Does the development of 'pupil voice' activities enhance young learners' experience of school?

Aims of the project

The research aimed to address the following questions:

1. Can the development of pupil voice help move a school from a performance driven culture to a pupil-centred learning culture?

2. Do pupil voice activities enhance teaching and learning?

3. Does the growth of pupil voice activities have a positive or negative impact on staff?

Dimensions of the study

The research took place in a one-form entry primary school in central Durham within a three year period. It involved 13 members of staff of whom seven were teachers and six non-teachers, including classroom assistants and office staff. There are 170 pupils within the school, 94% are white British and many come from families where both parents work.

The study examined the development of pupil voice activities, noting the extent to which the school moved from an organisation where pupils' views were infrequently sought, generally over minor matters, to one in which pupils have a much greater say into more significant issues – thus beginning to shape their own learning experiences within school.

Summary of main findings

- Pupils had much greater input into the curriculum, and were encouraged to identify what they wanted to learn within a topic and how they wanted to learn it. The school became a pupil-centred learning organisation where the needs of all participants, staff and pupils, were respected and acknowledged.

- Teachers invited feedback into teaching and learning, using these responses to make their teaching even more effective, with the use of questions such as "if I were to teach that lesson again, what could I do differently?" and "what helped you learn most in that lesson?"

- Pupil voice has had a positive impact on staff who have found that it makes their teaching more interesting and enjoyable. Pupils became more engaged and the activities around the school have raised teachers' aspirations as to what pupils are capable of in terms of making a contribution to their school community – both as active participants in the learning process and as co-contributors to the organisational needs of their school community.

Background and context

On arriving at the school as head teacher in 2006 I noted that whilst attainment (the level reached) was reasonably high, achievement (the progress made) was quite low and often the relationship between staff and pupils was one where staff taught and pupils learned. There was little sense of partnership between the two and not much account taken of the views of pupils. At my previous school, I had become interested in pupil voice through the work of Ruddock and Flutter and so when Durham Authority invited Dr. Carol Robinson to lead a pilot project on developing 'Pupils as Researchers' I embraced the opportunity. Working with the pupils, developing them as Pupils as Researchers (PARs), gave me an insight into just how capable they were and opened up a host of ideas about the development of pupil voice. I felt this approach might help us to develop the school into a more pupil-centred learning environment, with the potential to bring staff and pupils together.

An Ofsted visit in 2007 rated the school 'satisfactory with good features'. This judgement, together with adjustments to personnel, helped staff recognise the need for change, including developing strategies for raising pupils' involvement and increasing their progress. A key factor here was the staff's readiness for this.

Teaching processes and strategies

Developing Staff Involvement

As an experienced head teacher I don't believe in quick fixes, considering rather that real development comes about when those involved feel a sense of ownership. Subsequently throughout the project I was careful to pace change according to the responses of those within the school community. It was therefore necessary to regularly monitor the thoughts and feelings of those involved, through semi-structured interviews which were recorded. The first set of interviews brought to light anxieties held by staff, with initial concerns focusing on fear of criticism and loss of control. This awareness allowed me to take account of these, planning the best way forward.

By establishing the Pupils as Researchers (PARs) group in school before formally introducing the notion of pupil voice, I hoped staff could begin to relate to this concept and also see the positive impact it could have within school. The PARs were part of the

Durham Local Authority pilot and this helped give the work a degree of validity which it might not otherwise have had. Over time, pupil voice activities gradually moved towards the more significant 'classroom input' (aspects relating to teaching and learning or the curriculum) from the, perhaps less challenging but equally important, aspects identified within 'general input' (which included decisions about resources, the environment and which charities to support).

Main Activities Covered

Year 1 (2007-2008) focused on increasing pupil involvement in the school:

- This year's PARs project was developing a school newspaper. To improve sustainability I trained six Year 5 and Year 6 pupils (12 in total) using Dr. Robinson's materials so that experienced PARs could help train the Year 5s the following year. They designed and carried out questionnaires, interviewed some pupils, collated results and presented their work at a Durham conference on pupil voice.

