Whose voice is important in decision-making in the primary school?

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Can a head teacher create changes that transfer power to the classroom stakeholders?

Aims of the project

This study set out to use action research to implement approaches aimed at increasing the participation of children and teachers in making decisions about their own learning. We intended to investigate the potential of these strategies to give greater responsibility, involvement and ownership to those in the classroom, and to explore the role of leadership.

Dimensions of the study

The two-year project was carried out at Lark Rise Lower School, Dunstable, Bedfordshire involving all 280 pupils aged 3-9, 12 teachers and 24 support staff.

Summary of main findings

Evidence from interviews, reflective logs and focus groups suggested that:

- child/adult and peer to peer **relationships** were enriched;

- pupils' motivation and engagement increased as they developed **control** over their own learning and wider decisions across the school;

- teachers felt more **empowered** to experiment in their classrooms; and

- **accountability**, usually associated with the role of head teacher, was shared with those working within the classrooms.

Background and context

To start with we considered what was already successful and how to build upon the existing culture to establish a learning-centred community of practice.

We set up a school council. However, we recognised that there were weaknesses in the practice of using a school council as a vehicle for pupils' views. Those who were unsuccessful at being elected to the council often felt rejected and excluded from the decision-making process. Consequently from September 2005 we turned to pupil voice as a way of challenging assumptions about education. *'To what extent were pupils treated as empty vessels to be filled up, rather than as individuals who already had rich experiences and knowledge to be 'drawn out'?' 'How could their education become more child-centred, meeting their needs in a more personalised way?'*

We decided to develop all pupils' skills in pupil voice processes and adopted a number of strategies to do this, including: Philosophy for Children lessons, developing the voice of the pupil in classroom processes for learning and feeding back, and identifying the leadership skills needed to guide peers.

Teaching processes and strategies

The strategies we used included:

Introduction of Philosophy for Children (PfC)

A whole school PfC approach was introduced, based on the work of Joanna Haynes in 2005. Staff read about the project and then engaged in workshop sessions to plan the strategy.

Exploring classroom conditions and making changes

Experiences gained through PfC were transferred to classrooms as research projects in 2006. Children wanted to offer their opinions on things that they felt were happening in school and their teachers were willing to listen and change.

Actions for improving mathematical teaching and learning (co-research in the classroom)

Building on their experiences, in 2007 the teachers wanted to discover the effect of pupil voice activities on a more specific aspect of learning. They selected mathematical learning.

Peer mentors for playground support

We chose a group of children to take the role of peer mentor trained to support others with friendship issues. A focus group discussion with children about playground issues, however, showed there was much resentment about the role of peer mentors (they were 'bossy') and we are looking for ways to develop the strategy further.

Exploring choices of curriculum subjects in one afternoon

We implemented choices afternoons at Key Stages 1 and 2 which built on the skills gained in Foundation Stage. Children were offered a choice of subjects and learning spaces on one afternoon per week with teacher facilitators.

Philosophy for Children lessons

As a first step to involving children in pupil voice activities, thirty-minute Philosophy for Children lessons were introduced into all classes, so the children could gain positive experiences of discussing together and expressing themselves. The children enjoyed the fact that there were no right or wrong answers and that all points of view were valued:

"In philosophy you get to relax when you think, it isn't about yes and no or wrong or right it is just about thinking what you think!" (6 year old) and "you can think what you think and it doesn't matter if someone thinks differently" (8-year old).

The essence of the lessons was to engage children in discussions based on subject material of their choosing. Subjects such as 'what is God' suggested by 8- and 9-year olds led to very many different perspectives, with children listening and commenting on what they heard. The youngest Nursery children (4-year olds) used subject material within their cognitive levels such as 'Why did Humpty Dumpty sit on the wall when he knows his shell might break?' This led to suggestions about doing the right thing and being safe.

Changing practice through a partnership of pupil and teacher voice

We developed the use of pupil voice in changing classroom practice. The philosophy sessions enabled the children to think more widely about the learning processes they were engaging in. This led to a shared, active questioning in all classroom situations by children and staff. Rather than this being a head teacher-led initiative, individual teachers became involved in their own action research projects, firstly about changes in classroom conditions for learning and, secondly, more narrowly, on mathematical enquiry. One of the 6-year olds stated *"they were the ones who spent a long time in the classrooms and so they should be able to say what they want"*. The children were aware of the value of their contributions, as one said: *"teachers know about what we need to learn about we just want to say how we do it"*.

Exploration of classroom conditions for learning began with frank discussions about what it felt like to be a child in the class. The open nature of the discussion led to many comments from pupils such as, *"if you are in a real classroom it makes you feel like you are in the mood for learning"* (5-year old girl) and *"We are learning more so they have to give us harder work… so that we are smarter"* (8-year old boy). The depth of children's understanding about what they experienced amazed the teachers and through sharing their quotes they planned a way forward. One eight-year old wanted an area for group work and working alone. The classroom furniture was rearranged so that Key Stage Two classrooms had straight rows in one area and group tables in another. The children clearly identified the difference the seating arrangements made to their motivation levels.

