

Communicating...

Consulting Pupils Project Newsletter

No 12 February 2004

Particularly Primary

In this issue, we present three different approaches through which teachers have aimed at extending and developing pupil voice in primary schools. The first of these accounts, which follows, is taken from Jean Rudduck's interview with Alison Peacock about her work on pupil voice. Alison is now a Headteacher at another school, but her story here relates to Wheatcroft, her last school, where she was Deputy Headteacher.

I think it really started from my role in working with children with special needs. I had a student called Claudia who didn't have any speech; she was a child with severe learning difficulties and I worked with her just for a couple of hours a week. When I started, she was about 7 Years old and she hadn't learnt how to read. She was in a mainstream classroom but had been left with her classroom assistant to take what she could from what was going on. When I started working with her one-to-one, with the classroom assistant, I had to learn sign language while *she* tried to learn to read. We learnt together and she was a child who taught me so much about the potential power of pupil voice because she had a lot to say in her own way, a lot to teach me about what she needed in order to learn effectively. We went on a journey together in our learning and as a result of her increased confidence - at last someone was listening to her and responding to her and she was feeling good about herself because she was learning - she also began to become physically more confident - she had been told she never would be able to walk. There was one very moving occasion: all the reading books were kept at the end of a long corridor. She'd finally managed to stand alone without holding anybody's hand and also take a few steps and on this day she actually walked by herself from the classroom all the way to the reading books. And as she went past each class, the children realised what she was doing and stood up and applauded her. She was very lopsided, but the sense of achievement on that child's face will stay with me forever - and the feeling that

there's a limitless potential if children are given the opportunity to communicate how they need to learn.

How did it develop from Claudia?

Well, at the time I was studying for my MEd and my focus was early childhood studies, 3-13 and also special needs. I had young children of my own at the time, so I was only teaching part-time. When I went back into full-time teaching my youngest daughter was four and I went to work in a very small school - only about 20 children in the class, but their ages ranged between 4 and 7 - and I began to apply the principles I'd learned from Claudia: I had to treat them like individuals because they were individuals; you couldn't work with them as a whole class, so that built up those skills, I guess. From there I moved to Wheatcroft as SENCo and Year 3-4 teacher. I chose it because it was a school that had a very friendly ethos, very child-centred. And the head's message was that the most important thing was that the children were happy and that there was mutual respect between children and staff. I thought, 'Yes, this is what I believe in, this is where I want to work'.

At the time they had a school council chaired by the head teacher. One of the governors would attend, the school caretaker attended, there were representatives from each class. My role, as a class teacher, was to work with my class, talk about whatever the agreed issue was and then feed it back through our class rep to the school council. But it became obvious to me that this wasn't a terribly effective form of democracy, although it looked as if it was. The children who were chosen as the class representatives were the most articulate children; they weren't necessarily the children that were best at representing the views of their peers. And the school council didn't really have a very high profile as far as the everyday running of the school was concerned; it was

a marginal activity and the children didn't see it as important. There was almost a feeling of, 'Oh well, that's them saying that, it's not us,' and yet it should represent everybody's view.

I'd become involved in a post-graduate research project and I had a researcher who would come into my room and look at my ways of working with the children and promoting individuality and not labelling children by ability and not prejudging outcomes. As a member of the school management team, I was beginning to have more of a whole-school approach. Then I applied for the deputy headship, and got the job, and one of the things that goes with deputy headship is you do assemblies. And so I thought, 'Right, what am I going to do in these assemblies that's going to be worthwhile and meaningful?' In the meantime, the school council died really. It just petered out and I was increasingly interested in obtaining the views of the children (I was now KS2 coordinator). And I thought, 'Well, if I can work with the children in my own class, what wonderful potential there must be out there to actually work with other children across Key Stage 2.' I began to ask them in assemblies about school and their perceptions of school and the ways in which we could work together to make changes. There were about 120 children aged between 7 and 11. Generally staff would take that precious time to go and do something else and it would be me and the children in the hall. I started off by asking them how they thought the school could be improved and initially they were very loyal; I think you'll find this very often. They say they think the place is great, but it's also about the fact that the children very often aren't asked. They haven't got the language to

discuss issues to do with education because it's teacherspeak and there's a kind of unwritten rule that you don't criticise if you're the child, because it's your role to be done unto. And I began to chip away at those barriers. At about the same time, Michael Fielding had approached me and asked if I'd be involved in the TLRP project. So that also gave me an added impetus, because I'd got another outside body that was going to be listening to whatever we found out and that's important.

