

MA Educational Enquiry Unit

How effective is Mere School at listening to ‘the pupil’s voice’ in the self evaluation processes of the school?

Introduction

“Research is more thinking than doing.”

Knight, P (2002) *Small Scale Research* Sage

It has taken some considerable time to formulate my research question after many months of thought. My focus had to be relevant to my school, interesting for me and at the cutting edge of the future of British schooling. Journals and publications coming across my desk and the new OFSTED framework for September 2005 highlighted the importance of listening to ‘the pupils’ voice’. My school has a developing school council and my initial plans were to concentrate my efforts on the council but I wanted any data collected during my research to feed into our self-evaluation procedures and I was keen to canvas opinion from the whole school community. My overwhelming desire through this project, was to reflect on the way we listen and respond to our pupils and to develop our current practice so that we ‘listen more carefully to the pupils’ voice’ – hence my research question:

How effective is Mere School at listening to the ‘pupils’ voice’ in the self evaluation processes of the school?

My enquiry will take the form of an action research project. It will be a:

“systematic enquiry designed to yield practical results capable of improving a specific aspect of practice and made public to enable scrutiny and testing”

www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/research/glossary

and as Jack Whitehead states:

“an action research approach can help to raise morale and promote good practice in teaching and learning.”

Whitehead, J (1998) *Taking Charge through Action Research*, University of Bath –
www.bath.ac.uk/~edsajw

My aim is that my action research will be the means through which I can develop the ways we use the pupils’ views and opinions to impact on school improvement and pupil learning. I hope to have the opportunity to transform my own understanding through self-reflective strategies. The bank of data that is collected will provide useful evidence to feed into the new OFSTED self evaluation form that head teachers need to fill in prior to an inspection. I hope that this research project will audit the current position in my school and develop strategies to give the opinions and views of the children more value and recognition so that the pupils feel that they have an input into and impact on the development and improvement of Mere School which will result in better learning for all.

What is 'the pupils' voice'?

At present children have no rights of representation, except through their parents. The extent to which children have an opportunity to have their voice heard is dependent on individual heads and governors and on parents accurately reflecting their children's interest. The Children Act does not extend to giving pupils the right to have their voice heard in schools. Treating young people with respect, listening to them but also challenging them, requires a change in attitude.

Recent years have seen a wealth of statements supporting the idea of young people in school finding and using their voices:

"The fact is that pupils themselves have a huge contribution to make, not as passive objects but as active players in the education system."

Arnot, M, McIntyre, D, Pedder, D and Reay, D (2003) *Consultation in the classroom: developing dialogue about teaching and learning* Pearson, Cambridge

"Students can and should participate, not only in the construction of their own learning environments, but as research partners in examining questions of learning and anything else that happens in and around schools".

Fielding, M and Bragg, S (2003) *Students as researchers: making a difference* Pearson, Cambridge

Pupil voice is the consultative wing of pupil participation. Consultation is about talking with pupils about things that matter in school. It may involve: conversations about teaching and learning, seeking advice from pupils about new initiatives; inviting comment on ways of solving problems that are affecting the teacher's right to teach and the pupil's right to learn; inviting evaluative comment on recent developments in school or classroom policy and practice.

The Government are delivering plans to develop an accountability framework that puts a premium on effective self-evaluation as a means of driving school improvement. The policy document "A New Relationship with Schools" confirms that self evaluation will become a key component of the school inspection process and given that the whole endeavour of the promotion of personalised learning, there is clearly a place of the pupil as part of the new relationship. In the words of the White Paper:

"The key is that the school's self-evaluation should be based on a rigorous and honest analysis of adequate evidence which will include the views of parents and pupils."

DfES, 2004

The Government want the inclusion of the pupil voice in the self-evaluation process. The pupil voice should not be limited to their view on lockers, lunchtime provision and the general social life of the school – important as these are – but about the core of education, namely teaching and learning and the curriculum as experienced in schools.

Research Design

The research design was comprised of:

- 1 a review of literature concerning 'The Pupil's Voice'. I wanted to access research from this field to assess how other schools listen to the pupil's voice and how the outcome of this listening impacts on school self evaluation. Do researchers believe it is necessary or important to listen to the pupils when evaluating school practice and striving for improvement? I was hoping that reading about strategies employed by other schools might arm me with ideas for developing practice at Mere School.
- 2 a data collection relating to 'The Pupil's Voice' at Mere School.

