



How does involving the children in classroom planning affect their learning?

Chris Potter
Bailey's Court Primary School
Bristol

How does involving the children in classroom planning affect their learning?

Aim of the project

We were aware of a number of children who were coasting or dipping in English in Key Stage 2. We wanted to find out whether we could motivate them, using innovative classroom strategies.

Dimensions of the study

The study involved a mixed class of Year 4/5 children at a large primary school (390) in a suburban area of Bristol. It focused in particular on a group of six children (four boys and two girls) within the class who were 'dipping' below expected levels. The children were chosen purely on a dip in attainment levels, rather than aptitude or personality. (They were identified through school tracking data, based on their Key Stage 1 results and their Fisher Family Trust (FFT) projected targets).

Summary of main findings

Our initial evidence suggested that inviting children to plan lessons by co-constructing learning intentions and activities in small groups:

- made the children's contributions a genuine part of the planning process;
- increased the children's motivation to learn, particularly for children who were dipping below expected levels;
- made learning more relevant to the children;
- ensured every child had the opportunity to become involved in the planning process; and
- helped to increase the confidence and contributions of quieter members of the class.

Background and context

The school has historically focused on the children's metacognition and the children were recognised by Ofsted as being independent in their learning. The school is also innovative in its approach to

the curriculum and has recently re-designed both content and approach to reflect a more thematic curriculum. The idea behind our research was stimulated by a visit from a group of head teachers who had noticed that whilst children were often invited to raise questions regarding their learning, it did not always take place *before* the teachers began their planning. As a result, we felt that some children's contributions were perhaps tokenised rather than valued as a genuine part of the planning process.

Teaching processes and strategies

There was already a classroom culture in our school of children raising questions about the next topic at the end of the previous term's project. This idea grew out of our redesign of the curriculum which was stimulated by our research into the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme. We took it a step further by directly involving the children with co-constructing and designing their learning activities.

We started with the 'dippers', inviting them to become more involved in planning and co-constructing their learning through creating a learning plan for a specific lesson, which linked Literacy and their theme for learning. The children were asked to plan a Literacy lesson within the topic of 'information texts', which linked to the theme for the term – 'Off the Drawing Board' (a study of invention and inventors).

The six 'dippers' worked as a group away from the main class to plan the Literacy lesson. They were expected to come up with both a learning intention and a related activity that would link Literacy and the current topic. At first they tried to discuss the task as a whole group, but after a short while reverted to working on their own. They then shared their thoughts in turn with each other. They then voted for the most popular plan before arriving at the learning intention of; 'To make notes that can then be used by someone else and to summarise information seen in a film'. Next, they discussed a relevant activity, finally agreeing on 'To make notes from a video about Brunel that could be used to pass on relevant information to an audience who had not seen the film'. After the lesson, children commented how they felt both proud and surprised at how well the lesson turned out and said they felt more motivated during the lesson because it was their lesson. They also felt they had worked harder during the lesson than usual.

As a follow up, the six 'dippers' were asked to plan another Literacy lesson, but this time each dipper was expected to work as a team leader of a group of mixed ability children in the class, with minimal input from the teacher. The groups were given 20 minutes to discuss a learning intention based on playscripts with team leaders feeding back to everyone at the end of that time.

The groups approached the task in different ways. For example, in Alfie's group, the team first came up with individual ideas then shared their ideas, discussing and choosing their favourite. This worked well for the team on the whole, although we noted the perceived non-acceptance of Alfie as a team leader by Annabel (a confident Year 5 girl – Alfie was a Year 4).

Learning Intention: To write a playscript in a fun way

Activity: Small groups to write a play based on a specific picture

Amelia's group had a more wide-ranging discussion from the start. Amelia scribed ideas, with Nathan (confident Year 5) taking a natural lead. All of the team made an input.

Learning Intention: To edit my work

Activity: To correct a poor playscript

The findings

The children were very positive about the planning process, although they found it hard to please everyone. It was also evident that some of the quieter, less dominant members of the class were reticent about contributing their ideas. Nevertheless, one child (Billy) who was normally very quiet and happy to take a 'back seat', showed a high level of confidence in this situation.

It was noticeable that each of the groups came up with a different learning intention and significantly different activity. This reinforced the value of going through this process at the initial planning stage of the theme.

The planning process seemed to work particularly well with mixed aged year groups because it provided a forum for the younger members of the class and gave them an opportunity to shine.

It is too early to measure pupil progress; however, all the children spoke positively of their experience, as shown by the following comments:

"It's good to have freedom in what we do".

"It's great to know what we're doing when we walk into the lesson".

"32 heads are better than one".

"We already had an idea of what the lesson would be and we were looking forward to it and could just get straight on with it".

"We all did it so that no-one got left out".

"We can't moan about a lesson we planned".



Research methods

Our research methods involved observation of the children in their classroom environment, videoing, anecdotal notes, and debate and discussion with and by the six key children.

To extend this study further in the future, we would look for trends through tracking children's progress over a defined time, so that we could analyse assessment data in relation to our hypothesis.

Conclusions

We now have high expectations of the children's ability to co-construct their learning. We can see that it leads to increased motivation for and relevance of learning. There are indicators here that lack of motivation is a cause of children dipping. We noticed how the group planning process helped some children who were normally reticent gain confidence in leading a group and make excellent contributions.

The process will be shared with all teachers in Key Stage 2, with some lessons devoted to this style of delivery during the next year. Teachers will be encouraged to trial this method as a part of their planning and to interview children to establish any impact this may have on their motivation and, as a result, their achievement.

Suggestions for further reading

Dryden, G. and Vos, Dr J. (2001) *The Learning Revolution*. Network Educational Press, Stafford.

Hughes, M. (2006) *And the main thing is...Learning, Education Training and Support*. Cheltenham.

McIntyre, D., Pedder, D. and Rudduck, J. (2005) University of Cambridge, Research Papers in Education, 20 (2) pp. 149-168.

Prashing, B. (1998) *The Power of Diversity*. Network Educational Press, Stafford.

Teachers TV: Professional Skills – Planning with pupils. www.teachers.tv/video/5441

Primary Years Programme, International Baccalaureate Organization, 2005

Author's contact details

Chris Potter

Bailey's Court Primary School

Breaches Gate

Bradley Stoke

Bristol BS32 8AZ

Tel: 01454 866666

e-mail: chrispotter16@tiscali.co.uk



This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2008, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research.

All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

This publication has been supported by the DCSF Gender Agenda.

To find out more please email: research.summaries@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk