Did Pupils' Learning in Year 6 History and Geography increase as a result of a specific inservice training (INSET) intervention focused on Teaching Quality?

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Aim

An explanation of how pupils' learning in Year 6 history and geography was affected by an inservice training (INSET) intervention focused on teaching quality.

Dimensions of this Case Study

We studied the work of four non-specialist teachers of history and geography in Year 6 of a 9-13 middle school.

Summary of Findings for this Case Study

- Year 6 history and geography teachers were able to use INSET experiences to enhance specific teaching strategies and raise pupils attainment. For example, teachers were observed developing more specific and explicit learning objectives, more structured activities, better questioning and better matched, high quality learning resources. Increases in pupil confidence, involvement, creativity, questioning, learning outcomes and clarity about teacher expectations and focus were all observed as pupil responses to changing teaching strategies.

INSET activities which were effective in this Case Study included:

- providing summaries of relevant research findings and theories about teaching quality;
- opportunities to observe other teachers;
- formal reflection on specific teaching strategies;
- opportunities to conduct research;
- supported planning.

School planning and organisation which supported these activities effectively included:

- time and support for INSET planning focussed on ensuring that improvements in teaching and learning were sustained over time;
- leaders who drove forward change and anticipated teacher discomfort in unlearning previous approaches so that pupils and teachers could feel confident about the application of new skills;
- the allocation of resources for collaborative professional development.

Our study

Calversyke Middle School is a three-form entry 9-13 school working within Bradford's three-tier system. The school is situated in an area of marked social and economic deprivation.

This research was conducted in the context of a sustained drive to improve the quality of provision. Supported by Bradford LEA's *Teaching Quality Initiative*, we identified approaches to pedagogy which were effective in our school, and developed with our colleagues a shared 'theory of teaching'.

The aim of our research was to investigate whether sustained INSET on the quality of teaching had an effect on children's learning in history and geography classes taught by non-specialists in year 6.

This would lead to findings and recommendations about:

- teaching methods – how teachers can enable children to become active learners;
- how teachers can be helped to change and improve their practice;
- how schools can promote sustained improvement through staff development.

What we did

All staff attended six hours INSET on teaching quality. The aims of the INSET were:

- to become more reflective about teaching;
- to increase the amount and quality of talk about teaching;
- to improve the effectiveness of teaching across the curriculum.

In the sessions teachers:

- reflected on their own practice;
- discussed their shared understanding of effective teaching;
- were briefed on recent developments in research on teaching and learning;
- were briefed on national expectations through the publications of OFSTED, QCA, DFEE, TTA, etc.;
- synthesised a description of best practice in the context of our schools as the *Calversyke Theory of Teaching*.

Teachers then formed supportive pairings and watched each other teach. They then discussed their observations, reflected on their practice, and sought ways to improve.

The evidence we collected

We concentrated our study on the non-specialist teachers of history and geography in Year 6. They received additional subject specialist INSET and support from LEA subject experts.

We collected information from:

- classroom observations by participants;
- classroom observations by inspectors;
- teachers' diaries and short term plans;
- scrutiny of children's work at the beginning and end of the project;
- pupils' tests at the beginning and end of the project.

Statutory Guidance and Academic Theory

We tried to compile an up-to-date picture of best practice by studying research publications, academic theory, and material from OFSTED, QCA, etc. We presented a three-page digest of this information to our colleagues. The key points were:

- quality of teaching is at the heart of effective schooling;
- effective teachers understand how children learn;
- teachers need to use a range of strategies according to children's needs, understanding why and how these strategies impact on children's learning;
- structured teaching, dividing the learning into manageable parts and providing 'scaffolding', is highly effective;
- a teacher's subject knowledge is most important, but must be matched by a range of effective teaching techniques;
- good teachers use effective questioning as both a teaching and a control technique;
- children learn best when academic tasks are clearly introduced, structured and well paced;
- successful schools have a culture which encourages and supports teachers.

Our reading helped structure the project and informed our teaching quality INSET. In the training sessions we tried to match the generalised input on quality with subject-specific support. We tried to build a culture of reflective experimentation (see Fig 1). One result was a description of effective teaching in our school, which became known as the *Calversyke Theory*.

