaningful improvements but also to highlight creative successes.

Introduction

The motivations behind this research proposal were threefold: firstly the result of professional discourse which took place at the literacy cluster meeting at Southwold Primary School, secondly as a consequence of ideas raised at a Critical Thinking CPD inset and finally as a direct outcome of my personal reflections within the classroom. The pervading conclusions of all three aforementioned factors were strikingly similar in outcome - namely that the children in our schools overtly struggled with the analytical and critiquing skills requisite to the deconstruction and evaluation of their own writing or that of other authors. This is summarised in discussions held with a secondary colleague: *As a literacy coordinator in secondary school, I continue to be surprised at the plethora of skills displayed by Year 7*

children in their written work. Speaking generally, their writing shows a very pleasing degree of creativity and sophistication, with adventurous vocabulary choices and a solid understanding of grammar and punctuation - a direct reflection of their exposure to the primary curriculum. However, pupils unanimously tend to struggle when they are required to examine, evaluate, critique and analyse a piece of writing for its effectiveness. They are great writers yet conversely they are unable to point out what qualities constitute a compelling piece of work…They are unable to distinguish a convincing piece of writing from one with obvious logical fallacies and literary inconsistencies, Lorraine McCreesh (Assistant Head of English Clapton Girls School).

Paul and Elder (2005), who champion the advancement of critical thinking skills in education, state convincingly that it is not enough for children to possess or read information, [they] must be able to assess it for its clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic and significance. The secondary curriculum (2014) focuses heavily on critical reading, understanding of texts and the evaluating and self-assessment of one's own writing. It is questionable whether the primary curriculum (2014) does enough to bridge this skills gap - particularly in regards to literacy in KS2 - but also in terms of the application of such cross-curricular skills in subjects like humanities and PSHCE. In an era of fake news and online content of increasingly questionable veracity, we as educators are increasingly responsible for giving children the tools to analyse texts critically both for their aesthetic and practical content.

These are of course complex concepts, both to model and teach and for children of a relatively young age to understand. As a result, a conscious decision was made for this study to primarily target writers of a higher ability - whose grasp of the fundamental writing skills was already solid and who were prime candidates for a deepening of their understanding through higher order questioning and more abstract thinking about their writing. Nevertheless, moving beyond the time and resource constraints imposed by this project, it is my belief that these skills are fundamentally accessible to most children in Year 5 and 6 and should be taught explicitly and with more regularity.

Research Process

The project was co-ordinated by the Upper Phase Leader with the subsequent assistance of two teachers. An initial one hour session comprising 12 more able writers (Years 4, 5 and 6), was utilised to establish a base line on which to develop subsequent teaching. Children were initially asked to read and discuss two short pieces of narrative and pick out which they believed to be the stronger. Subsequently they were asked to outline reasons for their selection. It quickly became obvious that although the majority of pupils were able to identify the stronger written piece, they were unable in any meaningful way to explain the reasons for their choice or to suggest what could be done to improve the weaker piece of writing to bring it up to an equivalent standard. A further task centred around discussing the effectiveness of similes and whether they were appropriate and effective in their intended descriptive purpose. This task proved to be yet more challenging than the first, with only a small handful of children able to suggest why some similes were inappropriate in their choice of links or why they were ineffective in projecting a proposed image or action. Finally, the children were asked to show some self-assessed work from their own books and discuss the assessment process which they undertook.

The initial session quickly highlighted that children lacked the necessary tools with which to meaningfully 'unpick' selected writing and the clarity on how best to approach such a task. Furthermore, it became apparent that any self-assessment already undertaken independently was simply a cursory regurgitation of the success criteria, rather than a meaningful evaluation of the children's own work. A second, lengthier, workshop was arranged in order to address these issues, with the primary focus on teaching and modelling. Additionally, a new self-assessment grid was introduced, which allowed the children to scaffold their analysis and evaluation whilst retaining the independent nature of the activity. Finally, children undertook the evaluation of two examples of persuasive writing and were asked to discuss and evaluate the effectiveness of each piece, citing the reasons for their preferred choice.

Following this second session, children were given the new self-assessment grids and asked to periodically (and independently) assess their own favourite written pieces, with the intention of subsequently contrasting them to the initial attempts at self-assessment from before the start of the project.

