

What is the impact of questioning on deepening understanding in Literacy?

Southwold Primary School, Lower Phase

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine deepening understanding in writing for the lower phase of primary education. Using a focus group model, the study monitored the impact of a set of questions on writing. For three academic half terms, children working at the expected level for their year groups were exposed to a series of questions designed to promote greater depth writing skills. With no control group, conclusions must be considered carefully, however, there was a clear increase in the scores achieved by children throughout the study. Pupil voice indicates a good depth of children's understanding and teacher feedback from the study was positive. Any further research would need to consider further controlling the range of skills assessed by teachers.

Introduction

Southwold School is a larger-than-average-sized primary school situated in Hackney, London. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups and those who speak English as an additional language are much higher than national average. The proportion of pupils eligible for the pupil premium is also higher than average. In the 2017 national testing at Key Stage One, greater depth scores were as follows: Reading at 24% compared with a national average of 24%; Writing at 20% compared with a national average of 16%. Although attainment was in line with, or above the national average, greater depth remains a focus, which feeds into the School Improvement Plan to 'raise standards for the most able at KS1 and KS2'.

Prior to the introduction of 'assessment without levels', there was a view that teachers could become 'focused on getting pupils across the next threshold instead of ensuring they were secure in the knowledge and understanding defined in the programmes of study' (Commission on Assessment Without Levels, 2015). This has led to a recent drive towards embedding 'deepening understanding' practices across

the curriculum. This idea of deeper understanding is not new, indeed the Four Stages of Competence model, often attributed to Broadwell (1969) is a widely accepted view of mastery learning. In this view, learners start in a state of *unconscious incompetence*, or not knowing that they need to learn; through *conscious incompetence* and *conscious competence*, where learners have to make significant effort to achieve an outcome; before they reach *unconscious competence*, or genuine mastery. According to this view, it is a teacher's role to equip children with the skills needed, so that they can consistently and independently apply these in different contexts.

Deeper understanding in writing in particular is a complex idea, with varying definitions. In Maths, and increasingly Reading, there has been a great deal of research and published material suggesting criteria for, and approaches to, achieving deeper understanding. The material supplied for assessing greater depth in writing is only available for Year 2 and 6 and covers little beyond grammar and handwriting (Standards and Testing Agency, 2017.) In contrast, the Education Endowment Foundation (2016) states that 'writing is a very challenging skill to learn and there is less evidence about the most effective ways to teach writing than there is about reading'.

A solid definition is provided by Ferrara (2017), who suggested that greater depth writers 'write with a reader's eye, constantly re-reading work to check that it makes sense and that the message is effectively conveyed' as well as having 'a feeling for grammar, varying and controlling sentence structure with ease, in order to create different language effects'. A link between self-reflection and evaluation, for example by the Education Endowment Foundation (2014) which made a link between a prescribed set of self-regulation activities, including self-assessment and reflecting on writing, with a large positive effect on writing outcomes.

This study sought to examine the effects of a series of questions on the development of deeper understanding in primary writing. These questions were designed to promote higher order thinking and to give 'children the opportunity to explain their reasoning, to think more laterally about what and how they are writing' (Viridis Federation, 2017). Children were encouraged to 'delve deeper into word and punctuation choices, sentence structure and cognitive decisions about characters

and settings and ultimately the impact that these decisions have upon their writing and ultimately their audience’.

To investigate this, a group of children were tracked across three half-terms with and data collection points identified to review the effectiveness of the initiative. It was expected that the outcome of the project would result in children evidencing greater depth skills during Literacy lessons.

Research Process

The project was co-ordinated by the Phase Leader and supported by five classroom teachers. A total of eighteen children were identified. Although the project was carried out with all children deemed capable of achieving greater depth in end of year assessments, a focus group was chosen to enable efficient monitoring. Each teacher selected three children who were deemed to have the potential to reach greater depth in the end of year assessments. Teachers were asked to choose children at the lower end of this group, both so that they would focus on developing those children with greater need, and also so that greater potential progress could be measured in the study.

