

Focus on ... a school working with Project 4

Ratton is an 11-16 school in Eastbourne which has been working on Project 4 - the Students as Researchers project - since January. Elaine Buchanan, Staff Development Co-ordinator and Deputy Head at Ratton writes here about the project:

We chose year 8 students as our researchers as this year group had been identified as the "lost" group between the excitement of year 7 and the focus provided by exams in year 9. We also liked the idea of investing in developing expertise with one of the younger year groups.

Eighteen year 8 students who displayed good interpersonal skills, were popular with their peer group and had shown themselves to be reliable and committed in past work were chosen by staff. Two INSET sessions, one to students and one to staff, were held on the purposes and principles of the "Student Voice" project. Students, accompanied by three teachers, attended a one-day training course at Sussex University on conducting research.

Going to the university was exciting for the students, none of whom had been to a university campus before. The training raised key issues such as conducting interviews, constructing meaningful questionnaires and focusing the research. It was impressive to watch the students responding to the demands of the day, as the learning and discussion opportunities allowed them to display their potential. As one outcome, students identified a range of research possibilities based upon their experience of classroom teaching and learning.

On return to the school, students formed three groups and worked with their teachers to refine their research questions – on what makes a good teacher and a good lesson

and on mixed ability versus setting. The work was explained to teachers in staff meetings and to students in

assemblies. As we had involved many staff from the outset, it was easier for students to carry out their research by observing lessons; staff did not see this as a threat. The outcomes are currently being analysed.

"I want to know if what we found out is actually good enough. I want to show it to the teachers and see if we can get an improvement and see if they take what we found out and start doing it in their lessons?" Rachel, yr8

Students have now met with our new head-teacher to discuss their initial findings. He is very keen that their work should continue and will be using their findings in the school development planning process. They have also conveyed their findings to their peer group in a year assembly (receiving warm applause for their work) and to parents at awards evenings. They have managed well in winning support for their work partly by keeping others so well informed.

We hope to continue with the project at Ratton School by encouraging the students to cascade their expertise to new year 8 students. At Ratton, we have a student council, but up until now students have not had a voice in the area of curriculum development. The work carried out by year 8 has shown that the students as the

"Any research around their learning is going to increase their understanding of their learning and of course ours. It's the consumer insight, which we don't normally get in any systematic way, and children do see themselves as a consumer force now". David Linsell, Principal

"receivers" of our teaching are an underused resource. Our students have shown themselves to be capable of conducting research with integrity and commitment and this has resulted in their views being seen as important and respected.

Conducting this work has also developed the students on an individual basis. The skills acquired as a result of being involved in the project will complement and contribute to their learning in many other subjects.

Chris Reene, a science teacher and Year 8 tutor at Ratton, adds:

The concept of using students to research aspects of their school is a wonderfully refreshing idea. After all, they are the best ones to raise concerns and highlight issues that are important to them about their working and social environment. The project has given ownership and empowerment to the students and a voice in the running of their school. They have collected data through questionnaires, teacher interviews and lesson observations, and we hope that the findings can be used by both students and staff to improve learning and teaching across the school. This is what I find so exciting; this research can make a positive difference to everyone. It's not about students picking holes in teachers, it's about achieving together.

Is 'as' the most important word?

Students-As-Researchers and Questions of Identity in Learning

Sara Bragg is a Research Fellow at the University of Sussex currently working on Project 3 (student perspectives and participation: starting and sustaining the process) and Project 4 (involving students as (co)researchers in the process of teaching and learning).

How do Students As Researcher (SAR) projects address questions of identity in relation to learning? Etienne Wenger¹ argues that "issues of education should be addressed first and foremost in terms of identities and modes of belonging and only secondarily in terms of skills and information". In his view, transformative and long-lasting learning comes about through experiences in which students feel able to take control of and to negotiate meaning, to explore aspects of their own identity - who they are or want to be. Elizabeth Ellsworth² suggests that successful pedagogies might work "because of the who that they are offering students to imagine themselves as being and enacting". She describes this as pedagogy's "mode of address", drawing on a media studies concept that analyses how TV programmes, for instance, construct specific identities for their imagined audiences which real viewers must then take up in order to make sense of the text's world.