Another 8-year old explained how difficult it was to understand certain Mathematics questions. Children talked about the issue in a structured way. They confirmed that they learned from each other: *"It was funny that we all said the answer a different way"* (6-year old). *"I think my way isn't as quick as the others. I am going to try the quick way next time"* (8-year old) and *"The teacher laughed when I said that I understood when a child explained it in their words and that it made more sense than when the teacher explained it"* (9-year old). One nine-year old struggling with new concepts explained how the action research approach had helped: *"I realise that I don't always use the correct words and the first time we did this I didn't want to say my way. Now I know more words and have tried it out with small groups I feel better talking to the main class"*.

Teachers were prepared to take risks in the way they worked after listening to the children's views, but the process was not entirely painless. Teachers were aware of their accountability to provide a structured curriculum whilst looking for ways of transferring some of the responsibility for learning to the children. There were inevitably tensions and a sense of loss of control in the initial stages. Because it was important that pupil voice should not be seen as tokenistic it meant accepting that messages from children might be uncomfortable. Teachers had to almost suspend their beliefs that they knew what young children needed.

Other discussions prompted changes in furniture, position, curriculum, timetables, spaces for learning and highly significantly, the loss of the head teacher's office.

Feeding back

Teachers and children shared outcomes in whole school assemblies and at conferences. Teachers gave feedback to other staff every six weeks, while there were also opportunities for pupils to give feedback to the whole staff as well as to their own teacher within the classroom setting.

The findings

Relationships between children and adults were enriched because adults showed curiosity about the children's points of view, rather than simply telling them what to do. Instead of adults being seen as authority figures, they were partners in learning. This led to a greater feeling of trust and caring.

Pupils' motivation and engagement increased as they took control over their own learning. They enjoyed being free to explore their own ideas and showed improved skills in discussion, as this teacher's comment indicates:

> "Philosophy has allowed children to develop several integral skills needed for learning and future life skills. Many of the children are now able to take turns in conversations and are becoming better skilled at listening to and considering one another's opinions, and accepting them, even if it is not a view that they share. The children are learning to debate rather than argue and the impact of this, for some, is transferring into other roles they undertake within school such as Playground leaders. The opportunities for children to openly discuss things in philosophy without a fear of being wrong has given some of the quieter less confident children more confidence. Children have also learnt to use questioning as a tool for untapping further learning".
> (Teacher's reflective log entry)

Children's relationships with their peers improved as they became involved in leading and planning activities. As they took more ownership of the lessons, they were more able to empathise with their teachers.

Teachers felt more willing to experiment in their classrooms. During the PfC lessons, they were freed from the rigid setting of lesson objectives. This helped them to develop more flexible views about how their classrooms might look and how lessons

might be structured. Instead of evaluating their lessons in the usual way, teachers used the plenary, which was based on the philosophy approach of stating what they saw, heard and felt about the activities completed in the lesson. This opened up their practice to further experimentation and the continuation of the action research cycle. For example:

> "I found out more about misconceptions and misunderstandings by listening to their discussions than I ever had in lessons before, even when I was working with a group or one-to-one".

Regarding school organisation, the role of the head teacher had to change. As decision-making power was transferred to other staff, the school development plan became an action research plan; and even the head teacher's office disappeared! The children were asked to identify places of interest around the school and take photographs. From those photographs the head teacher worked with the children to change the purpose of certain rooms including her office which became a meeting space and toilets in the corridor a chill out space.

One of the classroom projects led to a kinaesthetic approach to Literacy teaching for a group of children who found Literacy difficult. They informed their teacher that when they came in from playtime their fingers sometimes were cold and they were expected to write. They designed finger warming activities; they also suggested we placed key words on footballs to allow them to read the words after they had caught the ball. One 5-year old suggested *"this way helped wake up my brain because I had to catch the ball and then work out what the word my left hand was on, I had to be quick; my friends were waiting".*

Research methods

Data collection was framed on the basis of what was *'seen'*, *'heard'* and *'felt'* following a focus group comment from a 7-year old *"Why don't we talk about our school by saying what we see, hear and feel?"*

We used semi-structured interviews with adults, focus groups with children and reflective logs. The questions were designed to be open-ended in order to capture a wide range of views such as:

- How does this expand on what these children already know?
- What skills are being developed?
- How will this activity help these children know more about their world?
- Do all children get a chance to tell us what they feel?
- How can we improve what we do?

For the focus groups we used visual prompts and we experimented with different learning spaces. Children felt more comfortable on bean-bags in a 'chill-out' room rather than in a more formal setting. The emphasis throughout was on encouraging the children to give authentic responses rather than simply saying what they thought was expected.

Conclusion

The project raised important questions about what and *how* we teach our children. A range of practical strategies were adopted in this study: including the use of Philosophy for Children discussions, pupil councils and discursive plenaries. The role of teachers and leadership were progressively modified to develop an 'enquiry' focus for school development, and to increase the involvement of the whole school community in decisions about their learning. This combination of classroom strategies, changes in leadership style, as well as renewed approaches to professional development and school development gave rise to other positive changes within the school: as relationships between the children and with the adults were enriched, the pupils' motivation and engagement increased, and teachers felt more willing to experiment in their classrooms.

Suggestions for further reading

Arnot M, McIntyre D. Pedder D and Reay D (2004) *Consultation in the Classroom Developing Dialogue about teaching and Learning* Pearson Cambridge

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Haynes J. (2002) *Children as Philosophers Learning Through Enquiry and Dialogue in the Primary Classroom* RoutledgeFalmer London New York

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