

Communicating...

Consulting Pupils Project Newsletter

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Another Splash of Paint

This issue is devoted to the work on target-setting and student voice which Ingrid Cox has been involved in at Rivington and Blackrod High School over the last three years. The account was constructed from the edited transcripts of interviews conducted by Nick Brown with Ingrid, with the pupils involved and with the headteacher, John Baumber. The school is a rural 11-18 comprehensive on the outskirts of Bolton, Lancashire.

It started when we were looking at analysing data to do with children's performance at GCSE and the information we had from their SATS while simultaneously we were involved in staff training about predicting future performance. That's when we got into the whole arena of **target-setting**. This was something new for us. But it just felt as though it was like leading horses to water – and unless horses want to drink, they won't, will they? And dealing with a lot of disaffected students as I had been in my Head of Year role, I felt that many of them might not want to just take advice. But it might be different if children said to themselves, 'This is what *we* want to do for *us*.' My belief is that target-setting, if it's not child-focused and child-based, is irrelevant.

At the same time, a colleague came to me whose role it was to try and develop **the School Council**. It was very much just about dealing with bike sheds and the usual things but the new Head came and gave it life by saying that the students would have a budget which was brilliant. The first word he used when he arrived and talked to staff was empowerment. My impression was that he wanted to empower both staff and pupils. He came just three years ago and this project started in September 2000, shortly after his arrival

What the students had to say about School Council

I've never seen anything of major impact from there. A lot of the things we've raised as a form, I don't think have ever really gone on to School Council. I don't think there's enough of an input of the rest of the school into the School Council. I think it's just that select few.

I don't have a clue about the School Council. I don't know if they actually do anything, really. I've not seen anything change from what they've done. I just don't know what they've done.

Of course staff were very antagonistic about target-setting in general at the beginning and just didn't see what was relevant, because it was threatening for them on a personal level: at the end of each year, each department would assess the information about which teacher had which pupils and what their results were, and whether they were either up or down on predictions. You had students some of whom were motivated others not, but all apparently with the potential to develop certain grades - and when they under-achieved it was down to the teacher. So there were two strands to target-setting, it seemed to me. You had to attack it from the teacher's point of view: we had to know what it was about, understand it and work with it together. But also pupils had to be involved in it. I wanted it to be a real thing.

So how did you set things up?

Well there was an opportunity. It was a good moment. Good moments to me are when things come together and you think, 'This is the way'. I asked the new Head of Year 10 whether she wanted to do some work on involving pupils in target setting. She was really positive, so I spoke to some staff in Humanities who I knew were trying to improve the image of their department and move it forward. I also wanted to work with staff who I knew would work together easily to move on various agendas. So we met and agreed on involving a group of Year 10 students for two years knowing they would have the same Head of Year and the same Humanities teachers for those two years.

So we went ahead. The Head was very keen as well. He's very innovative and welcomes different challenges and different things happening, so he was very happy to be part of it. He was part of the Humanities Department as well, you see, which helped. We started by identifying a cohort of students. We needed a mixture of boys and girls, a number that was manageable. We needed students who were taking two or three of the Humanities subjects as well. And we wanted a range of ability. So we came up with a group of nine Year 10 students, mixed boys and girls, who were from the top, middle and bottom ability ranges and who took two or more subjects from History, Geography and RE. So that's how we chose the students.

What the students had to say about target-setting

I don't think target-setting's very useful because I don't think students themselves feel strongly about target grades. I don't personally know anyone who gets their target grades and thinks, 'Oh I'd better go home and do things better'. It's easier if the teacher has a word with you and says, 'Look, you're slipping in this' rather than having to set the grades. To me it's more of an annoyance. I know when I'm not doing well at something and I need to work harder. And I'd rather work that out for myself than have target grades sent to my parents. I think everybody knows when they're not working hard enough and you always know when you have to pick yourself up. We don't need all these [...] target grades! I know it makes the school feel better if they're doing something. I am so melancholy about school! As far as I'm concerned, I come here because I have to, it's not my choice to be here. I do the work as I know I can do it and I set myself my own paces, I set myself my own targets ... I hate the fact that these target grades, ... all these different people see my grades, which for me, I don't really want to put on show for other people - it's not something that I feel is anybody else's business. I find it difficult going home and telling my parents what grades I've got because I don't want anyone else to know, so it's difficult with my parents let alone a bunch of strangers.