If we approach Students As Researchers projects in this way, we might say that, traditionally, many young people feel that the school constructs them as passive, subordinate 'pupils' or 'children' whose role is to imbibe the knowledge communicated by the teacher. Recent classroom-level projects have sought to engage new identities for young people in order to make education relevant and meaningful, positioning them in more powerful roles - for instance, 'as' original archivists in local or oral history projects, or 'as' media producers in Media Studies practical work. The distinctive contribution of SAR projects to these innovations is that they work at the level of the processes of schooling themselves - addressing students as positively and uniquely knowledgeable about the organisation of teaching and learning. They assume them to be active agents able to bring about real-world change in their role as 'researchers' and in

most cases offer defined mechanisms by which such changes might be brought about. Further, supplying

the food and drink they prefer ("cake and coke", it seems!) at meetings, as often happens, may symbolise the school's acknowledgement that young people have identities, needs and wishes distinct from adults, and thus positively affect their willingness to become engaged.

Ellsworth argues that how we are addressed shapes who we can be, and here again, SAR work reveals a productive potential. Staff involved often express delight and amazement at what the process reveals about their students, commenting on their maturity, thoughtfulness and insight. Moreover, as projects develop, staff become more confident about inviting a broader range of students to join the work, and more often than not find that those previously considered problematic or 'troublemakers' make outstanding contributions. By addressing young people as committed and able, SAR projects make it possible for them to demonstrate these capacities.

Of course, students have probably always felt that schools underestimate their abilities; and the notion that people behave according to how they are treated is not new. But today young people grow up in a consumer culture that also attends to questions of identity and desire. Youth-oriented media, for example, invite their audiences to imagine themselves as active consumers who are well informed, sophisticated, wise, and in search of identities and meaningful 'lifestyles'. They reinforce this through market research techniques - the questionnaire, the survey, the opinion poll, focus group, the interview and so on - which all flatter the customer's knowledge and significance. When students develop their research methods, it is not surprising that they draw on these practices, which they have experienced themselves and which they feel confident about handling.

SAR thus valorises and mobilises informally-acquired student knowledges rather than only official, scholastic ones. It also brings the school's 'mode of address' to young people more in line with that of

consumer media culture, blurring the distinction between how they are required to behave as learners inside the school and as consumers out of it.

SAR entails changes in teacher identity too. Educators have, perhaps, assumed that they were entitled to respect and an almost unquestionable authority on the basis of their training, experience and expertise. Whilst we may admire such a concept of the duties and responsibilities of the professional which produced years of dedicated work by teachers, we have to acknowledge that it is losing its mandate as we come to expect more egalitarian relationships in all spheres of life. SAR work follows the precepts of consumer culture in implying that successful teaching requires teachers to be 'close to the customer', in tune with their wishes, rather than remote and paternalistic. Moreover, it provides a structured process that can help ease the transition to new teacher identities. Many teachers find they enjoy the opportunity it offers to develop more personal relationships with students and to work alongside them rather than in hierarchical and distanced ways. They take pleasure in talking to students about teaching and learning outside the daily grind of subject syllabus pressures - especially when they find out how much students have to say. As one teacher commented, "It's revitalising! It reminds me of what I thought this job was about when I first started it". Moreover, SAR work is a discipline in which students act in quasiprofessional ways through the conduct of their research projects; if teachers experience this as a genuine partnership they may be more willing to extend it.

