



Julia Flutter explains the benefits of consulting pupils about their learning

Questions are not only a frequently used tool for teaching, but also a time-honoured feature of the special culture that we recognise as 'school life'. Walk into any classroom, anywhere, and you are likely to witness the familiar ritual of questions being asked and hands being raised. Teachers ask questions, of course, for a variety of purposes: to verify that pupils understand instructions and new information, to prompt pupils' thinking about problems and possible solutions or, perhaps, as a way of introducing discussion and debate on complex issues. Pupils, on the other hand, ask questions about what they are expected to do. They may also request additional or clearer information. They question each other and, of course, there will be the more prosaic questions about the whereabouts of pencil sharpeners and so forth. But there are some important questions that, somewhat surprisingly, rarely feature in classroom discourse and these are questions that focus on the learning process itself.

Thinking and talking about learning

Stop to consider, for a moment, how you would answer the following questions:

- How do you learn?
- What kinds of things help you to learn?
- Are there things that get in the way of your learning?
- If you struggle to learn a skill or to understand a new concept, what helps you to overcome the problem?
- What motivates you to learn something?
- How do you know when you have been successful in your learning?

In our research projects, we have been listening to young learners' responses to questions like these and examining the potential benefits of engaging pupils in this type of dialogue, focussing on the process of learning itself. Evidence from our work in primary and secondary schools across the country shows that, not only do pupils of all ages have remarkable capabilities for thinking and talking about learning in a considered and insightful way, but that the process of dialogue itself may have a key role to play in improving teaching and learning.

Many schools working with us have said that listening to pupils' perspectives has enabled them to develop a clearer understanding of how pupils learn most effectively and has offered new directions for school improvement. Other researchers have also noted that learning-focused dialogue can have important benefits for pupils themselves. Mike Jelly and colleagues, who have used this approach with their research in special needs schools, found evidence that involving pupils in talking about learning enhances their self-esteem, self-awareness and confidence; increases their engagement with learning and helps them to become more assertive and participative members of the school community (Jelly, Fuller and Byers, 2000). The widening body of research on pupils' perspectives of teaching and learning provides evidence of the approach's positive outcomes at individual pupil, classroom and whole school levels.

Talking about Learning – some potential benefits

At individual pupil level, talking with pupils about aspects of teaching and learning:

- enhances pupils' meta-cognitive development
- increases pupils' understanding and awareness of learning processes
- encourages pupils to develop a more serious attitude to schooling
- helps to raise pupils' self-confidence and self-esteem
- develops pupils' vocabulary for talking about learning

At classroom level, talking with pupils about aspects of teaching and learning:

- promotes more positive pupil-teacher relationships

- provides teachers with feedback to help them improve their practice
- helps teachers to identify things that may impede, or enhance, pupils' progress
- creates a more collaborative learning environment
- offers opportunities to develop new approaches based on pupils' perspectives

At whole school level, talking with pupils about aspects of teaching and learning:

- feeds into processes of school self-review
- offers possible new directions for school improvement planning
- helps to establish a more positive learning culture
- supports the teaching of important principles such as democracy and citizenship
- can be used to monitor and evaluate the conditions of learning in school

As James Park argued in a recent *Teaching Thinking* article: *Dialogue has potential in every school subject and every area of school life. It is a social activity that maximises the learning potential of the individual. Its power lies in its capacity to engage young people's thinking and feeling in ways that encourage them to expand their knowledge and understanding of the topic in hand.* (Park, 2001, p. 37).

In our research with primary and secondary schools, we have been looking at the process of pupil consultation and its potential for improving teaching and learning at these various levels. First, we will look at its impact on individual learning and then consider the broader implications for schools and society in adopting this approach.