Findings

The initial session which focussed on evaluating and analysing two extracts of narrative conclusively highlighted that all but one child was able to correctly and independently identify the more effective piece of writing. When children were asked two give three distinct reasons for why they made their decision however, only two were able to articulate coherent reasons independently (see Fig. 1 and 2). Only when prompted with suggestions (suitable adjectives, effective similes, setting imagery, wide range of sentence openers, appeal to senses etc), were the other children eventually able to clarify what attributes one piece possessed and the other lacked.
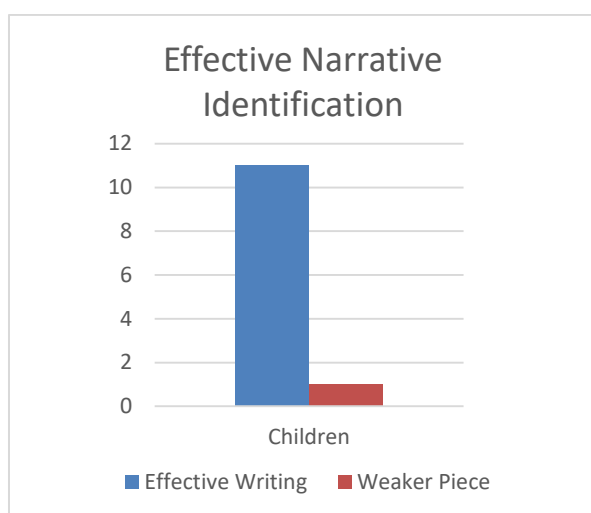

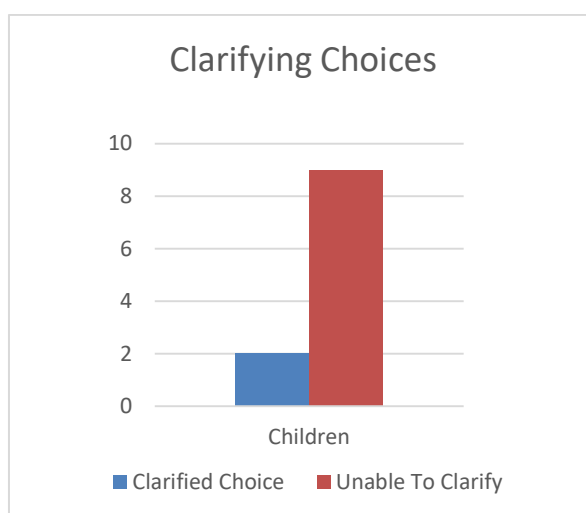**Figure 1.**   **Figure 2.**

It is clear to see that the numbers between identification of an effective narrative and the justification of this choice are practically inverted. Equally striking results were obtained when children were asked to analyse the effectiveness and appropriate use of similes. Although all children were familiar with the use of similes for descriptive purposes, only three were able to suggest why some were inappropriate to their intended descriptive purpose and only four were able to suggest why certain similes were more effective than others when read in context.

When children were asked to discuss previously self-assessed work and what process they underwent to analyse their work, the majority simply hinted at meeting the success criteria, often without being able to locate where they had done so. Most admitted to not having thoroughly read their work before assessing it. When asked

whether such self-assessment helped them to identify particularly strong elements of their writing or clarify how it could be improved, there was unanimous agreement that it generally did not do so.

The second workshop highlighted the importance of teaching and modelling self-assessment in an overt way. Teachers must avoid making assumptions that children possess the skills and clarity to effectively self-assess and analyse their own writing – most revealing was the comparative lack of importance given by the children to simply reading their own work carefully and compiling a mental list of the written skills utilised in its composition. Utilising repeated modelling of assessing various writing (including a comparison of two persuasive pieces – see Fig.3 and 4), children quickly grasped the methods by which writing could be analysed and evaluated for strengths and weaknesses. Importantly, this was eventually done without referencing any particular success criteria, as the children were beginning to show the ability to compile their own, based on the needs of a particular piece of writing.
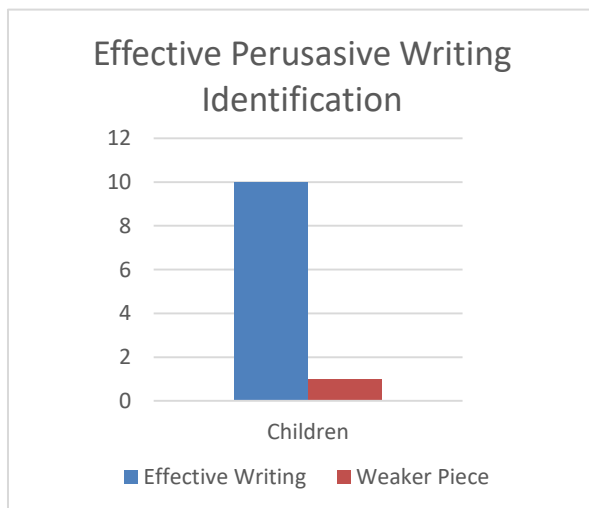

