

Focus on ...

Students as Researchers

The Students as Researchers initiative at Sharnbrook Upper School in Bedfordshire started in 1996. Louise Raymond writes here about the project. Louise is currently on secondment from Sharnbrook, where she was Deputy Head, and is leading the Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Partnership (www.bsip.net).

At Sharnbrook Upper School, students were trained in methods of research and enquiry and they then undertook work on behalf of the whole student body looking into issues that were important to *them*. Students generated data from a variety of different sources that enabled real school improvement to take place. As a part of Sharnbrook's Beacon school initiative, the student voice strand was a strong priority. As the project progressed, the sophistication of the methodology and variety of topics increased. External evaluation of the project proved to be extremely positive. The desire to develop a network of other Students as Researchers projects, both locally and further afield, became important.

Much student activity took place within the BSIP network in the academic year 2000/2001 culminating in a second student voice conference held at De Montfort University, where over two hundred and fifty students engaged in workshop activities focused on peer-led work and issues around the roles of student councils and students as researchers. Many of the upper schools looked creatively at designing Students as Researchers programmes to suit their individual needs, culture, climate and requirements. In the Spring Term 2001 our BPRS scholarship bid was successful, enabling us to network ten upper schools, thus involving a hundred and sixty students and twenty staff in Students as Researchers programmes; external facilitation of this initiative was an important factor. A training day, held in November 2001,

involving a number of different structured activities, with students involved in the planning and with consultancy

provided by the University of Nottingham, proved to be extremely exciting. In the ten schools, there is great variety in the areas of enquiry chosen by students, including lesson observation, teaching and learning strategies, curriculum planning, careers education, social facilities and transition and transfer. The BSIP team is excited about how this initiative will develop and it will be interesting to see at the conference in July 2002 how best to proceed with this project in the future.

Thomas Locke, a Year 11 student at Sharnbrook Upper School, writes:

Students as Researchers is a revolutionary scheme that I have had the honour to have been involved with for a year and a half. The project looks at issues within the school and its environment and is used to enable effective change. There are many groups in my school, each containing a number of students from years 9-13. Each group will spend a year researching a subject that is either decided by the group or from suggestions by students who are not involved directly in the scheme. At the end of the year, a report is written showing all that has been discovered from the year's work and we then hope that changes will be implemented as a result.

The project has been important to me personally in widening my experiences. It allows me to interact with the staff in a way that I never before believed possible, including having discussions with staff on an equal basis. It has allowed me to observe lessons whilst the teachers are teaching, an opportunity that would not have been possible before this work became embedded in the school. It enables me to voice my fellow students' opinions. The students work in the school as well, so why shouldn't they have a voice?

Before I joined the Students as Researchers scheme, if I was asked to give a speech to forty students I doubt I would have had the confidence to do so, but the project has given me the chance to achieve greater levels of self-confidence. I now find it easier to talk with a fellow student that I have never met before. Through cross-year group networking I am now also more confident around students who are older than me, a valuable skill.

Students as Researchers has also given me the opportunity to attend conferences and training days about sharing ideas about the scheme with other schools. As I have been involved with this work for a year and half I have been granted opportunities to change how it is organized within my school. Last year another student and I helped to plan the training day that helps the new researchers to learn about researching skills and several of us made presentations. I willingly give up my own time like this because I know that I am having an impact on my school. I am helping to make the changes that the students of my school want. It is such a good feeling to know that I am helping to improve the environment of many others and giving them the chance to achieve a better education. I feel I have become an advocate for my fellow students.

These projects are so important within a school. Within the coming years I would like to hope that many more schools will have their own Students as Researchers project. Without it they will miss opportunities for improvement and progress. The Students as Researchers projects will be vital for the success of schools in our future.

Using image-based techniques in researching pupil perspectives

Dr Pam Burnard is Senior Lecturer in Music and Arts Education in the Faculty of Education at Cambridge. She presented a version of this paper at the Network Project's Conference on 1 November 2001.