*It's not been [a] very good [process] really. I've spoken to other people and they find it difficult if they're quite clever but their target grades are all A*s. They still find it difficult to achieve it and if they're not achieving it, well, they think, 'Well, why can't I be achieving it? This thing says I can but I'm not', so it puts pressure on a lot of people. Someone that knows you should sit down and speak to you and discuss where you are now and what you think you can achieve. So if you did it like that, then I think it would work. [For my mentoring] I had [Teacher B] - I've never even met him/her in my life before. I don't know why I had him/her but that's just the way it worked out.*

I spoke to them and said that they'd been chosen because they did Humanities but I didn't mention the bit about top middle and bottom though they'd obviously sussed out their own abilities. So then we contacted parents and asked, if it was possible for someone from outside to talk to them in school and for them to do some work on a special project, explaining that it wouldn't impinge much on school time. So it went ahead and then you came up and interviewed the students. Alongside that the staff have been working in the departments to try and look at how they teach these students with a focus on improvement and reaching student potential in those three subjects.

On a day-to-day basis, teachers were talking about their work. They agreed on a way forward which involved pupils commenting on their own work. They talked about 'improvement', what did 'improving' mean for History, for Geography, for RE? And that's been something that's carried on later on for the entire year group.

We took the students off-site for a day to Anderton Hall and we looked at some of the things that fed back from your first interviews and your commentary on them. We pinned all those up and said, 'Right, these are areas that we'd like, during the day, for us all to discuss or focus on' - whatever was relevant. We agreed to be on first name terms. We had bacon butties and a proper cooked meal at lunch time and we said, 'We want you to be really open and honest about us, about what's happening, about the school, about your subjects, about your teachers.' Their teachers were there too taking in the feedback.

Key areas identified from the first student interviews which explore several feelings about school

Target setting

Strong negative views

Targets are based on CAT scores which are four years old therefore perceived as inaccurate.
There is no pupil involvement in target setting.
There is a perception that teachers also think it's a waste of time.
End of year exams give a better indication of how well or badly pupils are doing.
When you get a target grade that is OK you might 'relax' too much.
Very low target grades are upsetting and de-motivating for some.
Target and profile grades are confusing – it's better that the teachers tell you how you're doing.

Strong positive views

It gives you something to work towards or try and beat.
Target setting with mentoring afterwards is useful.
Grades below C can help pupils assess how much work needs to be done.

Comments on issues of motivation

There is a marked variation across the interviewees in their motivation patterns. Some appear to have quite high degrees of *intrinsic motivation*:

[I try hard at school] For my own personal standards really.'

Extrinsic sources include teachers, parents and friends:

The teachers motivate you when you're in the lesson quite a lot actually.'

But friends is most important though, isn't it. [Int: Is it, for you? Tell me about that.] 'Well it's cos like say you sit next to them and they're going...they're doing lots of work you think I've to catch up to them so you start working faster and better. You want to beat him.

[Int: What about your parents? Are they an important part of your motivation?] Yeah they help me. They push me sort of thing to like get me doing it and they enjoy me success.....

Some pupils are strongly motivated by ambitions of particular careers, higher education or just simply to avoid 'dead-end' jobs:

It's like I want a decent job when I leave so if you've been good that's what I get out of it.

I want to get somewhere in my life because I need 5 GCSEs A to C. I know it sounds like they're easy and anyone can do it but for me it's really hard so I've got to work hard to get it.

