

What impact will the assimilation of pupil voice into practice have upon pupils' motivation, engagement and standards?

Action Research Project by Victoria Mayhew and Felicity Poole (Parkland Primary School)

The key focus of this project was to develop an understanding of how the assimilation of pupil voice into practice impacts on pupils' motivation, engagement and standards. The project focused on pupils being involved in curriculum design which has been based on their own personal likes and interests. Pupils have contributed to short and medium term planning as well as home learning tasks. The project has also provided space for staff to reflect upon and interpret outcomes of the research project. This became a focus after reflecting upon observations made by staff regarding independent learning behaviours, pupil application within continuous and enhanced learning areas as well as the quality and quantity of pupil outcomes. Staff felt that improvements could be made and carried out research to help support this. The intended outcomes of this project was to:

- increase pupil voice in curriculum design,
- have an uplift in pupils' engagement in their learning,
- increase motivation and interest,
- ensure pupils are more ready to take on challenges and to take measured risks,
- develop pupils' understanding of their role and responsibilities as an independent learner,
- tailor home learning towards the interest of pupils so that they are able to see the connections with their learning, at home and at school, more readily,
- develop structures and routines to support colleagues in their classrooms or schools and to positively impact their learners.

As a school all staff had training in Growth Mindset principles. Pupils with a growth mindset believe that intelligence is not inherent and given but rather something that develops and improves through sustained effort and resilience. This explained by Barry Hymer and Mike Gershon who wrote:

‘People with fixed mindsets believe that fundamental qualities like intelligence are essentially stable: they don’t change much over time. People with growth mindsets believe that these qualities are, well, growable: they are susceptible to change and can flourish in certain circumstances and wither in others.’ (Hymer and Gershon, 2014)

This training led to most staff completing an action research project. It was felt that the focus of this project complimented previous action research with children furthering their understanding that their brain is a muscle which needs to be exercised regularly with perseverance and determination being required. To support this the question asked was; what impact will the assimilation of pupil voice into practice have upon pupils' motivation, engagement and standards?

Background to action research project:

When reviewing the effectiveness of Foundation Phase practice Estyn found, ‘... pupils have limited opportunities to practise their literacy and numeracy skills independently, and are overly reliant on adult direction.’ (Estyn, 2017). Under the pupil voice and independence findings it stated:

‘The amount of child choice varies considerably from class to class and from school to school. In the most successful schools, the interests of pupils and their views are an important ... Pupils’ opinions and feedback are a central

feature in curriculum planning and developing learning experiences. As a result, in many of these schools, pupils work together well and demonstrate high levels of engagement in their learning. Where the delivery of the foundation phase becomes overly adult-directed and too formal in Year 1 and Year 2, pupils' levels of perseverance, and a willingness to take calculated risks in their learning, reduces. These pupils become less confident in applying their literacy and numeracy skills independently across areas of learning. Overall, inspections identify more adult-directed learning than child-initiated learning in Year 2.' (Estyn, 2017)

The benefits of pupil voice in curriculum design and their independent application of skills is clear and therefore, as a school, this was made a priority in the School Improvement Plan to develop and enhance existing structures already in place.

This school improvement priority linked well with the fact that Parkland Primary is a pioneer school which has made changes in accordance to recommendations laid out in the Successful Futures documentation. In this document Professor Donaldson notes, 'Independence, self-reliance and respect for others should be fostered throughout the teaching and learning process.' He also notes the change in pedagogy required so to, '... excite and inspire children to want to learn and to be able to learn independently' (Donaldson, 2015). The 4 purposes reflect this desire and, for this reason, Parkland Primary places these at the heart of all teaching and learning. Planning documentations centre around developing:

- ambitious, capable learners,
- healthy, confident individuals,
- enterprising, creative contributors,
- ethical informed citizens.

The aim is for pupils to, '... be ready to learn throughout their lives... play a full part in life and work... be citizens of Wales and the world... lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.' (Donaldson, 2015). This research project will further support the changes made in preparation for the new curriculum and in response to Estyn recommendations which was to, 'Involve pupils in Year 1 and Year 2 in decisions about what and how they learn' (Estyn, 2017).

Ethical considerations have been made with all parents being made aware of the research project and the potential changes to provision this might have. All data collected from both parents/guardians and pupils will be anonymised and archived securely. No data will allow individuals to be identified. The research conducted has been judged to have little or no risk of harm to the participants involved.

The successes from this research project will be disseminated to colleagues within school and the changes made to classroom structures and routines will be shared. The results will also be shared using the school's newsletter and messaging system and social media platforms such as Twitter. Project findings will also be circulated with colleagues from our cluster schools with the school happy to host visits from others.

Research Context:

Parkland Primary School is located in Sketty Park in the west of Swansea and serves a diverse community. The school is fortunate to be sited within beautiful grounds and offers wonderful recreational space. It is a large school with 516 pupils on role with admission numbers rising. The school believes that children learn best when they feel safe, happy and secure in a stimulating environment. The Year 2 classrooms are large and airy with easily-accessible outdoor spaces. These outdoor spaces include an internal Quad, large open spaces as well as a woodland area. Areas are demarcated in the classrooms with creative learning spaces within the school also available.