I starting my research by introducing my work to the staff, selected parents and years 5 and 6 at Mere School. I asked each group for their support and they were keen and enthusiastic to be involved. I formulated a questionnaire for each group (pupils, parents and staff – see Appendices 1, 2 and 3) after reading widely and these were distributed and handed back over a period of time. The questionnaire focussed on auditing the current position at Mere School and collecting ideas and suggestions for developing our practice. The questionnaire was not piloted due to time restrictions.

I decided that I would not conduct interviews as my position at the school was a limiting factor. Parents, staff and pupils may have been inhibited about working directly with me and I felt that this might contaminate the data.

- 3 an analysis of previous questionnaires for pupils.

I wanted to look at the outcomes of these data collections to analyse whether the school acted upon the data gathered. This might enable me to come to a judgement as to whether we 'listened' to the pupil's voice and what impact the pupil's view had on the self evaluation outcomes. Did the pupil's evaluations impact on school improvement?

As the sample was so small I was able to sort, collate and analyse the findings. The reliability and validity of my research is limited due to:

- the very small scale of the research,
- time restrictions which prevented me from piloting the questionnaire,
- the collection of evidence if from one school only, and
- the fact that parents, staff and children knew that the head teacher was going to read their responses!

Literature Review

After an extensive search around this area I have 4 main, substantial literature sources. Access to the library was challenging for me personally so I have focused mainly on internet based studies. 'The Pupil's Voice' is also high on the educational agenda presently and I was keen to relate to up-to-date papers.

- 1 Harland, J (2004) *The Pupil Voice in School Self-Evaluation* NFER/ConfEd Annual research Conference

This paper argues the case for the inclusion for the pupil voice in the self evaluation processes of the school. It argues that the pupil voice should not be limited to the general social life of the school but to the core of education – teaching and learning and the curriculum. The paper

draws together recent literature and research from this field and offers 2 ideas for collecting pupils' views on their learning and the curriculum which could form part of a school self-evaluation process.

I found this document most useful and relevant to my study. It is at the cutting edge of Educational thought and frequently refers to David Miliband's (School Standards Minister) plans to develop an accountability framework that puts a premium of effective self-evaluation as a means of driving school improvement. The ideas for collecting the pupils' views are based in secondary schools – finding literature specifically relating to primary schools has been difficult.

- 2 Rafferty, S (2005) *Giving Children a Voice – What Next?*, The Scottish Council for Research in Education – www.scrc.ac.uk/spotlight/spotlight65.html

The aim of this study was to find out what happens when primary age children are given a voice in the informal curriculum. They interpret 'being given a voice' as having an opportunity to be heard by the decision makers and to influence decisions as legitimate contributors. This influence on decisions was limited to the 'informal curriculum' – what happens outside the classroom.

This paper is based on a study from one primary school. A literature study is conducted and a case for children's participation is made. The position of the pupils at the school is placed on Hart's ladder, which identifies both non-participation and the varying degrees of child involvement and participation (*Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*, Hart, R 1992). Conclusions are drawn from this and ways for giving children a voice are identified. There is a list of further questions formulated from this research – one of which is:

"How would it be appropriate and beneficial to give children a voice in decision-making in the formal curriculum?"

Had this question been answered in this research project the material would have been very useful for my study. I am hoping that my research will look at pupil participation at a deeper level. However, it was beneficial to engage with some research specifically planned for primary age pupils.

- 3 Johnson, K (2004) *Children's Voices: Pupil Leadership in Primary Schools* NCSL

The full report from this research includes case studies of how 2 schools have put into practice their commitment to involving pupils in the leadership of the school. Specific steps that these schools took in a number of areas are discussed at length. The author considers drivers for increased participation and identifies the factors that are important in encouraging opportunities for the authentic student voice in primary schools. This study raises some interesting concluding thoughts. The authors identify that published literature and new research continues to show an increased openness to working with children in school improvement and this has the potential to make schools both more responsive to their needs and more engaging. They feel that this is particularly important in the key area of teaching and learning and in any event this increased openness to collaborative working will inevitably bring with it a range of exciting opportunities for adults and children alike.

I found this paper enlightening. The research is rigorous and conducted on a large scale. The research design is transparent and principal judgements and recommendations are carefully supported with a bank of evidence. It is also relevant, with a particular focus on primary schools and up to date.

- 4 Fielding, M (2001) *Beyond the Rhetoric of Student Voice: New Departures or New Constraints in the Transformation of 21st Century Schooling?* University of Sussex

Fielding identifies that at the time this paper was written work on the student voice in schools was at an interesting crossroads – were we witnessing the emergence of something genuinely new or were these intentions an additional mechanism of control? Fielding draws on past and current examples of student voice work and on the ground breaking developments occurring in schools. He then raises a set of questions that seek to probe the realities of student voice. Finally some key considerations are raised to enable the student voice to become a significant part of school life. Fielding identifies that there are a few signs of a very different partnership beginning to emerge but he is unable to gauge what direction the student voice work will take over the next few years.

