

Meadfurlong Middle School

'Enhancing pupil voice and writing levels through publishing a school newspaper.'

Who was involved?

The inquiry began one year ago. The focus of the inquiry was to investigate how SATs scores in writing could be improved by getting pupils to publish their own school newspaper. Pupils were drawn from years 4 to 7. Pupil names were submitted by class teachers and teachers were encouraged to send mixed ability children.

What were the SAT scores at the start of the project?

Children at our school generally scored lower in their SATs than similar schools. However it must be noted that not all children who were involved in the inquiry fell into the above category. Some of them were on par with national expectations.

Was this a particular concern?

We were concerned about our pupil's low attainments, and part of the whole school development plan was to raise SATs scores, this project was seen as one way of achieving this aim.

Why a paper above other things?

A newspaper project was chosen because we felt that it would be an ideal way to involve the whole school. It would also give pupils a 'voice' and motivate them to think about their writing and develop essential writing skills which would aid them in their SATs. A newspaper project was also chosen because it would be an ideal opportunity to showcase our children's work to the whole community.

How many pupils?

23 children were eventually chosen and their last SATS scores for writing were used as a baseline to measure improvement. These scores will be compared to SATs scores after the newspaper project was completed. A core group of 4 teachers would be working with the SIG newspaper group. 2 children from each class were selected by class teachers. They had mixed abilities, some were attaining the expected SATs scores for their age and others were below their expected age levels. Some of the children had a history of poor behaviour and others were 'model' pupils.

Which teachers were teachers involved?

The teachers who were involved were drawn from the SIG group and from the general staff. One of the staff members had previous experience in working with children around a similar project and the other teacher was very experienced in working with younger children. They had to sacrifice part of their lunch breaks to help with the project. The other two members were from the SIG group, one who was responsible for the actual publishing and the other member was the literacy coordinator.

Where was the inquiry being promoted?

The inquiry was focused only in the school. The staff and some of the parents were informed that the project was being undertaken. The school council, which is made up entirely of children were also made aware of the project. All teachers were informed that pupils from their classes would be approaching them for help in investigating and writing articles for the newspaper. The network was informed before the inception of the project in September 2004. At further conferences and network meetings, guidance and monetary support was made available before and during the duration of the inquiry. The network also provided funds for supply cover and printing costs. The newspaper would also be posted on the school and networks web pages.

What did the pupils do?

Pupils met during the duration of the project on alternate Fridays with some of the teachers. Ideas were discussed and some pupils began researching and writing up their stories. Pupils investigated and wrote articles such as, reviews, poems, short stories, puzzles and other stories of interest including interviews with staff members. This work was supported through meetings with a local journalist who outlined newspaper writing styles and other journalistic methods, which would aid them in compiling their articles. They also worked with a senior teacher who worked on writing styles, sentence structure, and other literacy skills which would assist them in their work. Pupils worked on their articles on Fridays during their lunch breaks and were also given time off from normal classes to meet with the journalist and work with the designated teacher. Refer to the attached newspaper as an example of the pupils completed work.

Did the inquiry change teaching and learning relationships in the class?

At present this has not been fully investigated. We haven't had an opportunity to discuss this issue with all teachers and pupils, but, as far as some of the staff is concerned, they feel that by giving pupils an opportunity to be involved in a project such as this, it has further motivated pupils, to think about the quality and relevance of their writing. The staff hope that the pupils involved in the project would show a positive improvement in their SATS writing scores. It was also hoped that these pupils would encourage other pupils to take writing seriously.

One outcome that we have noticed was that children who were involved in the interviews became more confident in asking probing questions. This confidence was also displayed in the top literacy set in year five, in which children who were involved with the newspaper were far more confident in their writing abilities. The whole question around teaching and learning relationships needs to be addressed at a later stage.

How is this changing management and decision making processes in schools?

The staff and senior management are aware that children now have an opportunity to 'speak' to the whole pupil body about their feelings, opinions and views. The newspaper was used as a vehicle to get their thoughts and feelings across. Because of this, in future pupils would be consulted on certain issues and their opinions sort, before a decision could be made. Management has also realised that, the newspaper would be an ideal way to promote the school in a positive way into the community and hopefully attract new pupils.

A positive example of change

It was noted that some children would readily give up their break time to work on the newspaper. Some of these children often displayed negative behaviour in class, but became proactive while working on their articles. Children who were normally reserved became outspoken on some issues and even volunteered to write articles about it. This was an unanticipated, but welcome, outcome. One positive example was a year 7 pupil who had a history of poor behaviour, especially when working in groups. He displayed a willingness to work as part of a team and participated fully during editorial meetings.

Future plans

It is unfortunate that this report was compiled before the final SATs results were looked at. But we intend to carefully analyse all the pupils' results and then gauge the effectiveness of the project in improving their SATs scores. It is hoped that the newspaper would evolve into a self sustaining project, driven by pupils for pupils and so this project is intended to further transfer the authorship of the paper from teachers to pupils, enhancing the authentic nature of pupils' voices in this paper. We will also continue to expose children to further professional input from both journalist and authors. This includes the possibility of taking children to visit a local newspaper office to get first hand experience in the complexities and issues surrounding publishing newspapers.

If after reviewing the SATs scores no visible improvement is noticed, would this mean that the project had failed in its inquiry?

No, we feel that the even if no visible improvement is noted the fact that children were given an opportunity to express themselves and had an opportunity to be involved in such a project the long term benefits would be beneficial even though it was not evident in SATS scores. We are confident that visible improvement will be noted in the classroom.