The study was conducted across the year group with 61 children aged between six and seven (Year 2) involved with all data gathered anonymised. Through our classroom ethos and embedded Growth Mindset principles the children were protected from any possible harm or risks caused by the project. To begin pupil baseline data was gathered in school and questionnaires sent home for parents. The questionnaires used focused on the regularity of their input in to planning, levels of interest, attitudes to home learning and their behaviour when working independently. For parents the questionnaires focused on levels of independence, attitudes to home learning, facing and overcoming challenge and the ability to use and apply skills learnt at school. Baseline results showed that pupils, when working independently, only around half of pupils chose challenges and activities that were suitably challenging and in line with Growth Mindset principles. As a result of this we visited a local school that had recently been judged as excellent by Estyn in this area. Year 2 teachers and teaching assistants visited the school and observed the routines and structures put in place to develop and embed pupil independence. Time was spent with pupils to gather their thoughts and opinions regarding activities completed independently. Following this, activities were completed in class with pupils and changes made to arrangements and field notes were taken to record any changes seen. The impact of the changes made to structures and routines were assessed and monitored throughout the project. Lastly, the pupils and parents repeated the questionnaire again to measure impact.

Methods:

Task 1: Baseline Questionnaire:

The following questions were used as a baseline of pupils' attitudes to learning, readiness to take on a challenge and levels of perseverance.

1. How often do you put forward your ideas for what you learn/do in class?
2. How interested are you in your learning?
3. Do you ever get the choice of what you want to do for home learning?
4. How often do you choose a challenge that puts you in your stretch zone?
5. Do you always try your best?
6. Do you complete a task before moving on to another?
7. Do you ever do something you shouldn't be doing in enhanced areas?
8. Do you ever distract your classmates when they are working?

This was also shared with parents:

1. When learning at home how confident is your child?
2. How independent is your child when completing learning at home?
3. Is your child able to recall strategies to help them?

4. Is your child able to maintain their concentration for an extended period of time for example 30 minutes?
5. Does your child enjoy facing and overcoming challenges?
6. Does learning excite your child?

Task 2: Pupil voice and curriculum design:

Everyone Planning in Class (EPIC) sessions were used to incorporate pupil voice in curriculum design. Pupils initially chose options for what topic they wanted to study out of the following:

- Darker Depths: Explore what lurks beneath the waves from the weird to wonderful.
- Abracadabra! Learn about the magical, mysterious and magnificent.
- Truly Scrumptious! Tuck into a journey of discovery tasting tantalising treats!
- The Gallery: Stand back and enjoy the view. Gaze in wonder at the works of great masters for inspiration for your own great masterpiece.
- Dynasty! Take a step back in time and discover the kings and queens of the past.
- Secret Garden: Step into a world of wonder and discover the mysteries of plants.

After selecting the topic Darker Depths the pupils then took part in an EPIC session to start the topic. This involved pupils choosing what aspects of the ocean that they wanted to study and explore further. Pupils also had the choice over how they could apply previously learnt skills across the different areas within the classroom and outside spaces.

Task 3: Pupil Reflection:

All pupils were given time to self-assess their own learning. They selected pieces of their own work which they were most proud of. They did this using post it notes. Once they identified the pieces of work they wrote on their post it their reason why they were proud and linked this to the class learning behaviours designed earlier in the project. The children then shared this in small groups before work was stored in their Fab Folders. The Fab Folders were displayed in classrooms and pupils could refer to them, add and replace work independently to celebrate new work.

Task 4: Maintenance of systems:

Children were excited about taking charge of their own learning and would explain in detail what sticker they required and why. All staff were involved in the maintenance and upkeep of this initiative and modelled the language of learning when talking to pupils.

Task 5: Introduction of timetabled problem solving activities:

A problem solving activity was introduced to the pupils. This STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Maths) project was developed to compliment the learning behaviours developed by the pupils as it required them to; work collaboratively and cooperate, think creatively, plan work ahead, reflect and improve and make changes over an extended period of time. This activity proved very popular with children and this was made evident through our weekly EPIC sessions during which pupils would regularly request completing STEM activities.

Task 6: Exit Questionnaire:

Field notes were compiled and findings were analysed from exit questionnaires completed by pupils and parents. This was completed online using Microsoft Forms. The answers provided were analysed and compared to determine the effects and success of the project.

Findings:

Main headlines:

Findings collected from observations and pupil and parent questionnaires clearly showed that pupils became more independent, able to persevere for longer, were more keen to complete challenges, were more focused and the quality of output improved. The research project involved all year 2 pupils (61 in total), 23 parents completed the entry questionnaire and 30 parents completed the exit questionnaire.

Pupil Questionnaire Findings:

Exit data revealed an increase of 10% of pupils feeling that they contributed to class plans, with 52% of pupils feeling that they did this every week and 43% feeling that they did this regularly. This is supported by observations made by staff who noted that pupils would often suggest how to apply their skills in different areas of the classroom outside of the allocated EPIC planning time. Another observation made during EPIC time was that pupils regularly requested STEM activities which required them to persevere, be determined, make improvements, be resourceful and take on and enjoy challenges.