Motivation is affected by a range of things. One girl described how getting behind affected her attitude to work:

If I don't know what I'm doing, say like my coursework in geography at the moment I've not really been explained what to do properly, like if I knew properly I'd get it done but cos I'm struggling a bit with it because I don't really know what we're made to do.... because...I were absent and like they've been explained to and other people like what didn't come to the lessons she's not explained it to them.

Other factors which pupils referred to included not liking coming to school because of difficulties with peer relations, lack of autonomy within school and discipline problems.

Conditions of learning

There's not enough challenge.

There's too little choice.

There is too narrow a course choice and curriculum.

There's too much disruption and teachers wasting lesson time in dealing with trouble-makers.

Lower sets especially are hindered by noise and disruption:

I'm in set 3 for English like the people in there mess about a bit and you try and get on with it but they distract you and then you get a bit behind as well so but...

I am in the lower sets but with people in the lower sets they don't want to do the work, some people, so it's the majority that don't want to do it so the rest that do get put down with them.

Discipline is not always fair – some pupils feel labelled

Pressures

Pace is a problem for some pupils:

If you're like pressured into getting something done quick I find that hard but if you're under pressure to do something well I find it easier.

A heavy emphasis on testing and grades creates tensions and pressures for some.

One girl had to do coursework mainly at home because of noise and disruption in her lower sets which increased her sense of pressure.

Pressures arose from deadlines for coursework and homework which were unclear or allowed too little time:

Yeah, deadlines. That's the only question that I'm worried about. [Int: And that hinders you from learning?] Yeah, panic and stuff cos like you write something and cos you're thinking like it's got to be good and rushing it and you end up scrapping it cos you think it's rushed and everything....

[Int: And do you think the school pressurises you too much or too little?] I think too much....I think what they need to do is to think about what they're doing a bit more because at the beginning of the year they sent home a booklet saying when we get our coursework and when it should be handed in and stuff but they've not actually kept to it so when you've got about 5 pieces of coursework to be done all at once and then the next moment there's nothing to do at all which is silly.'

Some felt that they needed a sense of pressure:

They're not putting that much pressure on you, they're just putting a bit to like....all they're trying to do is get you a grade higher really.

Things pupils value about the school

Teachers who try to make lessons interesting were valued, as were the teachers who 'help you when you're stuck':

I think it's teachers. Like they come to you and you tell them you're stuck and they go through it with you and then they help you with it mostly 'cos I did a practice test for science the other day and she went through all the tests and she helped you with all the questions and I think that's what helps you most.

Teachers who are generally good at encouraging and praising pupils who work hard.

The supportive strategy for a pupil who was experiencing difficulties with anger management was valued.

The School council was thought to be a good idea and effective.

Sports facilities are very good.

Group work, especially drama, was appreciated.

Ideas for improving learning

Students voiced a need for more individualised information from teachers about what needs to be done in order to get a higher grade in individual subjects.

Students also voiced a need for more 'active' styles of learning (like drama).

Tests only once a year rather than spread out would help.

Quieter classroom environments would help.

Fewer tests or exams on one day would help.

Just prior to meeting the students, the teachers had met amongst themselves and said, 'Well, what do we make of what the students have had to say in these interviews?' They were amazed, intrigued, really involved, loved the work and loved the feedback from the pupils as well. And so they said, 'Right, what do we want to get out of the day?' They decided it was essentially to find out what inhibited children, to find out how certain things work, to find out about seating arrangements, to find out the ambience of the room. They were very mindful, the staff, about how there was some connection between an undeserved lack of status that Humanities held within the school and the size, the smallness, of the building they were in - how it looked, the aesthetics of the place - and they wanted to do something about it but they wanted the students to tell them what they could do. They wanted to empower the students to meet and decide how to improve their environment in that block, which is what has happened. That came as a by-product of the research we've been doing.