Back to the assembly for a moment; how did you conduct it? On a stage with 120 or did you have a few up on the stage with you?

There was no stage. I'd be sitting on a low chair, the children would be sitting on the floor, I'd have something like a flip chart, and I'd say to them, 'OK, well, today I want us to think about transition from Year 2 into Year 3. Who can remember what it was like?' One of the children would come out and be scribe. Or I might say to a couple of children, 'Try and remember what it was like when you were in Year 2.' It was very much discussion-based, very participative. It was very much a matter of 'let's work together, this is a whole-school issue we could make some progress on. What do *you* think? How can we improve things?' I would take suggestions from the children and then we would have a show of hands as to whether that was something we wanted to carry forward.

One of the things we did was talk about what makes a good teacher. I wanted to get to the nub of what they felt good teaching was all about. There were a lot of children in the room and I needed to know what they all thought, so we did a sort of brainstorming and the next week children in my class had written out the different qualities, put them on different pieces of paper and then, when it was our turn for assembly, we Blu-tacked all round the hall the different qualities of a good teacher. And I said, 'Now this is a bit of a risk. There's 120 of you and there's only one of me and some people would say I was completely barking mad, but what I'm going to ask you to do is to come and get a felt pen and write on these pieces of paper on the wall.' They had to put a 1, 2 or a 3, for the most important quality, second and third, and all of the children did that. They walked round as if it were an art gallery; they studied all the different qualities that they'd come up with the week before. We took the data away; my class collated them and put them onto an Excel graph, linked it

into subjects and then we fed back to the staff and to the other children in the school. The quality that the children

thought was most important was that the teachers trusted *them* and, second, that they could trust the teacher. That whole issue of trust is absolutely crucial and, well, I was trusting the children when I said to them, 'Here you are, have the felt pens.' They knew that I knew that they weren't going to muck around and therefore it worked.

I'd already found in my classroom that as a teacher you say things like, 'Well, today we're going to study poetry and we're going to look at blah-di-blah,' and if the children feel that it's ok to come up and say, 'I've thought about what we're doing this morning and is it ok if I do it this way?' Or is it all right if I include this? I've got an idea, could we maybe paint this, rather than write it?' most of the time I will try and listen to what they're asking me. 'I'm here to try and help you and if you've got a different way of interpreting this which means a lot to you, then let's work in that way.' And I think if you can build that relationship ... it's important to be aware that different children learn in different ways, but, more importantly, I think it's important to be aware that if you've established the right relationship, children are actually able to explore their own learning alongside you as a teacher.

When we became involved in the research project, I led a morning's inset with the staff talking about the issues associated with pupil voice and whether or not we felt that was something we wanted to commit ourselves to. And staff thought it was a good idea. One of the things the children came up with early on was that they would like a more exciting playground and I thought, 'Oh, I don't want to be doing the playground. I want them to tell me about how to teach maths or reading.' But the children hadn't got the feeling that that was their territory. But the playground very definitely *was* their territory and they'd got a lot of opinions they wanted to express, so we went with it.