- The School Council was reorganised to increase membership and make it more inclusive – each class had two members, one elected and one representative chosen on a rotating basis by the teacher.

- The notion of feedback into teaching and learning was raised with staff.

Year 2 (2008-2009) aimed at further increasing pupils' engagement in school:

- We encouraged pupils to provide feedback to lessons. This began by pupils using 'thumbs up, thumbs down' actions or smiley 🙂, straight line 😐 or sad faces 😠 on a page, and grew from there. The more confident teachers introduced questions such as "what helped you learn best?" and "what did you enjoy most?" Staff were surprised at how effective this was with one commenting, *"It's a bit scary at first... but (it) works brilliantly"*. One teacher explained how pupil feedback had led to a complete revision of her planned lessons on fractions – and how effective the results were.

- The School Council worked with the Equality and Diversity group to develop a 'Pupil Charter' for the school. This tackled all forms of discrimination. The Council skilfully addressed the issue of the wide age-range of pupils by drawing up two versions of the charter – one for juniors and a more simplified version for infants *"because the other one might be a bit hard for them"* (Y4 School Council Member).

- Some pupils developed an Enterprise Group, setting up a business for designing, making and selling jewellery. This involved purchasing components, pricing items and keeping basic accounts. They entered the Durham 'Enterprise Challenge' for primary schools, where they made a presentation about their work and ran a stall, winning the event.

In Year 3 (2009-2010) we further developed pupil voice in the following ways:

- Enhancing the use of pupil feedback; pupils identified which aspects they wanted to learn within a topic, posing key questions and areas to be investigated, and then agreed as a class how this was to be done, whilst teachers ensured all appropriate skills were addressed during the year. Comments from staff were unanimously favourable, such as:

I was astounded at how good my Year 3s were – they came up with things that I would never have thought to put in and it was all relevant", "they're more interested in what they're doing" and "it works brilliantly!

- PARs pupils involved the school community in their research into aspects of our new building, e.g. selecting cloakroom areas, planning corridor display spaces and determining signage. I felt the key to their success was that activities were real and relevant, thus avoiding tokenism.

- A group of pupils initiated a review of our Annual Pupil Questionnaire, adapting it for infants, as *"last year they didn't understand all the questions"* (pupil comment), by rewriting it to include pictures to be circled for some responses. This was the first activity that was initiated solely by pupils (there have been many more since) and their review meant that our Infant Questionnaire is now easier to carry out and more accurately reflects the thoughts of the pupils.

The findings

How embedded has pupil voice become in our school?

In the first year of the project we aimed to increase pupil involvement in school, however at the end of that year our Annual Pupil Questionnaire told us that about a third of pupils felt that their views didn't often count, that pupils didn't help shape decisions and that they quite often learnt things they weren't interested in. Over the next two years, teachers took more account of the needs and interests of the pupils, using their views to help shape their teaching, learning and the curriculum, and by 2009 more than three-quarters of pupils felt their views were important. This was recognised by Ofsted, who reported in our 2010 Inspection Report:

The curriculum contributes to pupils' good achievement by offering a wide range of challenging and creative activities which are increasingly well matched to their interests and abilities.

Involvement in pupil voice activity has also risen considerably from 29% in 2008 to 69% by 2010. This is acknowledged and appreciated by parents, one of whom commented in the Annual Questionnaire that pupil voice activities *"are really positive and help the children to see they are important and worth listening to – so self-esteem building".*

Pupils' views were helping to shape many features of school life, including 'General Input' into school policies and procedures, the building and resources as well as 'Classroom Input' into teaching and learning and the curriculum, enabling pupils to influence their own learning. One of the most significant moments came when the governors were reviewing our video and photographic policy. This was a complex issue for the school for a number of reasons until one of the governors suggested asking the pupils what they wanted. Once we looked at the problem from the pupil perspective, the policy was quickly completed and the fact that a governor suggested this approach led me to believe that pupil input was becoming firmly embedded within our school community.

