

PORTFIELDS COMBINED SCHOOL

An investigation into the use of response partners to develop pupil self-evaluation skills and collaboration in the classroom.

We are a combined school with 620 pupils on roll aged 4-12 years.

During 2003/4 we conducted an inquiry into the use of response partners to develop pupil's self-evaluation skills with an intention to improve writing skills. Following the success of this work we decided to initiate response partners across our large combined school. The intended effects were:

- that pupils were given greater opportunities to interact with each other,
- that pupils would have increased independence
- that self-esteem of pupils would increase
- to alter the balance of teacher/pupil relationships
- to initiate greater pupil collaboration/action in the classroom
- to reduce didactic delivery from teachers
- to enhance pupils abilities to evaluate their work

Our ultimate aim was to improve pupil's writing, not only in test results but also in daily classroom writing.

The inquiry focused largely on the work undertaken in literacy sets. We group children according to ability and the response partners were initiated across the school from Foundation to Year 7.

The selection of pairs has varied. Teachers made decisions on these based on their knowledge of the pupils in their groups. Pairs were then decided upon by either friendship through independent choice, or teacher directive-linked to ability/friendship (largely in less able literacy groupings).

With the younger children in Foundation the pairs are used for talk and phonic activities. From Year 1 - 7 the pairs have undertaken a variety of activities depending on age and ability. These have included:

- talk for writing
- phonic activities
- role Play for writing
- planning for writing
- writing together on a whiteboard
- editing work-secretarial skills
- responding to work verbally
- writing a piece of work together
- highlighting successful elements of each other's work and writing improvement prompts
- written comments made by children on each others work
- children marking to checklists of success criteria-including use of mark schemes

➤ assessing partner responses in SATs papers

Given that pupils have had greater opportunities to work as a pair we believed that pupils became more independent when having to work individually following collaborative work.

At the end of the first term all children in each set were asked for their views on the partner work to date. This was achieved through a questionnaire conducted to a literacy group by a different teacher. This was to gain initial impact from the pupil's perspectives.

Teachers in year groups reviewed the pupil comments and completed their own questionnaire. They set future targets following the analysis of work to date.

Focused pairs were identified for paired feedback in the Summer Term. This group was made up of 1 pair from each set, selected by the teacher. Pairs in Years 1-3 met as a circle time session to review their work and experiences with a member of the SIG (School Improvement Group) to gain greater understanding of the pupil's responses to the inquiry. Pairs in years 4-7 kept a log of activities and their experiences and also met regularly to discuss these as a group. All these pairs were asked to complete a review at the end of the Summer Term.

All the classes repeated the pupil questionnaire sheet in May with some additions, with their own set teacher to look at how the work had developed and their attitudes and experiences. The additions asked were:

How do you think working with a partner has changed your lessons? What has changed and why?

What difference do you think working with a partner has made to your own learning?

How has this changed teaching and learning relationships in the classroom?

Teachers across the school participated in this whole school inquiry at different levels. However, they were all involved in pupil and teacher questionnaires.

Our findings from the responses of children indicate that children feel more confident in the classroom and that most have enjoyed working regularly with a partner. They say this is because their partner helps support them with their ideas, helps them when they are stuck and helps their understanding of the task. They say they learn new ideas and ways of working and this makes the lesson more enjoyable and exciting. Once they begin a task, working as a pair helps ensure that they understand the task. It also helps them see things more clearly, makes lessons easier and speeds it up. They say they have an improved focus on the lesson.

Some comment that children can sometimes explain things better than the teacher and as they do more talking it helps their understanding through discussion. They say things are easier as they are working with someone and instead of the teacher teaching them, they can teach each other. Some report that when they are working on their own, they can think back to when they were working with a partner and remember what they said, which supports their individual learning.

Children say working with a partner helps them evaluate their own work and that the quality of their work has improved because they can share ideas. They report that they have new ways of doing things, and don't get frustrated. One child said, "It has made me think more about what I am doing and how effective it looks on the page." Another child said "It's made tasks more enjoyable and fun. At the same time you get more ideas and I've improved the quality of work as there are more opinions and points of view"

Those few children who did not find this as helpful to them found the relationship with their partner challenging due to differing personalities. This has implications for teachers in terms of the selection of pairs and whether to change these at certain times in the year.

From the teacher's perspective the use of pairings has made teachers more aware of the need to plan for paired activities and to provide adequate time for these activities to be of benefit. We are more focused on planning the task and its delivery. This has also allowed us to be more creative, to think about what activities can be undertaken in pairs and how using pairs can make an activity more enjoyable for the pupils. It has allowed us to highlight common problems that can be addressed in weekly planning.

It has changed the emphasis from teacher-pupil interactions to pupil-pupil interactions. Children are being encouraged to take more responsibility for their own work and the children are being given more opportunities to take the lead and a more active part in sessions. Teaching has become more varied, positive and interactive. Lessons have become more 'punchy' to allow time for partners. Teachers say it is a valuable teaching tool. However, it has been important to train the children to engage in evaluation skills.

When pupils are interacting with each other, the teacher has more opportunity to interact with the pairs and check their understanding. Teachers and children are more focused on the success criteria for the lesson and children have been regularly engaged in the assessment of their work. This has supported on-going teacher assessment and altered some aspects of marking work as the children have also been engaged in the process. This increased onus on the child's responsibility for their learning has changed the nature of the classroom climate.

How has this changed management and decision making in the school?

The inquiry, having been led by the SIG, has distributed the leadership of an area of the schools work. Members of the SIG feel that they have a greater part to play in implementing a development leading to change and that they have increased responsibility in the school.

It has allowed a different group of staff to work together in leading an issue. As the Inquiry has involved developing a change in teaching and learning, the group have developed their skills in writing questionnaires, asking questions which seek real answers to achieve views from all concerned. The emphasis on asking pupils for their views has enabled us to see our teaching from the child's perspective, something which for many staff was new. The previous small scale inquiry, led to this whole school development, which pupils have clearly found helpful in their learning.

The ongoing inquiry findings and processes have been shared with other SIG Co-ordinators at regular meetings of the network. Previous links have been maintained with the schools in

the network that have been involved in similar research. Our milestone conferences have been used to disseminate our school's work in more depth. Our work linked to the initial inquiry has been reported within the LEA at an Assessment for Learning conference, nationally at BERA and internationally at ICSIE.

One practitioner's perspective-an example of change

"Joining the SIG was a new experience giving me greater involvement within the school. It has been interesting to work with different staff that were not part of my normal working team and has given me a greater view of the whole school. Devising questionnaires, attending conferences and being involved in writing up work has been a new development for me and I feel I've had more input and greater responsibility in an area of change. It has made me think more about my own teaching and how the children respond to me and each other. It makes me evaluate my own practice more. The work has changed how my year team think about literacy planning and making lessons more exciting for the children. I have taken a more pro-active approach within the year team to develop learning opportunities and it has made me more confident. I believe children are more involved, they have to think more and take more responsibility for their work. Across the year team children appear more enthusiastic to learn as we have used the partner strategies across the curriculum."

Future Plans

As a result of the inquiry we expect our findings to have impacted positively upon teaching and learning which will result in strategies becoming part of normal school practice and policy. Children have responded very positively to this inquiry. We expect to develop pupil involvement in future inquiries, looking at how pupils learn effectively and their views on this, and we would like to consider how pupils themselves can be effectively involved in research.