In fact, the PTFA at that time had raised some money and the head was able, fortuitously, to say, 'Well, yes, I *would* like to develop the outside grounds, I've been thinking about it for a while; there are some funds here.' And so we did and, because there was an immediate impact in terms of what the children were asking for, that really gave momentum to the whole process. We could though, at that stage, still have taken it away from the children; we could have said, 'Oh yes, you want to develop the playground, we've got some good ideas and this is what we're going to do', but we didn't do that at all. Looking back, that was a strength because the children came up with some wacky ideas that the adults would never have thought of; for example, they wanted a digging pit which would be most mothers' idea of a nightmare, but in actual fact it's just a self-

contained area where they can dig with little trowels and sticks and find bugs or fossils and they don't get muddy. They said they wanted a bug world, an area of garden with plants that attract insects and also big stones, so they could lift stones and uncover creepy-crawlies and look at them with magnifying glasses. And they wanted a stage where they could perform their dances - it's only raised from the ground about nine inches, but it's separate from the other places where they would be. They wanted a 'sad' area, somewhere to go and be quiet sometimes, and that became what we subsequently called our sensory garden and the children designed the garden with a landscape gardener who came in voluntarily to work with them. It was completely open. And the children wrote to local garden centres and people and said, 'Please can you help us?' But again it wasn't an adult-led agenda and I do think that's important. We moved forward; a lot of the parents got involved. The results were phenomenal - so much was achieved, and I think the children really did have a feeling that this pupil voice stuff is good, it really can work. It's real!!

And then one of the early years staff said, 'How can we get Key Stage I and Foundation children involved in all of this?' So we decided to use our circle time groups and mix up the ages. The staff who were involved were really fired up. I said, 'I don't want to present it to the staff because it's always coming from me. See what you can do.' So the next staff meeting, Jane proposed that, instead of having an assembly on one day a week, we could have mixed-age circle groups. It was like a Trojan horse, because it meant that everyone automatically then had to be involved, because you had a circle group coming to your room and you had to talk about the issues that had been decided for that week. It was teacher-led to start with but I put it to my Year 6 class, 'Do you think you could have a go at leading these groups?' Again, the staff agreed. And off they went; it was a great success and the staff and children alike were impressed and pleased. I think the younger children probably spoke more in that time than they ever had done before because it was their peers who were leading it and they look up to Year 6 like nobody's business. And it then went from strength to strength with Year 5 minuting - when I say minuting, it sounds very grand, but what they would do basically is use note-taking and where else in the curriculum do they get the chance to do real note-taking? It's all real-life stuff! And they would take notes of what had happened in their group and then bring them back to Year 6 and Year 6 would see what emerged.

Our peer teaching is an extension of the circle time group. The Year 6s were leading the circle groups and feeling, 'Oh yes, we

like this! We could probably run the school if you gave it to us!' I suggested that we have a maths morning which they could plan and lead. This was post-SATs and any Year 6 teacher will tell you that once the SATs have come and gone you need to have a few little things up your sleeve to keep children motivated and wanting to learn. They thought that was a great idea, the staff were quite happy. The Year 6 children, in groups of two and three, met together to plan out activities they thought they could teach to the children - mixed age classes between 4 and 10, in groups of about 25. They wanted activities to do with shape that the children would enjoy doing and which they could also learn from. The ideas that the Year 6 children had were fantastic, and when you think about it, they've been consumers all their lives, so of course they know what activities they like doing. They came up with all kinds of things, like a shape trail where the children all had to go round and find things, and painting and tessellation - they had to prepare the materials and then they taught the groups

and we evaluated the lesson from the children's point of view by asking them about the experience the following week.

With the Year 6's, I led a circle group meeting after they'd carried out this teaching and asked them about the experience and it was really exciting to hear their comments. They'd said things like, 'It's much more difficult teaching than I thought it would be; it's hard to be able to plan activities for everybody. What do you do when somebody finishes? You want to keep people interested all the time but sometimes it's hard.' They really showed an empathy with the teaching process which I feel was valuable. We've now done a geography morning and 97% of children said they'd learned something that morning and they'd really enjoyed it.