How the deepest discoveries require sometimes the briefest expression

Children know more than they know they know. They surely know more about what they know than the researcher does. Most of what they know, they know implicitly. Knowledge is not filed away in pupils' heads in answer form waiting for the stimulus of the perfect question to release it. No researcher has ever found out what it means to be a new age traveller's child or a foster child or a teenage mother by asking directly, 'What does it mean to be a . . . ?' The purpose of image-based techniques in interviews is to get them to represent what they know, feel and think about what they know - and to help them to talk.

The typical sit-down research interview is difficult to conduct with children. Why?

- Pupils will most likely not have had any experience with this particular form of interaction with you.
- Pupils can feel pressure either to give you the 'right' answer or one that will please you.
- Pupils can find it hard to respond to the question - and may not understand it.
- Pupils can be threatened by the question and can feel no leeway in how they answer.
- Pupils are less familiar with, and feel less competent in, interviews.

How can we release the realities of pupils experiences? As researchers, we have to take the simple but all important step of using unusual, even new research tools - instruments without sharp edges but with a powerful zoom lens which will give authentic insights into pupils' perspectives.

Image-based techniques

Image-based techniques are a powerful way of accessing the thinking of a diverse group of pupils and exploring edges of possibility in their struggle to create and represent meaning. So let us

consider some of the image-based techniques that qualitative researchers have used with the discovery and construction of meaning.

Using talk-and-draw technique

- Ask pupils to draw an image or pictorial representation to convey some aspect or aspects of what it is you're researching.
- Invite them to explain in detail how these pictures relate to their experience.

Possible prompts that the researcher might use are these: '*Thinking back over your experience of . . . what does it mean for you . . . ? Can you show me by drawing how you might represent what [...] means to you? Talk to me about what you have drawn.*'

Using print and visual resources

Pupils' responses can be richly informative if you provide something concrete for them to talk about. Find an image or picture that you think is relevant to the topic you wish to explore with them and ask them to explain what is going on. Pictures of children in a classroom can be useful for getting at pupils' understanding of classroom social interactions. For example, you might have a number of photographs on display and then pick out the photo of Mary and ask the pupil you are talking to, 'If Mary was working at the art table, what other children would come and work with her?'. Be aware that small details, like picture size, are important. If you want to use the visual stimuli with a lot of pupils, laminating them is a good investment!

Rivers of experience - critical incident charts

- Pupils are told that they are going to reflect on key moments which they think have influenced the direction of their lives. They will be asked to visualise their lives as a winding river in which each bend in the river represents a change that they think has been important. (Clearly, there will need to be a close focus for the conversation, such as patterns of friendship, patterns of academic progress, or feelings about the school and patterns of attendance.)

- Ask the pupils to tell you their special memories in relation to the theme which is the main focus of the conversation.

- Whilst they recall the key events in their histories they, or you, locate each episode on a different bend along the length of a winding river: each bend represents a critical moment or turning point.

- Then ask them to reflect on these critical moments, talking about their attitudes and their feelings. Try to let the pupil talk without interrupting.

- With the pupil, try to reflect on the whole picture and see what patterns start to emerge.

Rivers of experience can be extremely useful and powerful in stimulating dialogues with pupils. This is a research tool which encourages active involvement from participants in an emancipatory and democratic manner. The technique allows pupils to investigate the meanings of experiences in their past lives. It doesn't feel like an interview, but more like a reflective conversation. Like rivers, the words start to flow, without too many constraints. The river of experience is a reflexive tool since pupils, on their own or with the help of the researcher, draw it in ways that they feel are appropriate, linking it to critical incidents or moments in their lives: each bend of the river's path marks a critical moment.

How can they be used?

- To identify what pupils experienced as critical moments in their lives and the strength of emotion attached to those moments.
- To help pupils make sense of a particular sequence of events in their lives in or out of school.
- To help pupils understand how bits of their lives link together.
- To help teachers understand how pupils feel about aspects of their experience that might not normally be accessible to them.

