

School Partnership Program
Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum
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Executive Summary

What Do You See That Makes You Say That?: The Role of Asking Young Children to Provide Evidence for their Observations in Visual Thinking Strategies Discussions

This report provides an analysis of the appropriateness of asking Question 2 ("What do you see that makes you say that?") to children ages 3-6 in a Visual Thinking Strategies discussion. The current implementation manual for grades K-2 (Housen & Yenawine, 2000) recommends that Question 2 be introduced at the end of the school year with children in Grades 1 and younger. The manual introduces the Question 2 in the lesson plan for lesson 8 out of the 10 lesson curriculum. While there is no official PreKindergarten curriculum, an image set is currently being piloted by the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. The report itself moves through a progression of five stages: (1) a review of the Visual Thinking Strategies Methodology, (2) an overview of perspectives focusing on cognitive and metacognitive development for children ages 3-6, (3) an examination of how our knowledge of metacognition stands to inform how VTS is facilitated, (4) a discussion concerning how VTS discussions benefit the development of cognitive and metacognitive skills, and finally (5) recommendations for moving forward both in research and in practice.

Methods of analysis included synthesizing research studies that examined cognitive and metacognitive skills in children ages 3-6, exploring the guiding principles of Visual Thinking Strategies, and direct observations of 3-6 year-old children engaging with the methodology. Results of the analysis indicated that children from ages 3-6 were capable of the cognitive and metacognitive skills needed to formulate a response to Question 2 and that time, predictable structure, and amount of exposure were critical elements in fostering appropriate responses to Question 2. Additionally, the analysis indicated that Visual Thinking Strategies discussions benefit the development of children ages 3-6 due to their encouragement of open-inquiry, culture of risk-taking, and peer-based environment. While the report references examples from PreKindergarten and Kingergarten discussions, the referenced transcripts are not included.

The conclusions of this report support the inclusion of Question 2 in Visual Thinking Strategies discussions with children ages 3-6. However, it is acknowledged that there appears to be a critical transition in cognitive and metacognitive skills that occurs between the age of 3 and the age of 6 and recommends further empirical research to document how children respond to Question 2 over the course of development. This report also suggests that there may be a way to facilitate Question 2 to make it more or less challenging to meet the needs of diverse audiences, and that further research is required to determine how facilitation can be graduated. Finally, this report recommends further research with children ages 3-6, who are participating consistently in Visual Thinking Strategies discussion, to determine if transfer of evaluative skills can be documented and what, if any, longitudinal effects emerge.