On the whole, staff have been fairly cooperative and even staff that had reservations about it have gone with things like the circle group and they haven't made a fuss and said, 'But that's my curriculum

time and please don't eat into it.' We haven't had any of that, there hasn't been that negativity. But of course there are some staff who have taken on board the principles behind pupil voice more than others. One teacher was initially quite put out but when I said that I was leaving Wheatcroft. She was one of the first to say, 'But what about pupil voice? We must make sure it continues' and I think that's a wonderful affirmation. But I still think it comes as quite a shock, because the reality of the partnership approach to teaching is not easy. It's something that's taken me a long time - all my teaching career I've been working towards doing this and I'm still working towards it. I don't think it's something that you can just walk in the door and get sorted. The children need to know where the parameters are. It's based on structure: the children know what your expectations are. They know for example that I do a lot of work on building teams. It's all to do with respecting each other, understanding the principles of the way in which we work.

Kaye Johnson has been a headteacher of two Australian primary schools and here she identifies some of the strategies that helped her to build, over time, a whole school commitment to listening to students. The comments are taken from the transcript of an interview with Jean Rudduck in September 2003.

- Developing a habit of talking about learning is important and for the final 15 minutes of every day, teachers in the school reviewed, with the children, what they had done and what they had learned. Each child would rehearse with his or her partner one or two things they had enjoyed learning – so that they could go home and tell their parents. It also helped them to recognise what they had learned and to be able to talk about their learning.

- When you are doing something innovative it is important to make sure that parents know what lessons are like. For one parents' evening, 'activity stations' were set up where teachers would do 5-10 minutes of a typical (or model) lesson with a small group of children. Parents observed the lesson and were then able to ask the children questions. All children in the year group were involved in some way in the evening – and they had also helped plan it. One of the students' ideas was to make yellow footprints for the floor to guide parents from one activity station to the next.

- It matters that students can have a say about everyday matters that are important to them. Every class in the school had its own 'Meeting' where practical issues, such as noise and seating, could be discussed and solutions collaboratively found to problems. A 'Meeting' might set up its own student research group to gather more information on a particular topic.

- Involving as many students as possible

was one of our concerns. In one school, ten student committees were set up each linked to an area of school life that students thought important; for instance, there was a playground committee, a rewards committee, a canteen committee and so on. One child from each class was on a committee and one teacher was attached to each committee. The children were expected to report back to others in their class.

- At parents' evenings, groups of children from the committees would present the outcomes of some of their 'Students as Researchers' enquiries; parents were impressed at the businesslike and confident way that the children had tackled the problems, explored solutions and presented their summaries.

- Working parties were also established to deal with specific problems that flared up - such as a sudden spate of stealing. The meetings were always chaired by the head. The student representation on these was matched to anticipated levels of interest and commitment.

- Another idea that worked was to train middle years students as 'Ambassadors'. They were helped to look at the school from the perspective of a visitor and to think what visitors might want to know. The training sessions provided information as well as ways of escorting visitors round the school and answering their questions. Students also became involved in managing information sessions for parent

evenings – where parents would ask the questions; these often focused particularly on changes in the school's physical resources and the intention behind the changes (such as why there were photos of teacher-student committees and how the green 'comment box' was used). One advantage of course was that the students themselves developed a good understanding of what the changes were about and why they were being introduced.

- Then there was the Values Project: the school had four basic Values – Respect, Trust, Fairness and Collaboration. Two or three different topics were attached to these values each term or year (such as, the environment, or homework). Four Values groups were set up, one for each Value with one child from each class as members. These groups decided on a particular way of linking the topic and the Value and conducted practical enquiries into aspects of their topic: for instance, how to respect the school environment by finding ways of reducing litter.

NB Kaye Johnson believed that teachers would not work well on student consultation and participation until the teachers felt that they were valued and that their voices were listened to and taken seriously by their senior management team.

Pen or Pencil? - On Opening Up Pupil Choices

Avril Vaughan works as a Deputy Headteacher at a primary school in Stoke. In this interview with Nick Brown, she talks about her work with a small group of pupils undertaken as part of Project 6, led by Julia Flutter.

My school is a primary school in Stoke on Trent, so it's in an urban area, and it has about two hundred and sixty pupils at the moment, with an interesting mix.