This paper is significant and well referenced. The educational climate has moved on considerably since this work was published and Fielding's concerns about the genuine desire for schools to listen to their pupil's voices are not as great. The new OFSTED framework gives schools little choice in this matter. Some very interesting and thought provoking questions are raised throughout the work.

What does 'the pupils' voice' mean at Mere School?

From analysis of the questionnaires everyone was aware of the different ways we listen to 'the pupils' voice' at Mere School. All of the parents and the majority of the school staff felt that Mere School valued and acted upon what the pupils told us – one member of staff made the point that it was not always possible to act on pupil requests but careful explanations were given when this was the case. The pupils felt that the teachers listen to them and try to act on what had been asked but 50% of them felt that their ideas had no influence over the way the school is run. On further analysis the year 5 pupils felt their opinions had some influence and the year 6 pupils did not. Pupils did make interesting comments about time restrictions and the fact that

“every school has to stick to certain things”.

The negative responses related exclusively to the school council on using the ideas generated. Opinion on the adult questionnaires as to the pupils having influence over the way the school is run was divided. The general consensus of opinion was that the 'pupils' voice was considered in some areas – playtimes, playground equipment, toilet refurbishment etc, but curricular influence was small. It was noted by a member of staff that

“there were very few realistic requests that could result in change”.

A parent commented that

“lots of statutory issues get in the way”.

All respondees believed that it was important to listen to 'the pupils' voice'. One year 5 child wrote:

“Just because we are small doesn't mean we're DUMB!”

A wide range of educational benefits were highlighted. The adults generally commented that the children are the most important element of the school – the consumers – and we can all learn together as a school community to improve the provision. Trust, value, confidence building, life skills and appreciation were common threads. One teacher felt that we should

listen to pupils carefully to identify shortcomings in our teaching. The benefits discussed by the children were all related to learning:

“people like different ways of learning because the attitude of the pupils will change if they are learning in a way that they like.”

“the teachers understand how well we are learning”.

“We can concentrate on our school work if other issues are sorted out”.

Some parents believed that the high standards of behaviour achieved at Mere School were achieved through listening and responding to the pupils:

“improved behaviour results in improved learning”.

The pupils found it difficult to make suggestions as to how we can improve current practice – a suggestions box or the opportunity to talk individually were mentioned. The parents were concerned about the growing numbers at Mere School and were anxious that the school does not lose its current ethos. The staff of the school looked at this question in more detail and related it to how listening to ‘the pupils’ voice’ can impact more fully on school self evaluation. Major issues raised were:

- 1 The School Council needs to feed back in more detail to the staff.
- 2 The school needs to ask the pupils’ opinion on their learning more frequently – possibly regularly as part of the plenary during lessons.
- 3 Could the children have the opportunity to talk to someone ‘neutral’ – an adult who is not a member of staff in a more relaxed environment?
- 4 Would it be valuable as part of our peer group monitoring for staff to talk with pupils from other classes?
- 5 Could we participate in the ‘Transforming Learning Project’ (HayGroup – an on-line self-evaluation website)?

All respondees made valuable points about how giving the pupils a ‘louder’ voice could improve learning. The issues raised related back to the benefits previously mentioned. One parent was concerned that we needed to get the balance right in school and there is a ‘fine line’, in their opinion, between giving the children voice and dictation. There was total agreement though that listening to the ‘pupils’ voice’ would improve learning.

Effect issued raised through ‘the pupils’ voice’ have had in the past

I analysed data from the previous 2 academic years. On a pastoral front the school has responded to issues arising in the following areas:

- 1 a school council has been established.
- 2 separate playtimes have been introduced.
- 3 classroom space has been considered and new buildings and different classroom organisation has addressed many of the concerns.

On the learning front in 2002/3 44% of the pupils thought that their homework was boring. In 2003/4 this figure fell to 37%. However, this is still a large number of children who are uninspired by homework and according to this data ‘the pupils’ voice’ had a little impact. However, in 2002/3 only 24% of the pupils felt that they had the opportunity to discuss their work with the teacher, but in 2003/4 this percentage rose to 79%. The impact of the 2003/4 questionnaire was significant.

Discussion of data regarding future development in this area

The collection of data for this research project was crude and limited and I have the following concerns:

- 1 the questionnaires were not piloted due to time restrictions.
- 2 there was a low response to the adult questionnaire – 45%. I feel that this was because it was too complex for parents.
- 3 the pupil questionnaire was again challenging for the children so I only administered it to the year 5 and 6 children.
- 4 on further analysis the questionnaire was given to the year 6 children when there was a ‘power struggle’ going on within the management team of the school council. This impacted on the pupils’ responses.