The day itself was wonderful, absolutely brilliant - how teaching should be every day! The atmosphere was relaxed. Everybody was respectful of each other. We said, 'First name terms. Don't shout our name down the corridor later on in school because we might object, but today it's first name terms'. And we said, 'Right, how do you want to work?' It was up to them. We showed them the key areas that we had identified from what they'd told us in the interviews and proposed that these might be the things to talk about if that's what they wanted. But they basically managed the day and took over. And it was brilliant. We worked round the table, we worked in pairs. They did some discussion work amongst themselves, discussion work with us.

I know from talking to them that they thought the conference was brilliant too. But what did you think were the kind of outcomes of that that were most exciting?

It's like having paint guns which fire splashes of paint wherever they're pointed. It would be good to audit where the dabs have landed, because they're everywhere and it's really changed the ethos.

But back to the conference. The students decided that they wanted to do certain things as far as the aesthetics of the block were concerned. They wanted to know, if they were going to improve things, *how* were they going to improve? Specifically, they wanted to know what revision was and what it meant for the various subjects. The Head of Year took this on board and held an open evening for students and parents about target-setting and study skills and about reaching potential in different subjects. Heads of departments stood up in turn and took five or ten minutes to say, 'If you want to improve in my subject, revision looks like this. These are the key tips and hints.' We learnt a lot about each other and how we taught. But then, you see, that's another dash of paint as well.

The Head of Year put on a Study Skills Weekend as well for students. Some parents came too. Because we as teachers all say something like, 'You've got to work harder, try harder, and you've got to revise', but we don't say what that looks like, what it actually involves. And the students on that day talked about what it feels like when you get your book back and it's been marked. Has it been marked? Are your books generally marked, up-to-date? How do you feel about your relationships with members of staff? How do you feel about what they write about your work and your targets? And so we went right down to the nitty-gritty as far as target-setting was concerned. And we sensed that the students didn't really understand - just like a lot of staff - what the whole process of target-setting was about.

I'll tell you what I was really struck by. I can remember my first interview with your students, and there was one girl who said, "Oh well, I want to be a hairdresser, you know, that's my target. I want to be a hairdresser. Actually I've got a job already. Doesn't really matter what I do in exams. Doesn't matter at all, my job's there. But you know, I come to school, I do what I'm supposed to do." But you just realise that some people's actual targets are very personal, aren't they?

Of course they are. Maybe she's one of those students whose target grade is going to be something like an E or an F and yet for her to achieve that is fantastic. But it's because it's E and F, it sounds quite a long way down the alphabet doesn't it? So how do we involve words as well as just grades? Well, we're going to talk to them! That's the next stage.

The other thing I loved in these interviews was the one who said, 'Well I'm getting better than my official target grades already, so I've made up my own ones.'

At the moment, you as an ordinary classroom teacher can't change the official target grades and neither can the pupil! But all this is a start and things are getting better. And it's surprising how many senior staff are now coming round to this way of thinking. We had a meeting a little while ago and a deputy was doing some work on a chart about people who were involved in target setting. So I just looked round and got out my pen and put 'pupils' at the bottom. I got the, 'Oh, it's her and pupils again' look. But more and more people are coming on board.

What the students had to say about the whole-day consultation process

It's been good, the fact that we've got a voice finally. Because although the school council's supposed to give us one, it always seems to get over-run by teachers coming in and taking over.

No-one even knows it exists. Only the people in it.

I actually got my views across. People actually sat there and listened to you.

I enjoyed the food - it was brilliant! No, the day out [was what was good], actually. The feeling that it wasn't 'they're the teachers and we're the students'. We were all at the same level for that day. You didn't feel that you couldn't say nothing just because of your teacher. And I think after the students had been out with the teachers on that day they had a better relationship with them. A lot less tension and easier-going.

It needs more times when we all spend time together. I think that would do a lot. And the pupils knowing what points they've put across have actually been done, know what's going on instead of not knowing.

We were talking about bullying and that but bullying hasn't been going on since we had that talk, so that's helped. The word gets out when you're talking about it to each other and people have obviously heard and it's stopped. We were trying to get year 11s to talk to year 9s and year 8s, so it's like a little help club really and we were trying to get the boys, ask them why they were doing it; well, they've heard about that and stopped. So it's quite good actually.