The children were exposed to a series of questions designed to promote deeper understanding in Literacy (Appendix 1). These questions were previously developed by the Viridis Federation, to develop skills such as: understanding narrator viewpoint in narrative fiction; understanding character emotions in narrative fiction; identifying key events in a narrative; changing sentence length in non-fiction; identifying effective sentences and making improvements in non-fiction; as well as questions designed to target grammar through understanding of syntax, grammar, punctuation and word choice. It was agreed that each teacher would select and prepare at least two questions a week to every child capable of greater depth answers.

Teachers discussed at phase level the teaching of writing in their classrooms, and the strategies used to deepen understanding. It was agreed that teachers would embed discussion of skills and modelling to support children answering greater depth questions into their main taught sessions. Throughout the testing period, the level of support provided to the children would be phased down, to enable the children to demonstrate genuine independence and application of skill required in

greater depth. To further develop children's learning, it was agreed that teachers would mark children's responses and address misconceptions and gaps in learning, providing model answers where necessary.

A set of criteria was discussed and agreed at phase level, to allow teachers to assess children's responses (Appendix 2). It was agreed that, as independence and application of skills in different contexts were key to deeper understanding, the highest scores would only be given to detailed, independent answers. The scale allowed teachers to track children's progress from a score of 1 (unable to answer) to 5 (a detailed answer, giving reasons, produced independently). Examples of pupil response at different levels are provided in Appendix 3.

On a fortnightly basis, for the project duration of three consecutive half-terms, the team would score the responses given by each child in the focus group. The scoring process was conducted collaboratively by the whole team to avoid unconscious bias by individual teachers. The children's responses were discussed, as was the level of support provided by the teacher. This provided the opportunity to track and monitor the questions being set to children and for team members to suggest questions which might fit with upcoming Literacy units of work.

As the project developed, it was noted that it was challenging to provide consistency of classroom experience to the children. Through ongoing discussion and monitoring, it was hoped that this could be adjusted during the assessment process.

The children's baseline and end-of-year assessment data was also recorded as a means of tracking the project. Pupil voice, obtained through interview, and verbal feedback from teachers has also been used to inform findings. It was recognised that the impact of the project is difficult to measure, given that there was no control population to assess the progress against.

Findings

All children within the focus group made good progress and most achieved greater depth during end-of-year assessment.

Fig 1 – Pupil assessment data before and after the study.

		Autumn assessment	End of year assessment
Year 1	Child A	Year 1 Developing	Year 1 Greater Depth
	Child B	Year 1 Developing	Year 1 Greater Depth
	Child C	Year 1 Developing	Year 1 Greater Depth
	Child D	Year 1 Developing	Year 1 Greater Depth
	Child E	Year 1 Developing	Year 1 Greater Depth
	Child F	Year 1 Developing	Year 1 Secure
Year 2	Child G	Year 2 Developing	Year 2 Greater Depth
	Child H	Year 2 Developing	Year 2 Greater Depth
	Child I	Year 2 Developing	Year 2 Greater Depth
	Child J	Year 2 Developing	Year 2 Secure
	Child K	Year 2 Developing	Year 2 Greater Depth
	Child L	Year 2 Developing	Year 2 Greater Depth
Year 3	Child M	Year 3 Developing	Year 3 Greater Depth
	Child N	Year 3 Developing	Year 3 Greater Depth
	Child O	Year 3 Developing	Year 3 Greater Depth
	Child P	Year 3 Developing	Year 3 Greater Depth
	Child Q	Year 3 Developing	Year 3 Greater Depth
	Child R	Year 3 Developing	Year 3 Greater Depth