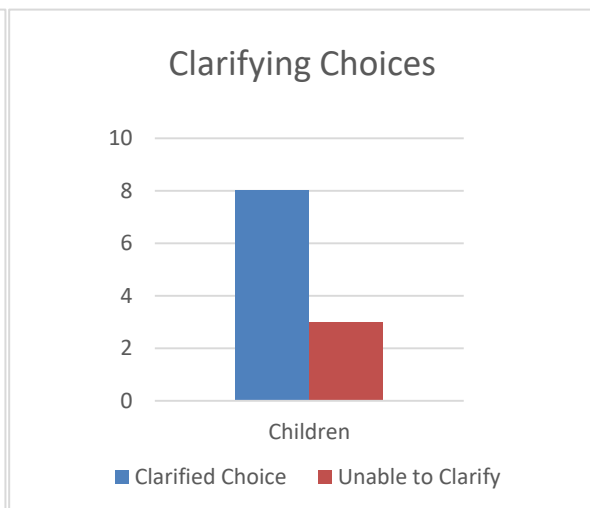**Figure 3.**   **Figure 4.**

Pupils were then introduced to the improved self-assessment rubric, which effectively necessitated a thorough reading of the written work and independent analysis of its effective and ineffective sentences. Utilising this grid, the children practiced completing it with older pieces of written work, showing with each attempt a far better understanding of the necessary steps to assess and evaluate a piece of writing.

Subsequently, children were left to utilise these grids independently after completing various in-class pieces of writing. A comparison of the outcomes presented in these new grids by the children who undertook the project when compared with the older self-assessment grids is self-evident. Furthermore, a control group of children which was asked to complete the new grids without the initial workshop sessions further highlighted the need for clear and implicit teaching and modelling of the skills.

Impact and Conclusion

Children who attended both workshops and who went on to regularly utilise the new self-assessment rubric showed a perceptible improvement in their ability to analyse and critique their own writing independently; both in order to suggesting meaningful improvements but also to highlight creative successes. This also impacted on their ability to analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of the writing of other authors and de-construct such writing into its effective components - particularly in regards to the effectiveness of persuasive writing. As such the conclusions from the project can be summarised in the following ways:

- Self-assessment, evaluating, analysis and the constructive critiquing of writing is a taught skill which must be modelled effectively and rehearsed by embedding it into the practice of children in Years 4, 5 and 6.

- Children should be exposed to a variety of writing; both good and bad. Only then do the differences between the two become clearly appreciable.

- These skills have extremely broad cross-sectional applications and should be utilised in other subjects.

In summary, research indicates that programmes that promote analytical thinking skills, such as the ones undertaken by this project have positive effects on academic achievement (McGuiness 1999). Due to their extremely broad cross curricular applications, they can help raise the achievements of primary children across a range of measures, including literacy, and can enable teachers to plan more purposefully for their pupils' metacognitive development. Such benefits are not only cognitive. Analytical thinking and critiquing skills, and the ability to cope with cognitive conflict and to work things out together through group discussion, are at the heart of education for democracy and good citizenship. There is no better

preparation for being an active citizen in a democracy than for a child to participate with others in a community of enquiry founded on reasoning, freedom of expression and mutual respect (Fisher 2000). If children are aware of other opinions, and are encouraged to question their assumptions their thinking is enriched and their own personal choices become better informed - a key life skill in a digital age where there is continual exposure to an increasingly polarised plethora of information.

References

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