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Research Associate Summary Report

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...and the pupil said

Learning from pupil voice to guide a more personalised approach to learning and teaching

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Introduction

The current focus in our school relates to how we can best develop and support effective teaching and learning strategies that meet our pupils' individual needs. As part of this, pupils are being provided with activities that encourage the use of thinking skills, and help them to discuss and identify the progress of their own learning.

Upon joining the research project we focused on pupils' response to learning, thus linking with the teaching and learning strand identified as one of the five components of personalised learning by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2004).

We are concerned that the present focus on learning at school, although actively encouraging pupils to think and present their learning in their learning logs, is not, based on our evaluation, leading the children to take charge of their learning.

We were keen to see how pupils from our own and four other schools, each of which were developing thinking-oriented approaches and reflective learning practices, viewed their learning. Each school had selected approaches aimed at engaging learners and better meeting their needs. These included, for example, using visual, auditory, kinaesthetic (VAK) learning styles, learning logs and individual targets.

The study was heavily weighted therefore towards listening to what the pupils had to say. By adopting this approach, we hoped to gain an honest and representative picture of how learning was for them, and whether the approaches adopted by the schools were affecting how they saw learning and themselves as learners.

Methods

Three primary schools, one infant school and one junior school were used in the sample. All schools were drawn from similar socially deprived contexts and were based in the Midlands. Structured interviews were used with eight pupils from each school, with the sample comprising an equal representation of gender and a proportion of minority ethnic pupils representative of the schools' number on roll. Follow-up interviews were carried out with a sample of teachers and the headteachers from the schools.

Findings

What the pupils said

The main findings from the interviews were that pupils perceived the following.

- Learning is seen as subject-specific rather than interrelated. Pupils discussed their separate areas of learning but made no links between them.

"I like literacy, but not numeracy and ... oh yes, my favourite lesson is geography."

- Learning, including homework is seen as a teacher-led activity in which pupils' ability to exercise choice or self-direction was either limited, of potentially lesser value, or not apparent to them, for example, designing their own homework task:

"I'd like to ... could I?"

- Pupils were not able to articulate clearly the personal relevance of learning styles.
- Pupils discussed their own capabilities clearly in terms of relative areas of strength or areas in which they required support, referring to actual learning experiences.
- Learning strategies were something they had not considered in any depth in relation to their own preferences and how they applied these to solve tasks.

- Marking was reflective of traditional marking systems in which constructive feedback was limited.
- Learning was an activity largely confined to the classroom rather than something in which pupils were involved outside school beyond the completion of homework, and for some pupils, the mention of museums. Also, learning was seen as work and therefore the delineation apparent in the following statement is understandable.

“I work when I am at school but not in the holidays.”

- Personal targets were said to be of help and something they enjoyed receiving.

“It gives me something to aim for.”

It was evident that pupils' ability to engage in dialogue around their learning was restricted by their ability to use learning-related vocabulary, eg in terms of preferred strategies.

Teacher perspectives

Teaching staff in some schools had evidently developed approaches based on learning styles and used these in developing their planning and lesson delivery. However, pupils appeared to be unaware of these and unable to discuss, for example, their preferred style or how best they learnt. One teacher reflected:

“I am amazed our pupils didn't talk more about learning objectives and kinaesthetic learning.”

There was also surprise that pupils did not make any reference to the use of ICT as a source for their learning, eg as a way of finding out about an area of study. One school reflected that this might be because it is an underused area of focus within the school and that more emphasis is placed upon developing discrete ICT skills in the context of planned work, and because of the lack of computers within many disadvantaged homes.

During discussions around the findings from our dialogue with pupils, many of the teachers in the five schools were concerned that teaching needed to move beyond mere skill and knowledge transfer.

Teachers perceived pupils' lack of opportunity to take responsibility in, for example, designing their own homework task as something that needed addressing as it was such a simple step forward. One teacher felt that this was a huge barrier that needed to be overcome if personalised learning was to develop.

“Maybe we need to talk to pupils more. What do pupils really think we are saying to them?”

Leadership issues

For the leadership of schools, there was a very clear dilemma that although pupils may be offered a wide range of learning experiences there was still evidence of traditional transmission models of learning. As one of the headteachers of the sample school said:

“We have a long road to travel.”

The same headteacher spoke of the need to create more focus on pupils' own participation as a key to moving their learning on:

“We need to encourage the children to take more ... responsibility for their own learning.”

Another headteacher's comment related to the need for establishing a greater focus on engaging learners in dialogue about their learning:

“We have never really asked the pupils before about their learning in depth. Just knowing they had little drilled-down knowledge around learning will bring us all up short.”

Conclusion

If, as educators, we believe participation in one's own learning journey is at the heart of personalised learning, teachers and school leaders face a very real challenge in ensuring that pupils are 'being involved in the decisions that affect their life, the life of the community and the larger society in which they live'.

The question is, how can leaders ensure that the message of learning to learn and personal growth in learning replaces the separate and, one could proffer, limited messages, apparent in the pupils' responses in the interviews?

The implicit and explicit messages about learning and its processes must, we would argue, be at the heart of staff training and professional development. It must be at the centre of discussions at governor and senior management level to ensure that explicit behaviour around learning is evident everywhere within the school environment.

Although the personalised learning horizon presently seems distant and misty, there are instant yet profound actions that could be taken to bring it a great deal closer. The instant removal of the word 'work' and its replacement with 'learning' could potentially change contexts and encourage reflection upon how we personalise learning in our schools and, one could hope, lead to more empowered, enquiring pupils.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the school leaders, teachers and pupils that willingly allowed us to interview them.

References

DfES, 2004, *A National Conversation about Personalised Learning*, London, DfES

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