[I've enjoyed] all of it. It's really good. We go to these meetings and we just say what we want. The teachers are just listening to us. They don't go, 'Yeah, tell me later' and just leave it on the bottom of the pile. They just listen to you.

I think it's been good because you've actually been able to say what should happen but saying it and it actually happening is a different thing.

Someone is actually listening to you and taking you seriously enough to listen to you.

I enjoyed the day out with all the free food! And trying to change the way for future pupils.

I'm not really a good lad at school. But if you get to know the teachers like this then you know they're alright and that you can go to them if you need some help.

I don't think it's had any impact yet but hopefully in the future it will. I hope it will because my brother's just started in year 7 and I want the best for him really. Little things like target setting and how to do your best because it's not really been happening very well so far.

I don't really see a future for it. It's one of those sort of things that people forget about.

What you're doing is actually swimming against the tide. Maybe what you're managing to do is something difficult - to introduce something that is dynamic and worthwhile in an environment that actually isn't always conducive to it. What are the changes?

One change is that Humanities has now got two advanced skills teachers and is more highly valued than previously. We've got Study Skills Weekends too. So those things are already there, and they might not have been without the work by the students. The School Council has been reinvigorated and the Head has decided that they've got to be involved on a school development planning level. And staff have become more involved too. The students have just devised their own questionnaire on community affairs and after school activities. That's something the School Council have led.

Can I come back to Student Council in a minute, because I think one of the things that we haven't yet covered is just the impact of the second stage of what you've been doing with the other students, your selected group. Can you tell me a bit about that?

Well, I fed back the students' comments to staff and the students were involved in taking it to the next stage and feeding their ideas back to senior management. And suddenly it was all about, "Well how many students are involved? There are only nine." And I said, "Yes, these are just the views of nine students." But it really unsettled some people and one Senior Manager started to say, 'Well, who's involved here? And where is all this going, where is it all going?' Nobody knows how it's going to end, that's the thing. I thought, ooh, it really needles! It's only nine students, and should we listen to nine students? And that's when you know which side of the fence people are on. So there are all these people mid-stream at the moment and they don't really want to moor on either bank. And there are some who just stick their necks out and are definitely on the students' side and promote it who really believe in what they're doing.

I was always very impressed by the way that, although they did say things that were critical, they were very balanced. Nothing was said in hostility or anger. Nothing was said irresponsibly. So there may be only nine students involved but look at the maturity with which they've tackled the task.

That's right. One of the students would probably have been excluded in the normal run of things and I'm sure being involved in this has helped to keep him on track. And maybe you can extract from that some principles too. You can see the sorts of things that made a difference to him - very simple things, like the fact that he could see the teachers actually treating him as a human being, trusting him. And then there's one of the girls who was experiencing a lot of problems in growing up and wanted to be very independent. She found us completely boring, as a lot of students do who really want to be in charge of their own learning. And I think the way that she reacted and the fact that she was on board throughout was good for her because she was one who probably would have just walked, not bothered coming in or under-achieved if she had. Another benefit is that now I've talked to School Council members about how they would like to be involved as researchers.

Isn't there a conflict between these unelected researchers who have so much that's interesting to say and the elected School Council? How do you bridge that gap?

That's what I'm trying to do. There are two representatives from each of twelve classes in a year group who have meetings. And from those meetings the School Council members are chosen. And it looked at one stage like things were going to be really positive, and the agenda that they would be leading would be reaching out to every child in every classroom. But it's not. And so I've said to them, 'How do you feel about being involved from September onwards as researchers?' I've also been on the website to get ideas from other schools, and it's amazing isn't it? Some of them have been doing this sort of work for years and have dealt with this issue, that issue, the other issue. So we need to set up links, I think, with some of the good practice that's out there. I've pulled things off the web about how to set up research and move it forward, because we're trying to be a learning school. I want to try and give pupils' research credibility, not just by being nine of them, but by it being a whole-school thing. That's what I want to try and build.