As part of Project 6, I've been working with a small group of children in Year 5. They were definitely a group that lacked confidence when I first met them in September. They were children who had been overshadowed all along and they were lost. They looked lost in September. I asked them then to list the choices they'd got and the only choice they could come up with in September was pen or pencil! You know? They have no choice over anything. And that was even in my class! And I was astounded because I thought that there I was, a liberal-minded teacher who was concerned about learning. And what choices did I give them?

Originally it was with only twelve children, but it's been impacting across all the different age-groups. My project is to take these twelve children (I have two sessions a week with them) and to give them choice and to see what impact that has on their learning - and their attitudes to learning - at the end of the year. I'd already done a project with learning objectives and self-assessment, but I wanted to see what else I could do with this particular group of children. And as I went through with this notion of giving them choice, I realised that I had become more adventurous, not just them!

I started off with providing them with choices in literacy, because I was interested in their language skills. So, for example, I gave them a playscript with no characters and no setting; they read it through and then the first choice was just to choose the name of a character that fitted with what they'd heard. Now I look back on that I think, 'Well, that wasn't really much of a choice, was it!' I think I was pretty nervous to start with! But they really liked it and then the different settings they chose were all valid. Next lesson, I just took a handful of newspapers and spread them all out over the classroom and said, 'Just cut some words out'. When they'd done that, I asked them to make up their own headlines and think of a story that went with those headlines - which was really quite daunting for this particular group of children. They cut away with fervour! But then they had to stick them together to make sense and that was much harder because the group I'm working with is the group that has been targeted as not likely to achieve level 4 at Year 6. None of them had support but I felt they were a group that were being neglected and that we should do something special with them.

After that I was doing something about instructions, so I took them into the library and asked them to choose a book that had a set of instructions that fitted certain criteria - and, apart from giving me a real idea of their library skills, it also enabled them to choose things that suited themselves - photography, making cakes, whatever. They kept saying, 'You choose for us' and I would say, 'No, no, I want you to decide and you can explain why you've come to your decision'. And the nice thing is, they are now much more easy about making choices. I mean, I suppose they still wouldn't wander in to the library unless I suggest it to them - and if I say, 'It might be a good idea to look in the library,' then, of course, they all get up and run in! But then they wouldn't go of their own volition normally and the reason I've targeted them is I want to get them to think for themselves more and that's what we're working towards.

I've also during this project made a point of directing them to the choices they have over whether to use IT or not to facilitate learning in all sorts of different ways, particularly in literacy whenever they need to draft or edit. I have a computer suite and they each have a computer as well as access to different writing programmes. They don't always take the opportunities! Some of them have become aware of the fact that a lack of keyboard skills can actually hamper their efforts and have come to choose pen and paper for preference. It means they can take things home and work on them too. And in IT, I give them access to different programmes too: 'These are the programmes that might help you; which do you think is going to help you the most?' Most of them chose the one that was the most familiar format. Only one chose one that was different.

The only other thing I've done is, having run out of ideas on choices, I then said to them, 'Well, what choices do you want?' 'Choices of visitors,' they said. One asked for a man to help with his reading. They all wanted someone from the local paper to tell them about writing news reports. 'And can we have some actors?' they said. So I organised a visit by the local investigative journalist and then we did a workshop with the Victoria Theatre, (which was entitled 'Choices').

I've noticed in general they tend to choose what they're most comfortable with, incidentally, rather than go for a challenge. Though one said the other day, 'Oh Miss, don't make us choose. It means we've got to work harder.' They also tend to choose as a group, though, interestingly, it is different ones each time, and sometimes surprising ones, who choose to go out on a limb.

Their self-esteem has improved through all this. They're much more positive than they were.

C ontacts:

Project co-ordinator: Jean Rudduck

Network co-ordinator: Nick Brown

Network secretary: Nichola Daily

Faculty of Education,
University of Cambridge,
Homerton Site,
Hills Road,
Cambridge
CB2 2PH

phone (+44)01223 742010
fax (+44) 01223 742013
e-mail nd241@cam.ac.uk

www.consultingpupils.co.uk