Another finding was an increase in the number of pupils interested in their learning. The number of children extremely interested in their learning rose by 14% and those that were not at all interested in their learning fell by 5%. This was observed within the classroom also - pupils tended to concentrate for longer periods of time, showed greater perseverance and determination to complete their learning which was of a better quality.

A fall of 26% was recorded in terms of pupils having opportunities to plan their own home learning and follow their own interests outside of the classroom. 90% of pupils felt they had a choice of what home learning they could do and how they could present it. Once again this was supported by observations made once home learning was presented which was of a higher quality than previously.

It was found that there was a rise of 16% relating to the number of pupils choosing suitable challenging activities. 72% of pupils stated that they always chose challenges that put them in their stretch zone. Very few pupils chose challenges that were too easy, putting them in the comfort zone when learning. When marking children's work it was evident that most pupils had selected the appropriate challenges for their ability. Further analysis of the questionnaire showed nearly all pupils often tried their best.

16% more pupils felt that they would always complete a task before moving on to another when compared to the start of the project. Nearly all pupils would regularly complete activities and bring it to a satisfactory conclusion after the introduction of learning behaviours and stickers. It was observed that pupils appeared more settled and required fewer adult prompts to stay focused and complete tasks. Staff also noticed that fewer interventions were needed to deal with distracted behaviour. Nearly all pupils felt that they never distracted their class mates when using continuous and enhanced provision.

Parent Questionnaire Findings:

Parental questionnaires were analysed and showed an increase of 15% in the number of pupils who are extremely confident when learning at home. There was also a significant fall in the number of pupils who had no confidence when working at home – this fell from 13% to just 3%. Levels of

independence when working at home also improved. There was a significant rise from 0% to 23% of the number of pupils who completed work independently at home. Previously only 4% of parents felt that children were able to recall strategies to help them however by the end of the project this increased to 30% of parents feeling their child could recall previously taught skills. There was a rise of 7% of parents who had observed their child being able to concentrate for extended periods of time. Significantly 17% fewer parents felt that their child never concentrated for longer periods of time. Pleasingly the number of parents who felt that their child enjoyed facing and overcoming challenges rose by 37%. Finally, 15% more parents felt that learning excited their child at the end of the project when compared to entry data.

Conclusion:

In summary the project proved successful in engaging pupils in their learning, increasing their level of interest and contribution of ideas. Pupils felt they had more ownership over the direction of their learning for teacher led activities, continuous and enhanced provision as well as home learning activities. Teacher assessments also showed that the majority of pupils made above expected progress within the year. This, it was felt, was achieved in part due to the changes made throughout the project as pupils' attitudes to learning shifted. Questionnaire results for both pupils and parents showed a positive uplift in all questions asked relating to:

- pupils' level of engagement and interest,
- pupils' ability to concentrate,
- pupils' enthusiasm to contribute to their learning,
- pupils' enjoyment of facing and overcoming challenges,
- pupils' determination and perseverance,
- pupils' confidence,
- pupils' independence,
- pupils' drive to complete work,
- pupils' ability to recall, use and apply previously learnt skills.

Due to these significant improvements this project and the systems established have been disseminated to staff across the school. This will involve all pupils from reception to year 6. The number of learning behaviours will be progressive with reception pupils starting with one learning behaviour and building up to two by the summer term. The number of learning behaviours used by pupils will increase year on year or across phases according to pupils age and ability. Additionally, the delivery of EPIC sessions has become more consistent across the school with all pupils contributing to their weekly and long term plans through teacher led activities and continuous and enhanced provision. The school's Home Learning Policy has also been amended and updated to include opportunities for pupils to follow their own interests at home. Finally, reflection time will be scheduled during which pupils will evaluate their learning and discuss the learning they are proud of and why. It is hoped these discussions will become a regular part of school and will take place outside of the designated reflection times.

Reflections and next steps:

This project has been beneficial for all staff involved. The time it has afforded staff to visit other settings, reflect on own practice and systems, read and research and consider how changes can be implemented effectively has been invaluable. It also allowed all staff to maximise the learning opportunities for all pupils. Furthermore, it provided pupils the time to reflect on their learning, develop their ability to talk about the learning journey and the transference of skills. Another effect of this project has been the way in which some school improvement priorities have been approached. Clear, systematic timetables with timescales have been used when managing and monitoring changes across the school.

In the future it is the school's intention to establish independent learning spaces where pupils regularly and independently organise their learning in terms of their daily time table. They will be required to recall, use and apply previously learnt skills at such times. Finally, all staff agreed they enjoyed being involved in this project. They felt improvements were made to their own practice and felt they would be keen to be involved in similar projects in the future.

Reference List:

Donaldson 2015 *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales*.

Estyn 2017 *Active and experiential learning: Effective foundation phase practice in delivering literacy and numeracy in Year 1 and Year 2*: Estyn

Hymer, B and Gershon M (2014) *Growth Mindset Pocket Book*. 1st edn. Teachers' Pocketbooks.

Appendices:

