

CASTLETHORPE FIRST SCHOOL

Milton Keynes Primary Schools Learning Network

Context and motivation for the research

Castlethorpe First School is a small, rural school, organised into two mixed age classes with approximately fifty pupils on roll. Overall, standards of attainment throughout the school are high, although some dips in attainment have been consistently apparent. Our work began as an inquiry into how we might improve the quality of children's writing, and has progressed into a much wider issue, that of developing the pupil voice to improve the quality of the learning experience for children and to raise achievement.

The Performance and Assessment data received each year showed that there was a gap between children's achievement in reading and that in writing. This was more pronounced for some children than for others. We suspected motivational issues were at the heart of under achievement for these pupils because they were able to produce work of good quality in other curriculum areas, including reading. We initially chose to target specific under-achieving pupils, however as we devised and implemented teaching and learning strategies, we found that the whole class could benefit from our new approach, and so implemented the strategies with the whole of each class.

Data was collected from a combination of classroom observations and pupil questionnaires. For this we focused only on the target pupils which was an extremely useful part of the research as it gave us specific information about pupil attitudes to writing. Initially we were surprised at the high level of positive responses about writing from the children to our questions, which appeared to be in direct conflict with classroom observations. When we looked closely at the questionnaires, we realised that we had asked a number of closed questions that would only give limited information. We also suspected that the children had given us answers that they thought we wanted to hear. Nevertheless enough data was present in order for themes to be drawn out and strategies implemented.

How the research is being promoted and shared

Our research has now become firmly embedded into school practice, with not only new, effective teaching and learning strategies in place, but a wider move to promote the pupil voice within our school. This approach is steadily being written into school policies, and is discussed at staff and governors' meetings. It is a regular feature of the headteacher's report to governors. Newsletters to parents and elements of the school prospectus also reflect our work. The development of the pupil voice initiative has dovetailed well into the work we have carried out for the Healthy Schools Silver Award and each initiative has become the stronger for it. Our initial research has been presented at the British Educational Research Association's conference in Manchester in September 2004, and also at the conference for the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement in Barcelona in January 2005. Our work has also been disseminated at a local level through an invitation from the Milton Keynes LEA to talk about our findings at a course for teachers.

Differences for the pupils

The strategies devised, we believed would raise the level of pupil participation in, and responsibility for the assessment of their own work. One focus was that of raising children's understanding of learning intentions. With the Foundation Stage/Year 1 class, prompt cards were developed for the children to use to structure their writing and to check their work before bringing it to the teacher. In the Year 2/3 class, whole class discussions were held in which pupils, with the guidance of the class teacher, chose features of writing they judged to be important for a particular piece of work. The children collectively agreed that these would be the outcomes they would work towards, and like the younger class, used their nominated features to reflect on the success of their writing. The older children took the process one step further and used the chosen features to improve their work where it was lacking. Some children work individually to make their improvements, while others who have greater maturity work with a partner to share the task. Children were, and continue to be encouraged to talk about the ways in which they have made improvements. Through this the teachers are able to assess the learning that has taken place and to guide pupils towards the next steps for improvement.

More recently we have begun to extend the notion of the pupil voice into developing the children's thinking skills. Staff have received training in deBono's six thinking hats programme, which is now being specifically taught in both classes. The children are learning to solve problems and questions by collecting their ideas and suggestions through a structured pathway. It is still early days in our work.

Changing teaching and learning relationships in the classroom

Our ongoing work is resulting not only in a greater independence of pupils from the teacher, but also a marked improvement in the quality of their writing, as well as a greater sense of responsibility for themselves at school. We found that end of year and key stage assessments have shown a significant rise in standards in writing. In 2004 our PANDA grade for writing exceeded those for reading and science. But it should be understood that the role of the teacher remains an essential one, that of facilitator of the development of children's writing rather than its appraiser.

Year 3 pupils form the school council which has raised and tackled issues to do with learning as well as with the school's environment. They commented that they learn best through lessons which are practical, arts/DT-based and fun. This has resulted in the provision of a music club together with a review of long and medium term planning to reflect the more creative and holistic curriculum they would like.

How this is changing management and decision-making

As teachers we are now listening to children's views about the wider context of school life and are taking action about the things they tell us. In writing activities, time for pupils to evaluate and improve their own work and to talk about it needs to be built into teachers' planning. More curriculum time is now allowed for children to engage with their writing, and consequently, one writing task spans two or even three days, with an emphasis on drafting and redrafting to improve. The secretarial aspects of punctuation and spelling have become elements of the final drafting phase. The pupils' evaluation of their own and of each other's work has a new significance and value which teachers have to accept. Teachers need to use pupil evaluations to assess the learning that has taken place and to provide guidance for the next steps in learning.

Similarly in the thinking hats programme, children's views and opinions are given greater importance, which teachers have to accept and use to move the children forward.

An example of change

Our work in developing the strength of the pupil voice has become a continuous and increasing continuum. At this point in time, as a result of the school's work in pupil self-evaluation in writing and the development of children's thinking skills, the school council is learning to become more confident and is steadily developing a louder and more effective voice within the school. The council has had a real impact on curriculum planning and provision together with developing aspects of the school's environment which concern them.

Future plans

Our work on developing the pupil voice is gradually becoming embedded into school practice, and continues to evolve. There is scope for pupil self-evaluation to be explored in other curriculum areas and for the thinking hats programme to be applied to problem-solving across the whole curriculum and wider aspects of school life. The school council has suggested involving the rest of the school in the decision-making process. They have instigated an ideas box into which children can place suggestions for improvements to the school. They made presentations to the whole school to explain its purpose, and now regularly check the contents, reporting to the headteacher and giving feedback to individual children concerned. They are beginning to participate in the task group set up to develop the Healthy Schools programme. The school's work on the exploring the potential of the pupil voice started as a small research project focused on one aspect of one curriculum area. It has proved to be such an effective approach to our school's development, that it is continually expanding into other areas of school life.