Have pupil voice activities enhanced teaching and learning?

Initially, staff felt that pupils should be more involved in general activities within school but avoid any 'Classroom Input' relating to the curriculum or teaching and learning. By summer 2010, staff attitudes had changed considerably with all teachers receptive to pupil feedback into teaching and learning. Staff also embraced pupil input into the curriculum, with pupils largely shaping the scope and direction of the topic. This has had a positive effect on teaching, with this comment being fairly typical: *"I think asking for their ideas and taking on board their opinions has made me a better teacher"*, as well as learning: *"we've got children more motivated and excited about what they're learning"*. Feedback indicated that pupil voice activities had enhanced teaching and learning and in 2010 Ofsted noted that:

> *The school provides many activities which enrich pupils' learning and there is a strong focus on enterprise activities.*

The overall impact on the school community was summed up by this teacher's comment: *"I think the whole school seems very enthusiastic."*

Does the growth of pupil voice have a positive or negative impact on staff attitudes?

Initial concerns from teaching staff that increased pupil voice might result in their own role being diminished have been dispelled. As one teacher said, "initially I felt worried I would lose control but this has not been the case" The range of pupil voice activities grew over the three years and was introduced step-by-step. Feedback indicated that this helped ensure success with pupil voice, as one teacher noted:

> *Gradually we've built upon it so staff have really had a chance to take it on board and understand it and see the positives..... It was small steps at first, but now... we're doing it in so many ways it just feeds across the whole school.*

Staff have reported that the positive impact pupil voice activities have had on children, such as increased motivation and improved behaviour of pupils, have made their jobs more rewarding. Staff have grown in confidence, are more willing to take risks with their teaching and all agree this has been largely due to the development of pupil voice within the school.

Research methods

The research took place in a one-form entry primary school in central Durham and over a three year period 13 members of staff were involved, seven teachers and six non-teachers (classroom assistants and office staff). Progress was monitored through questionnaires and semi-structured staff interviews at the beginning of the research period, half way through and finally at the end. Information was also gathered from the Annual Questionnaires for both pupils and parents and from reports by external bodies such as Ofsted, Unicef and Investors in Children.

Conclusion

Findings clearly indicated that the increase in pupil voice activities has had a positive impact on the school: pupils are more involved in decision-making and in shaping the direction of the school, including teaching and learning. This appears to be welcomed by parents, teachers and pupils alike. The school's pupil-centred approach has been acknowledged by Unicef through their Rights Respecting Award and also by us achieving 'Investors in Children' status.

Staff are comfortable with consulting pupils over the content and direction of their topic planning and teachers have embraced the notion of obtaining feedback from pupils to their teaching at some level. Whilst it would be wrong to attribute the increase in school performance solely to the development of pupil voice activities, it is worth noting that such activities had no detrimental effect and external bodies such as Ofsted and our Local Authority have judged us to be a more effective school. An Ofsted in 2010 graded the school as 'good' whilst the LA judged the school to be 'good with outstanding features'.

This research aims to contribute to our understanding of the ways in which pupil consultation can enhance not just teaching and learning within school, but the whole school experience for all involved – staff and pupils. The development of pupil voice activities has led to increased motivation for pupils, increased enthusiasm for staff, teaching becoming more relevant and pupil centred and an improved climate of trust and respect throughout the school.

Suggestions for further reading

Flutter, J. & Ruddock, J. (2004) *Consulting Pupils: What's In It For Schools?* London: RoutledgeFalmer.

MacBeath, J., Demetriou, H., Rudduck, J. & Myers, K. (2003) *Consulting Pupils: A Toolkit for Teachers.* Cambridge: Pearson Publishing.

MacBeath, J., Frost, D. & Pedder, D. (2008) *The Influence and Participation of Children and Young People in their Learning* (IPiL) Project [online], Available at: www.gtce.org.uk/133031/133036/139476/ipil project [accessed 18th January 2009]

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