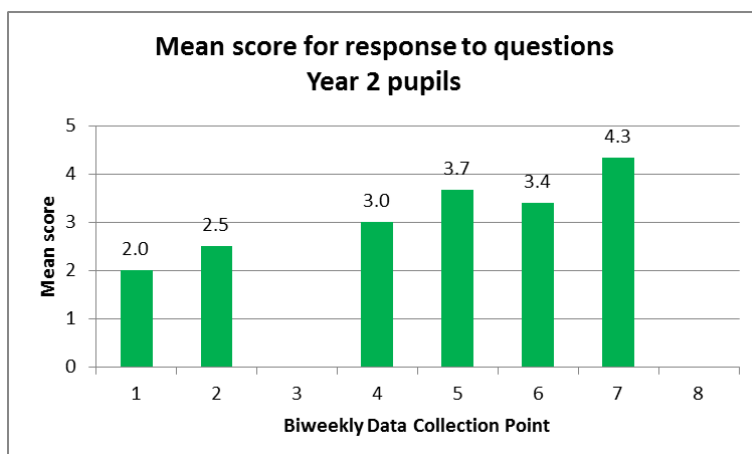
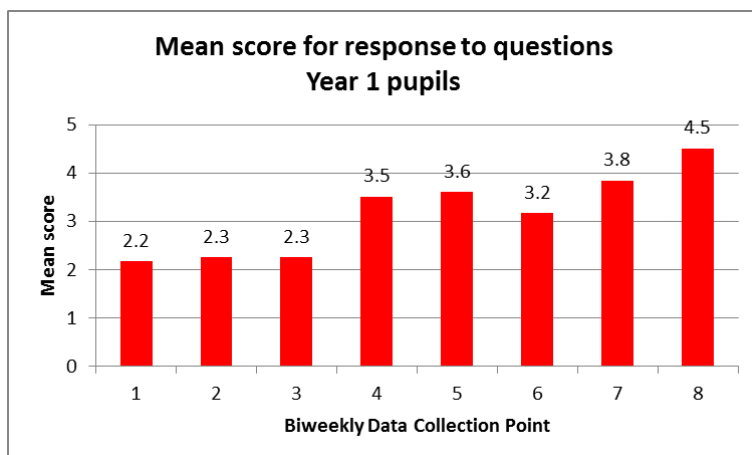
Fig 2 – Data table, showing the scores of pupil responses, during each bi-weekly assessment point. Gaps in data indicate pupil absence.

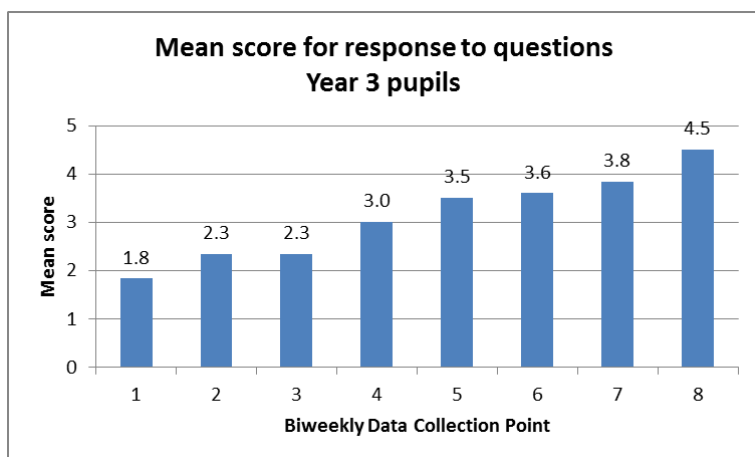
Fortnightly data collection point								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Child A	2	2	2	5	5	3	5	5
Child B	2	2	2	4	4	4	3	5
Child C	2	2	2	4	3	3	4	4
Child D	3	3	3	2	3	4	4	5

Child E	2			3	3	3	4	4
Child F	2			3		2	3	4
Mean score	2.2	2.3	2.3	3.5	3.6	3.2	3.8	4.5

Pupil scores were collated, and averaged across each year group to analyse for trends. The average scores in each year group show a significant increase in pupil attainment. As the study went on, there became an increase in pupil skill, confidence and familiarity with the questions, leading to increased scores. This is supported by teacher judgement – “Through repeated exposure to the questions, most children in my class became familiar with the type of questions, and became more confident in their responses. They also became increasingly able to provide detailed answers which drew on evidence.”

Fig 3a, 3b, 3c – Tables showing the scores assigned to pupil responses, for two-week intervals during the test period, for each year group





Pupil voice to support the initiative was very strong, with children remarking that the questions were ‘fun because you get say what you think’ and that they ‘learned how to improve their writing’. Teachers also spoke positively about the questioning process, stating that children seemed to enjoy the questions, and often asked for them in lessons where they were not provided.