Now one issue that came up at a Senior Management meeting the other night was about sanctions systems. I said, 'Why not, if we've got a school Code of Conduct, take that to the students?' And I'm thinking, this is what we could launch September with, take this to students and say, 'How do we actually make this happen? Draw up a Rewards and Sanctions Policy for us. Consult with everybody in school. You'll have some proper time, you'll have some proper credibility'. It's the ideal way, actually, as a pretext, of raising the whole issue of what students consider to be acceptable. And they're very fair, are children and very tactful too. I've always found that. You know, they might not like what's happening, but they're not antagonistic to people, apart from those that they see as really unjust and they will be vehement about that. But they want to be treated, respectfully. You can write as many rules as you want, but unless they feel ownership of it...

I've got this image - I like to remember things by images - and I remember the paint. So in my own mind, I can physically go round and look at splats of paint all over people, and over buildings and rooms and departments. And I think, 'Just keep going! It's the students that matter. It's about transforming learning, transforming structures, transforming management, transforming lessons, transforming everything.'

So what does the Head, John Baumber, make of the project? What impact has it had on the school and on his thinking about the whole issue of student voice? We interviewed him on the same day as Ingrid Cox and what follows is an edited version of his response:

We've had some very interesting discussions at Senior Management level about the project and I think if we were to do it again we'd want to make sure that everybody understood more of its purpose and its research base. When you start something like this, I think people need to own it in order not to dismiss it - because some of the things that are coming out are quite painful to hear. You clearly don't necessarily agree with everything that's presented to you just because a student's said it, but if you're not careful, people start looking for reasons to discredit work like this. I think that's what we went through with the early part of the discussion about target-setting. It's a small sample of students and therefore to be able to take broad conclusions from it was difficult, particularly when one of the Senior Managers had already worked extremely hard to develop the target-setting and learning approach that was being commented on.

But what it has done is stimulate a debate within the school about pupil and staff voice, which is something that we're very very keen to have within the school. I'm really at a loss, I have to say, like most people, to know the best way of harnessing pupil voice. But what it's done, the research and the evidence so far, is it has given us an opportunity to think through some of the issues around pupil voice in a much more constructive way.

I've been a Head for fifteen years now and I haven't yet found a model that I'm comfortable with about genuinely giving students an effective voice. I think we need to find different models that work. I think we probably need the formal Council because that's the inclusive way of making sure that all students are represented. And the times that it's worked really well have been when there's been high levels of staff intervention, but it's only worked well in terms of communication, not necessarily in getting the view of students. On the other hand, when staff step back, you hear the students' voice but it doesn't go anywhere. So it's a model that I don't think gets us to where we want to be. Whereas having the research group, where you're actually dealing with specific issues, and then having a focus group that could actually respond is a model that might give us some very different sort of answers to the ones we necessarily want to hear. We still don't seem to get past the level of having a representative of the student body on the Governors. And maybe it satisfies you because you've got somebody there, but it doesn't make one jot of difference at the end of the day. Whereas if we could have an active research group...

There was an issue in your interviews with students about teachers seeming to have different rules. That's something that we're working at really hard at the moment. I'm sure that currently when people use their discretion students get different messages depending on who's standing by the door on any particular day. And those little things just bug them, and lead to conflict. So I suppose that although I knew that, what the research has done is bring it home to me. We wouldn't have had that debate about, 'Should we ask the youngsters about it? This is just basic discipline isn't it? Why do we need to ask them about that?' So I think that sort of debate about pupil voice is something that we wanted to do, but which this project has encouraged.

What about the impact of the project on target-setting?

We've changed the process this year to involve students in the process of setting the target rather than it simply being an objective minimum target grade. We will still generate the minimum target grade which is based on the expectation, but the student will then go through a process with his or her form teacher of negotiating the target. So that will be owned.

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