When teachers applied the theory

Year 6 history and geography teachers collaborated to plan a series of lessons and found that improved short-term planning and subject knowledge enabled them to:

- be specific about learning objectives;
- communicate these objectives more effectively to children;
- structure activities in appropriately small steps;
- differentiate more effectively;
- provide more effective, high quality learning resources to match the objectives;
- use key questions to promote and extend learning and focus the lesson;
- enable pupils to share their findings with one another;
- use end-of-lesson plenaries to review achievement, set targets and reflect on next steps.

The increase in teachers' confidence and performance improved pupils' response to the lessons:

- pupils were clearer about what was expected;
- pupils became increasingly confident about their learning;
- pupils became more involved and more on-task;
- the focus and quality of discussion in pairs and in groups improved greatly;
- pupils actively wanted to share their work with others;
- pupils began to formulate their own questions and carry investigations forward;
- pupils became increasingly creative in their approach to the work, and took more risks;
- pupils made active use of a greater variety of resources.

Teachers were very positive in their evaluations of the lessons. They reported that:

- the use of small steps for learning and key questions was vital for moving learning forward;
- they were surprised how much pupils' responses had improved over a short period of time;
- specific teaching of the key skills enabled pupils to make rapid progress;
- clarity of focus in teaching was matched by pupils' response, enthusiasm and achievement.

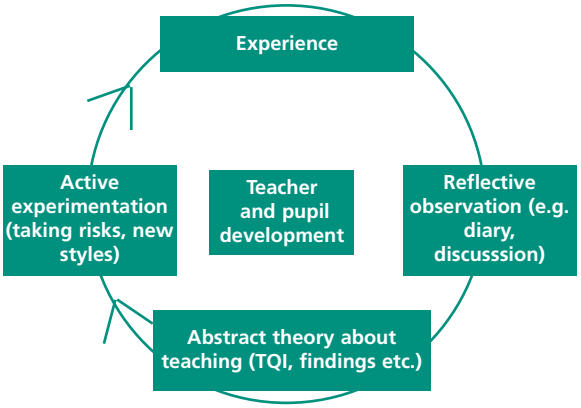

Figure 1 – A model of teachers' and pupils' learning

Teachers drew various conclusions about quality in teaching:

- high expectations are essential if children are to achieve their potential;
- the risks involved in trying new techniques were rewarded by improvements in pupils' response – they became more enthusiastic as they found the techniques working in practice;
- teachers saw how important it was to provide children with clear objectives which were achieved in small, manageable steps;
- they felt that modelling was vital – it helped pupils achieve the tasks and move towards the independent application of newly acquired skills;
- activities and resources need to match the learning objectives and pupils' abilities;
- teachers found that formal reflection on their own strategies was a vital factor in helping them improve their teaching;

- they found opportunities to observe other teachers and to be observed themselves extremely useful;

  "15 minutes' observation is as useful as a day's INSET".

  Teacher A

- collaboration with colleagues was a vital factor in improvement and increased confidence;
- when support is given for risk-taking and development it is much more likely that improvement will be sustained.

Implications for teachers' planning and classroom practice

- Planning needs to focus on skills, so that they develop progressively over time.
- Teachers need to practice key skills regularly, so that they become embedded.
- Lessons need to have structure, with distinct beginning (introduction, make aims clear to pupils), middle (activity), and end (summary, plenary, review).
- Lessons need to have clear, focused and differentiated objectives ("*what do I want these pupils to achieve today?*").
- Learning objectives need to be shared with pupils. ("*…by the end of the lesson you will be able to tell me about...*").
- Learning activities need to be modelled by the teacher ("*I will show you how to…*").
- Activities need to be stepped and supported, to help pupils work towards independent learning.
- Key questions are a powerful way of supporting, extending and assessing pupils' learning.
- Pupils should have the opportunity to present their findings in a variety of ways.
- Teachers and pupils need to be willing to take risks if they are to learn.

Implications for school leadership

The research convinced us of the value of collaborative professional development based in school. This needs to take place in a culture that supports innovation, reasoned risk-taking and new learning. We found that teaching improved when:

- quality planning and collaboration time was built into timetables at a structural level, not just slotted in;
- INSET was organised in school, and undertaken by teams who supported each other's development;
- colleagues observed one another's work;
- school leaders anticipate the unsettling effect of the un-learning which precedes the adoption of new teaching techniques;
- developments are adequately resourced.

Further Reading

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Publication number 71 / 8–99