However, despite this I have had the opportunity to audit and reflect on the current position at my school. The bank of data will feed into the new OFSTED self evaluation form and I have issues I would like to discuss with the staff and governors. Without doubt all stakeholders feel that ‘the pupils’ voice’ is listened to and valued at Mere School but there is some question as to whether this voice impacts on the development and improvement of Mere School overall. I feel, as mentioned in Harland’s paper, that the focus for the pupils’ voice at Mere School is on the social side, although we are making inroads into involving pupils in the core of education – that of teaching and learning.

Some key issues have arisen that I would like to investigate further with the staff and pupils:

- 1 The School Council – this body needs to have strong student leadership and I am keen to ‘widen their brief’ to consider issues directly related to teaching and learning. The School Council need to be given the opportunity to feedback their outcomes to the staff and governors.
- 2 I would like to consider the possibility with the staff and pupils of participating in the HayGroup ‘Transforming Learning’ data collection and analysis system. This is expensive and the staff need to be well prepared for the data that is returned. However, it would save time for the school and offer the pupils a “safer” and anonymous route for delivering their opinions. Some very useful information is produced on classroom climate and pupil learning.
- 3 As was highlighted on many of the questionnaires the pupils are our consumers and we need to consult them regularly on how and what they have learnt and what changes could be made to the lessons to help them learn more. I would like all teachers to engage in discussions of this type at the end of every lesson, as part of the plenary, so that it becomes part of our ethos. I am aware that some of the messages can be quite ‘painful’ for the teacher!
- 4 Other stakeholders have expressed an interest in having an opportunity to listen to ‘the pupils’ voice – governors, a neutral adult not attached to the school or a teacher from another class. I am particularly excited by the idea of using our peer group monitoring to listen to the pupils in our colleague’s classes to see if we can develop our teaching and learning.

I have relished the opportunity to look closely at ‘the pupils’ voice’ in my school and I now have a clear picture of ‘where we are’ and what we need to reflect on to develop our practice.

Conclusion

To return to my research question:

How effective is Mere School at listening to ‘the pupils’ voice’ in the self evaluation processes of the school?

I have concluded that the school does listen to the pupils and values what they have to say. The data supports this statement. However, the school needs to be better at listening to their voice so that what we hear impacts on the ‘nitty gritty’ of the school – that of teaching and learning and not just the informal curriculum. Pupil consultation offers a rich source of information. As my educational enquiries continue I intend to evaluate the validity of my belief that pupil consultation can enhance the children’s own learning experiences and development as independent, critical thinkers and contribute to broader and longer term school improvement.

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MERE SCHOOL

'The Pupils' Voice'

Questionnaire for Staff

- 1 How do we listen to 'the pupils' voice' at Mere School?
- 2 Does the school value and act upon what the pupils tell us?
- 3 Do the pupils have any influence over the way the school is run?
- 4 Do you think that it is important to listen to 'the pupils' voice?
Why?
- 5 What are the educational benefits of listening to 'the pupils' voice'?
- 6 What might we do to develop the role of 'the pupils' voice' so that it impacts on our self evaluation?
- 7 How might giving our pupils a 'louder' voice improve their learning?

Thank you for your help!

Appendix 2

MERE SCHOOL

'The Pupils' Voice'

Questionnaire for Selected Parents

- 1 How do you think we listen to 'the pupils' voice at Mere School?

- 2 Do you think that the school values and acts upon what the pupils tell us?

- 3 Do you feel that the children have any influence over the way the school is run?

- 4 Do you think it is important that we listen to 'the pupils' voice'? Why?

- 5 What do you feel the educational benefits of listening to 'the pupils' voice' are?

- 6 How might we listen to our pupils more effectively?

- 7 How might giving our pupils a 'louder' voice improve their learning?

Thank you for your help!

Appendix 3

MERE SCHOOL

'The Pupils' Voice'

Questionnaire for Children

- 1 How do you share your opinions and ideas about our school and your learning?

- 2 Do the teachers listen to and try to do something about what you have told them?

- 3 Do you feel that your ideas have some influence over the way Mere School is run?

- 4 Do you think it is important that the teachers listen to the children's ideas? Why?

- 5 What are the benefits of teachers listening to the children?

- 6 What might the school do to improve how we listen to the children's views and opinions?

- 7 How can listening to your ideas and opinions improve your learning at Mere School?

Thank you for your help!