Important steps in the research process: problems and promises

The initial negotiation phase

Establish a rapport with the pupil. Are you comfortable? Are they? The first step in interviewing pupils is negotiating the process - what it is all about and how one does it. Depending on the age of the pupils, the context and your relationship to them, this initial negotiation may be time-consuming. Expect the first real interview session to take longer than you imagine.

Be creative in finding or developing new ways to encourage talk

Look for inspiration in visual arts, in performing arts and in drama.

Think about a range of possible formats for interviewing pupils

- Pair or small-group interviews: Pupils are often more relaxed with a friend than when alone with an adult. They help each other with the responses. They also keep one another on track and truthful.
- Props: Props, such as printed pictures or images that they themselves have drawn, provide something concrete to focus on.
- Hypothetical questions: Well formed hypothetical questions allow younger pupils to turn the interview into 'pretend play', an activity they are familiar with and more competent in than being interviewed. Such questions allow older children the freedom to move from looking for the 'right' or 'expected'

responses. For example, 'Suppose I was a little kid and I was coming to this school for the first time and I didn't know anyone, or what to do or where to go, and suppose you saw me. What would you tell me so I wouldn't feel so scared and out of place?'

- Third-person questions: An easy way to make questions less threatening and to allow more leeway in how pupils respond is to ask questions about pupils in general. Questions about 'what kids do' as opposed to 'what you do', permit a respondent to answer honestly without having to implicate him/herself. 'Sometimes kids sneak out of school and hang out in the park because...'
- Recording interviews: There can be hesitation about talking freely into a recorder. Children are not that innocent and they are aware. They may say things when the recorder is turned off that they will not say when it is running.

Aim for empathic attunement

Try to build a context in which the researcher is attuned to each pupil's thinking and feeling state. Empathy seeks to work from the inside out, working to discover what makes an individual think and feel the way s/he does. It is about putting oneself in the place of someone else and having pupils help you to see new things.

The validity of multiple meanings

Qualitative research emphasises the validity of multiple meaning structures. It recognises the importance of the subjective and the experiential lifeworlds of individuals. It embraces the multitudes of personal meanings.

What are the limitations?

Being a researcher

Three basic assumptions should underlie the researcher's attitude towards the pupils he/she is studying:

- All kids are smart. They know how to get along in the world they inhabit. They know what works there, what does not work. The only way to get as smart as they are about their world is to learn from them.
- All kids make sense. What may appear from the outside to be dysfunctional activity, from the inside, to those involved, makes sense. The only way to understand how those actions makes sense is to listen and observe very carefully.

SEE THE PUPILS AS CO-RESEARCHERS, NOT OF THE WIDER RESEARCH PROJECT, BUT AS RESEARCHERS OF THEIR OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, THEIR CORRELATIONS AND MEANINGS.

Finding out, as Geertz put it, 'What the devil people think they are up to' requires attending very carefully to them and respecting their abilities.

- Burnard, P. (2000) *How children ascribe meaning to improvisation and composition*.
Denicolo, P. and Pope, M. (1990) *Adults Learning - Teachers Thinking*. In Day et al (Eds). *Insight into Teachers Thinking and Practice*, Basingstoke: Falmer Press. pp. 155-69.
Gave, M. E. & Walsh, D. J. (1998) *Studying Children In Context: Theories, Methods and Ethics*, London: Sage.
Prosser, J. (1988). *Image-based Research: a Sourcebook for Qualitative Researchers*, London: Falmer.

New Reading

Although the project described in *Involving Pupils in Practice*, by Mike Jelly, Alan Fuller and Richard Byers, involved special schools and special units, this practical and insightful book will be of interest and relevance to all schools seeking to develop pupil consultation and pupil participation. Using case studies from the project, the book presents a range of strategies and ideas tried out by practitioners in their classrooms, including innovative approaches to circle time, school council initiatives focused on issues concerned with teaching and learning and ways of using thinking skills teaching to encourage pupils to become more independent