Reflecting on learning

Offering pupils opportunities to think and talk about aspects of teaching and learning improves their understanding and awareness of the learning process (see, for example, recent work by Watkins, 2001) and has a direct impact on pupils' meta-cognitive development, as illustrated by Ingrid Pramling's work (Pramling, 1990) with very young children. The approach can be particularly useful as a way of identifying and working on those aspects of schooling that pupils find difficult. In our project, *Effective Learning – Thinking about Learning, Talking about Learning*, we worked with teachers in local primary and secondary schools, on classroom-based investigations of pupils' perspectives. One issue that teachers were keen to explore was pupils' understandings of what makes a piece of work 'good'. The research investigations focused on the following questions:

- How do pupils evaluate their performance?
- Whose advice do they value when assessing their work?
- What kinds of feedback do they need for improvement?

- Is their understanding of learning objectives and assessment criteria clear?
- Do certain conditions of learning enable them to produce better work?

We gathered data from pupils through interviews, questionnaires and surveys. Issues identified from this evidence were used as a basis for developing new strategies for assessing pupil progress. One primary school was particularly concerned that pupils' understanding of learning objectives tended to be quite limited and the Year 5/6 class teacher thought that one way of developing pupils' understanding would be to give them a more active role in the assessment process.

After an initial investigation into what the pupils understood about learning objectives and assessment, she decided to ask pupils to assess each other's pieces of creative writing and to offer feedback (via sticky/post-it notes) on how well their work matched the learning objectives that she had set for the lesson. Over the course of the one-year project the teacher noticed significant changes in the quality of pupils' written work and, through her discussions with pupils, she found that they had gained a more sophisticated understanding of assessment processes. These are the class teacher's comments about the outcomes of her research:

In the initial group interviews when children talked about how they knew when their work was good, their comments were vague. But towards the end of the project their comments increasingly reflected the learning objectives set. Children of all levels of attainment were able to comment and mark effectively as long as they were clear about the criteria and learning objectives... The quality of children's English work has improved enormously over this year and our judgement is supported by an overwhelmingly positive response from parents and good English SATs results! And, importantly, we feel that our children understand more clearly how to improve their work. We also believe the project has given the children a stronger sense of responsibility for their own learning.

As another school working on this project discovered, talking with pupils about assessment and feedback also helps to identify their misconceptions about these processes. Teachers in this large comprehensive secondary school carried out a survey and focus group interviews with Year 8 pupils to investigate their views on what makes a piece of work 'good'. Analysis of the data revealed that, although pupils saw assessment and feedback from teachers as important measures of their achievement and took these processes very seriously, they were nevertheless often confused by marks and grades, and did not know what was required to improve their standards of attainment. As a result of their research, teachers introduced new strategies for giving feedback to pupils with more detailed information on ways of improving the quality of work. Another school

focused its research on pupils' views on a recently introduced target-setting system. Teachers found that even older pupils were experiencing difficulties in making sense, or use, of this information. One Year 10 pupil even suggested how the school's target-setting system could be made more effective:

Rather than just set the grade, at the end of the day that may be what you have to aspire to, but rather than just doing that [teachers] could point out the areas where you could really do with improvement, rather than just sending round a piece of paper with like... profile grade, target grade and effort grades and things like that that don't mean anything. It's what you need to improve on that should be there.

Our evidence also shows how assessment influences pupils' identities as learners. Less confident learners appear particularly vulnerable to loss of motivation and self-esteem as a result of regular negative feedback. These comments, from Year 11 students at a student support centre, illustrate how adopting a more positive feedback strategy can promote re-engagement with learning:

If, you know, instead of a teacher saying 'Oh that's not good enough! Do it again because you've got one word wrong', you've actually got a teacher saying to you, 'That was a very imaginative, well-written piece of work' – that's like, well, a reward in a way. (Year 11 boy)

Before, a lot of teachers just used to think I was useless and I would never try my best whereas now they like acknowledge



that I am trying my best and that does make it a lot easier to get on with work and motivates you to do things. (Year 11 boy)

This process of consulting pupils about learning has enabled teachers and researchers to gain insights into aspects of schooling that have a direct impact on pupils' progress and it has also helped pupils to develop a clearer understanding of how they learn best. The potential benefits of pupil consultation, however, are not confined to individual pupil's learning and progress and there are some important, wider implications in adopting this approach for teachers, schools and society at large.