Teacher feedback for the study was positive with one teacher remarking that, “These questions have helped my children to analyse their own writing and make improvements, for example in extending their sentences by adding conjunctions and adjectives.”

It became apparent that effectiveness of early teacher modelling and support in the children’s responses was fundamental to the outcome. Children who gave poor responses to early questions, despite adult assistance, went on to produce less effective scores throughout the assessment period. This is supported by pupil voice, ‘My teacher helped me before. Now I can do it on my own’.

It is to be noted that there were clear differences in outcome between classes. Year 2, who had the additional focus on the national testing process, found it more challenging to implement the required number of questions. It seems apparent that newer members of the teaching team, who were initially slow to implement the initiative, have now embedded it and are using questioning to effectively develop deeper understanding in writing.

Impact and Conclusion

The evidence indicates that, with appropriate modelling and support, questioning can lead to deepening understanding in Literacy. Children appear to develop a more thorough understanding of the skills necessary to become a proficient writer. Moreover, the structure of the study meant that teachers had to bear these key skills in mind throughout the planning and teaching process. This may have led to a further impact on the children.

The project was not challenging in itself to implement, however, teachers required regular reminders and monitoring in order to remember to provide questions for the children. Pupil engagement was high throughout, with some children developing meaningful dialogue with their teachers which lead to increased depth of learning. Positive teacher feedback indicated that most teachers valued the impact of the set of questions in developing greater depth writers.

It must be acknowledged that this study had limitations, given that there was no control group, and that children in some classes were not given full exposure to the methodology. A further consideration is that of the coverage of the skills in the deepening understanding document. Teachers largely chose these themselves, to best fit whatever they were teaching, which lead to repetitive questions on character viewpoint, or extending sentences, for example. Given further repeat of the study, there would be great benefit in exercising greater control of the skills taught to achieve a wider breadth of understanding.

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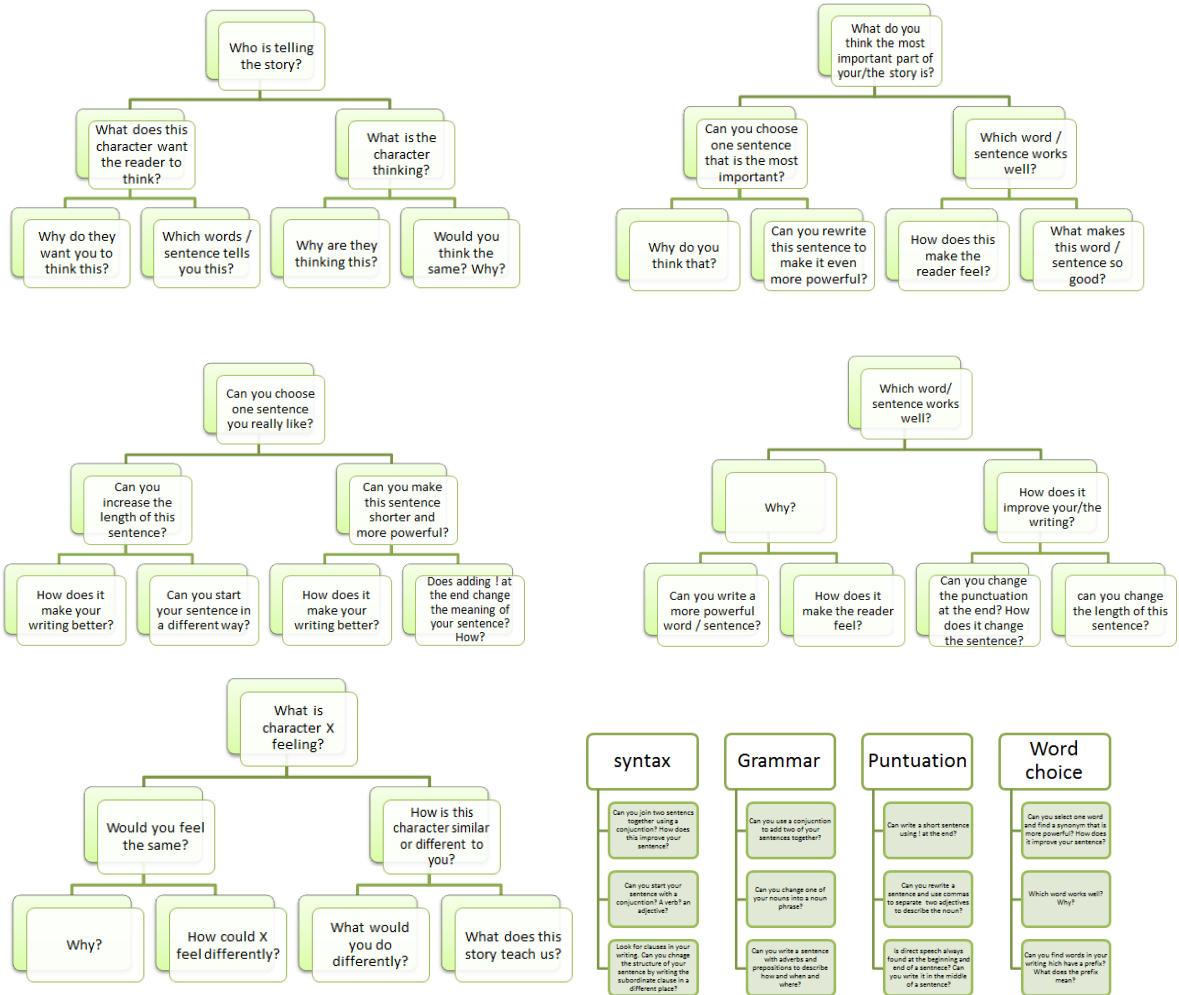
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Viridis Federation. (2017) Deepening Understanding in Literacy. *Viridis Federation*