New on the Website

Under "conferences" on our website - www.consultingpupils.co.uk - you can now view and download full reports from the *Students As Researchers / Student Voice Conference held at the Mary Ward Centre, Tavistock Place, London, Friday 7 December 2001 and the Report on the Students as Researchers Conference held at the University of Sussex, 2 March 2001 as well as presentations by Helen Demetriou, David Pedder and Jean Rudduck from the Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning conference held on Thursday 1 November 2001 at Cambridge University's Faculty of Education Shaftesbury Road site.*

learners. The final sections of the book include guidelines for monitoring and evaluating the initiatives and their impact on pupils' learning, an audit check for schools considering developing their own initiatives and a selection of resources drawn from the project's schools. As Judy Sebba (Standards and Effectiveness Unit, DfEE) comments in her foreword to the book, 'This book provides the basis for enabling every school to benefit from increasing pupil involvement by demonstrating how, in its own words, an improving school is one that listens to the voices of its students.'

Look miss, I don't want to be in school. I don't like it.

Maggie Chambers is a member of the Network. She is Deputy Head and SENCO at Norbury Primary School in the London Borough of Harrow and has carried out considerable research in her school on inclusion, research which has involved an important element of student consultation. She has sent us an account of this work and a shortened and edited version appears below. The full article can be obtained from Maggie at Chambersmag@aol.com.

A number of questions guided our research on inclusion. Here we focus on two issues: whether there were marked differences in how children felt about learning between those on and not on the SEN/EAL register; whether behaviour problems were more prominent among children on the register.

We started by asking all pupils in the two year 5 and year 6 classes about their feelings in lessons. We wanted to know whether, compared with their peers not on the register, the SEN/EAL pupils felt they were more or less welcomed, supported and included - but we were also interested to know what overall picture would emerge from the survey.

"Look miss, I don't want to be in school, I don't like it, I want to stay at home and play with my toys."

"I'd like more support - my helping teacher isn't there every day. I'd like her there to help me every day"

"I don't like to go out of the classroom. I don't like someone sitting with me. I just want someone there to help me when I'm stuck"

The questionnaire we used came from the CSIE "Index for Inclusion" and the responses to the questions were collated for all pupils in the year 5 and year 6 classes. We were particularly interested in four issues; the results are given as averages across all four classes:

My teacher likes to listen to my ideas:
44% agree,
43% partly agree,
13% disagree

My teacher likes to help me with my work:
60% agree,
38% partly agree,
2% disagree

When children quarrel in my class, the teacher sorts it out fairly:
51% agree,
31% partly agree,
18% disagree

I feel pleased with myself when I've done a good piece of work:
84% agree,
13% partly agree,
3% disagree

Individual differences between teachers were highlighted and inevitably some were more obviously respected than others. In particular, the responses to teachers' fairness in dealing with disputes varied considerably from class to class.

We then analysed the results again, selecting out those pupils on the register for learning or behaviour difficulties. There was very little difference between the two groups of pupils on the register and pupils not on the register - in fact in answer to questions 1, 2 and 4 (above) the SEN pupils were more positive. However,

they were more likely to feel that their quarrels had not been sorted out fairly.

We discussed the results of the survey with individual teachers. Other issues, such as the feelings of many pupils that their work was not displayed, were dealt with when working as a staff on Class Environment Guidelines. Pupils felt that setting writing targets helped their work to improve and all teachers were encouraged to set targets with their pupils. We are also aiming to ensure that targets on IEPs are written in exercise books so that pupils are aware of and involved in achieving them.

In addition to using a questionnaire, we talked to the special needs pupils in the year 5 and year 6 classes about the support they received in school. Of the twenty-two pupils consulted, fourteen felt they received enough help in school, four said they usually received enough help while another four felt that they did not receive the help they needed. Interestingly, although most children said that they received enough support in school, nearly all would like more! There was a general consensus amongst the children asked that they liked both working in class and being withdrawn for work in a smaller group - although the pupil quoted in column 1 is clearly an exception to this!

We also carried out a behaviour survey with teachers in all classes in the school. We wanted to get some sense of the amount of disruption in lessons and the main sources of the disruption. Our most important finding was that behaviour problems were not specific to the SEN children - they were pervasive.

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