¹Wenger, Etienne (1998) *Communities of Practice: learning, meaning, and identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

²Ellsworth, Elizabeth (1997) *Teaching Positions: difference, pedagogy and the power of address*, New York: Teachers' College Press

What Pupils Tell us about Choosing a Secondary School - *Isobel Urquhart*

“It’s two days since 11-year-old Frances heard she’d got into the secondary school she was hoping for, and she’s still walking on air.”
(*Guardian Education*, 20.3.01)¹

For a significant number of children, the experience of choosing a school is one of protracted anxiety. While the outcome might be happy for some, such as Frances, above, for many other children it is not. Difficulty in getting into the secondary school of your choice is not a situation to be found in all LEAs. We were asked to look at the issue in an inner-London LEA where there was a relatively large number of pupils who did not obtain places in their preferred secondary school at transfer.

The study ran from April 2000 to April 2001. Overall, 22 predominantly working class Year 6 girls and boys, from different ethnic backgrounds, were interviewed. Children disappointed by the results of the admissions procedure were selected by their teachers and were invited to take part in the project. In each of three schools, 4-6 children were interviewed in same-sex pairs, together with one pair who appeared to be satisfied with the admissions procedure.

We explored the children’s feelings about the schools they thought they might be going to as well as their knowledge and beliefs about the other schools in the frame and we asked them what they were looking forward to and what they were anxious about.

Responses to rejection

Well, I don’t think it’s fair really because my cousin, yeah, she got ten choices and all ten she failed. She’s like me. I feel like an orphan.

It kind of makes my work go down because it’s like because... I don’t really care because I’ve only got a school that’s rubbish. I don’t really care.

Far from feeling that they were able to choose a school, some of these children worried that no school would choose *them*. Some tried to conceal their anxieties about their uncertain destinations as if not having been picked for a school they had chosen made them ashamed of their own inad-

equacies, rather than it being the outcome of a highly competitive educational market. Children found various face-saving coping strategies for explaining the situation away:

All the schools do the same work really so it doesn’t really matter what school you go to because you just do the same thing there whatever school you go to.

[I feel] pretty upset but I’ll manage. I’ll probably get a private tutor off the Internet or something.

Handling the rejections was no easier for parents; some would keep back the news, trying to find the right moment to tell children that they had not been accepted and defusing the rejection by finding fault with the rejecting school: *“My mum said like it was good that I failed because she didn’t exactly like that school because her friend’s daughter went there and she got pregnant.”*

Given the dispiriting feelings of rejection, it was ironically striking that all the children interviewed were still committed to learning and to getting ‘a good education.’

I done a test...that was quite long and my head was aching but I don’t care if it hurts my head: the more education I get the more I’ll learn - so that’s what I need.

How children felt about going to the big school

I’ve heard that they teach you lots of things and that’s what I like about schools - when you have hard work.

Many of the children looked forward to the challenge of hard work at secondary school - so long as it wasn’t too hard. They did not want to be given easy work, or too little homework, both of which they saw as characteristic of schools holding low expectations of pupils. It was important to the children that secondary teachers would be strict enough to be able to create a safe environment in class and around the school that would protect them from bullying, as well as creating a studious atmosphere in the classroom. The children also revealed their palpable anxieties about the ‘demonised’ reputations of some of the

local comprehensive schools, and there was a wistful regret that they would not be going to schools with more idealised reputations:

I really want to go to secondary school. It’s just that I keep on hearing rumours, the ones that I want to go to, yeah, that people get stabbed and that and it just scares me...all these stories get you dazzled.

Hearing voices

Children’s voices have helped us understand, through responses that were frank and thoughtful, the real experiences behind the statistics – as well as the mythology of parental ‘choice’ of secondary school. We learned that it can be heartbreaking to be rejected by secondary schools that you have set your heart on; and that, despite that demoralising experience, children continue to value education and to express a commitment to learning. Until recently, however, the perspectives of these ‘expert witnesses’ (Rudduck, 1999)² have often been overlooked but these pupils are making perceptive and constructive contributions to the discussion of transfer.