Appendix 1

Deepening Understanding Questions, developed prior to this study by The Viridis Federation

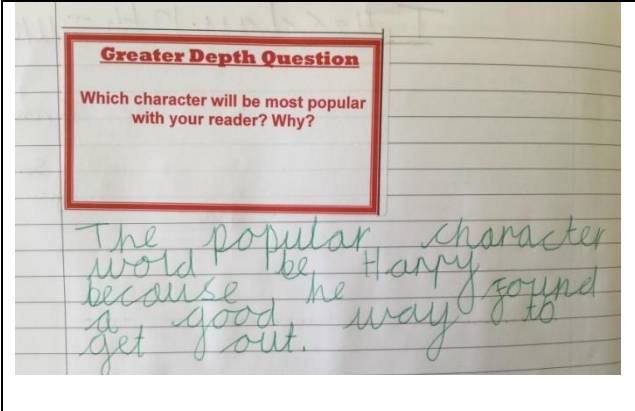
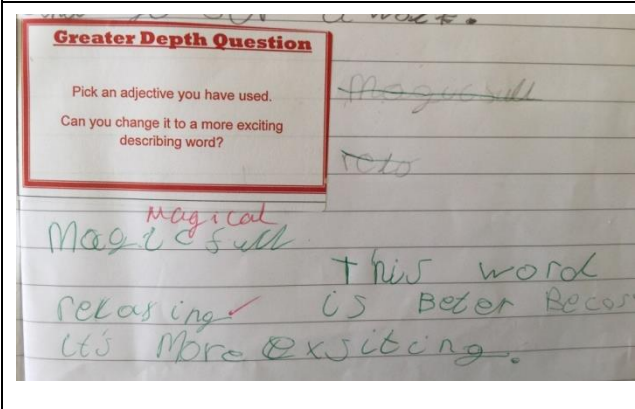
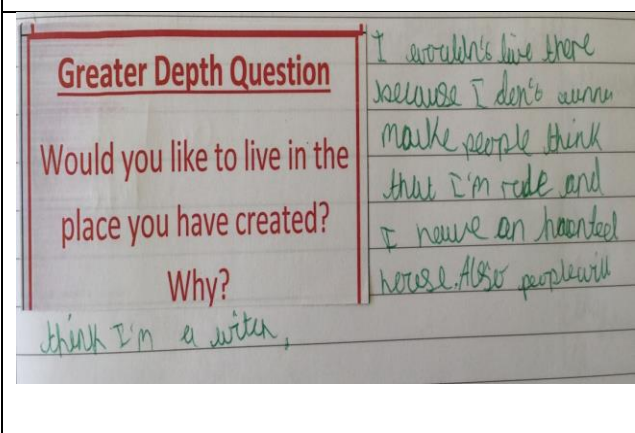
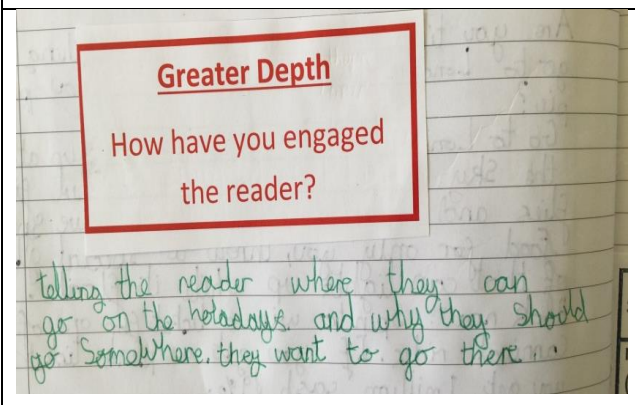


Appendix 2

Response Assessment Scale

1	Unable to answer
2	Full answer with some support
3	Partial answer independently
4	Full answer independently
5	In-depth answer, drawing on prior learning and making connections

Examples of pupil responses

 <p>Greater Depth Question Which character will be most popular with your reader? Why?</p> <p>The popular character would be Harry because he found a good way to get out.</p>	<p>Year 3 Score = 3</p> <p>Pupil makes some attempt to answer the question, and gives a reason, but does not expand on the effect on the reader</p>
 <p>Greater Depth Question Pick an adjective you have used. Can you change it to a more exciting describing word?</p> <p>Magical. This word is better because it's more exciting.</p>	<p>Year 1 Score = 3</p> <p>Pupil makes some attempt to answer the question, and gives a reason, but does not expand on the effect on the reader</p>
 <p>Greater Depth Question Would you like to live in the place you have created? Why?</p> <p>I wouldn't live there because I don't want make people think that I'm real and I have an haunted house. Also people will think I'm a writer.</p>	<p>Year 2 Score = 3</p> <p>Pupil makes some attempt to answer the question, and shows limited understanding of the effect on the reader.</p>
 <p>Greater Depth How have you engaged the reader?</p> <p>telling the reader where they can go on the holidays and why they should go. Somewhere they want to go there.</p>	<p>Year 3 Score = 4</p> <p>Pupil makes a reasonable attempt at answering the question, with an understanding of the impact on the reader.</p>

<div data-bbox="204 197 485 367" style="border: 1px solid red; padding: 5px;"> <p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;">Greater Depth</p> <p style="margin: 0;">How do you want to make the reader feel? Why?</p> </div> <div data-bbox="193 383 804 539" style="border: 1px solid gray; padding: 5px;"> <p style="font-family: cursive;">Upset because could they not just add we want to be there for him so we can help him.</p> </div>	<p>Year 2</p> <p>Score = 4</p> <p>Pupil makes a reasonable attempt to answer the question, and shows an understanding of the impact on the reader.</p>
<div data-bbox="240 577 544 734" style="border: 1px solid red; padding: 5px;"> <p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;">Greater Depth Question</p> <p style="margin: 0;">1) What is Jack feeling at the start of the story?</p> <p style="margin: 0;">2) How is this character similar or different to you?</p> <p style="margin: 0;">3) What would you do differently?</p> </div> <div data-bbox="193 719 804 913" style="border: 1px solid gray; padding: 5px;"> <p style="font-family: cursive;">1) he is worried because he doesn't have money 2) it is like me to my back use it don't stop 3) I would get a job</p> </div>	<p>Year 1</p> <p>Score = 4</p> <p>Pupil makes a reasonable attempt to answer the question, and shows some deeper understanding of the characters.</p>