Children themselves can, understandably, be sceptical about our interest. As one child commented at the end of her interview:

“You know you’ve asked us if there is anything we’d like to change? If there’s anything that they can do, will it happen?”

And that is the challenge.

*This work is the result of a separate satellite project run by Isobel Urquhart at Homerton College. A full version of this paper is published in *Forum*, Vol. 43, No.2, 2001, pp 83-86*

¹Moorhead, J. (2001) ‘Class Politics’, *Guardian Education*. March.

² Rudduck, J. (1999) *Teacher practice and the student voice in: M. Lang, et al. (Eds) Changing Schools/Changing Practices: Perspectives on Educational Reform and Teacher Professionalism*, pp. 41-54. Louvain: Garant.

Is yours a listening school?

In earlier issues of the Newsletter, we asked for your responses to three questions: Where are you on the ladder of pupil participation? Is yours a listening school? What are your pupils telling you?

Anne Laskowski, of the George Spencer School in Nottinghamshire and a member of the Network, writes here about using student perceptions to improve student learning.

A particularly useful and enjoyable short-term project that we tried out in school involved students in evaluating a whole school teaching and learning initiative. We specifically chose one year group - year 9 - for which each faculty would develop new learning materials. To aid evaluation, faculties were also asked that the materials be used within the spring and summer terms. My next step was to talk to year 9 in assembly, explaining that they were to be part of a research project in which their views would be important and would be shared with their teachers to help improve the learning materials. I asked for volunteers to join a student learning forum to investigate student perceptions. A group of eight students, of varying ability and character, came forward. They met at lunch times and devised a questionnaire to ascertain student opinions across all the subjects. At the same time, individual faculties built in their own student evaluations, either by interviews or questionnaires. Towards the end of the summer term the learning forum, using a team of friends, administered the questionnaire and collated and graphed the results. The office also typed up all the comments that were made in the open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire. These responses were surprisingly detailed and useful. I think this was because the students knew that we really did want their views and advice, that we were listening.

The results were reported back to year 9 in assembly by the learning forum. I was then able to use these and the results of the faculties' own student evaluations to report back to the whole staff at the INSET event devoted to evaluating the project. What I had, importantly, was specific information

from a student perspective, about what had worked well and what they felt could be improved. As a result of this many of the learning materials were changed and the points were taken into account when preparing new materials for another year group.

Of all the projects we have used, this has had the most student involvement. Others have been more teacher led and have included more student interviews. For example, one initiative used student interviews to identify perceptions of the preferred learning styles of boys and girls. This again was fed back to the staff to help improve whole school teaching and learning approaches.

Some initiatives have been based more on student questionnaires, such as the one to evaluate computer based distance learning materials. For this one the results were compared with the students' preferred learning styles. Some staff also use short questionnaires following units of work or learning activities in the classroom. All these have been very specific in their focus

and consequently have thrown up issues from the students which can be implemented relatively easily.

Another way we have tried to include student perceptions is during our faculty self evaluations. A common questionnaire was designed for use with all faculties. This has provided a different type of information. Through asking for perspectives on a range of whole school issues it has acted as a checklist to monitor the impact of the school's action points for improvement in the classroom and on the students.

Where next? We are currently developing a Learning to Learn curriculum for year 7. I definitely want students to evaluate this. I would like to take it a step further, however, and devise a way of allowing the Learning to Learn curriculum to respond to what *they* perceive as *their* learning needs. The aim of the new curriculum is to make them more aware of their learning and reflect upon the effectiveness of different ways of learning. I think it would be very powerful for them to be able to influence the development of the curriculum.

Reminder

A conference at which teachers will present their work with pupils - and which Lord Puttnam will attend - will be held, in Cambridge, on **Saturday March 16, 2002**. We are limited in the number of places we can offer at this conference, but if you would like **either** to attend **or** to present some aspect of the work you have been doing on pupil voice, please contact Nichola Daily.

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