A new kind of experience

Learning is often thought of, and is generally measured, as an individualistic pursuit and, although group work and other collaborative ways of working are quite commonly used in the classroom, these activities are rarely assessed or celebrated as 'joint productions'. Opportunities to experience learning as a collaborative process tend to be quite limited, even with regard to curriculum areas where these ways of learning might be particularly appropriate, such as citizenship education. Inviting pupils to think and talk about their experiences as learners represents a departure from this predominant, individualistic view of learning because it encourages a more positive, participative learning culture in which the position of young learners is redefined.

Rather than being regarded as passive recipients, or even consumers, of education, pupils who are consulted take on new

roles as 'key witnesses' (or sometimes as active agents) in the process of improving teaching and learning. As James suggested, re-conceptualising young learners in this way can have a far-reaching effect:

...inviting the young to be responsible persons, the young behave responsibly and the whole character of the school society changes. (James, 1968, p.68).

Our Network Project, *Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning*, has been looking at how schools develop and use pupil consultation and pupil participation and at the impact these strategies may have on teaching and learning in schools. Many schools working with us have reported positive changes in ethos and culture arising from their initiatives. Some have now moved beyond the first step of gathering data from pupils to a more direct involvement of pupils in setting the agenda of enquiry, acting as researchers or co-researchers and in monitoring and evaluating outcomes.

School councils

Some schools have, for example, extended the roles of their school councils to encompass discussion of issues concerned with teaching and learning rather than focusing exclusively on the more traditional school council topics of uniforms, vending machines and social events. Several schools have set up sub-committees on their school councils to investigate pedagogical concerns and to report back to staff (topics have, for example, included changes to the PSHE curriculum and assessment and feedback processes). Teachers have been delighted at the serious approach pupils have taken to these tasks and, as the following comments indicate, its impact can be far-reaching:

The concept of using students to research aspects of their school is a wonderfully refreshing idea. After all, they are the best ones to raise concerns and highlight issues that are important to them about their working and social environment. This is what I find so exciting; this research can make a positive difference to everyone. It's not about students picking holes in teachers, it's about achieving together. (Secondary school teacher)

We have had a student council, but up until now students have not had a voice in the area of curriculum development. The work carried out by Year 8 has shown that the students as 'receivers' of our teaching are an underused resource. Our students have shown themselves to be capable of conducting research with integrity and commitment and this has resulted in their views being seen as important and respected. (Secondary school teacher)

Pupils also appreciate these opportunities to express their opinions and to take responsibility as members of a learning



community. Beth Crane, a former pupil at Sharnbrook Upper School and Community College (a Network project member school) who was involved in the school's 'Students as Researchers' initiative, explains how this project changed her view of schooling:

As my involvement in the project continued I came to realise more and more that every student is a valued member of the school community, and that how they feel about it does matter. This knowledge not only had a profound affect on a personal level for myself and the other students involved in the project, but also, on a school-wide level, it encourages students to be honest with the school. The research projects undertaken provided the student body with another opportunity to express their opinion, in the knowledge that it would be taken seriously. This kind of knowledge creates an ethos of respect in the establishment.. (Crane, 2001, p. 54)

These comments have been echoed by many other teachers and pupils and demonstrate that processes of consultation and participation can have a powerful, positive impact on the school community. Clearly, such processes have special relevance for citizenship education because they allow young people to experience and enact democratic principles and offer opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills necessary for taking an active role in democratic structures.

Summary

I began by considering the benefits for individual pupil progress of talking with pupils about teaching and learning. I presented evidence of the kinds of positive effects this approach can have on meta-cognitive development and in helping pupils and teachers to gain insights into ways of making teaching and learning more effective. While these are clearly important and valuable advantages, the wider significance of pupil consultation and pupil participation must also be recognised. Encouraging young people to see themselves as members of a learning community promotes a different perspective on thinking and learning in which these processes are no longer seen as wholly individualised and competitive, but are perceived as creative, collaborative ventures for common objectives.



Strategies for teaching thinking have often focused on individual ability and problem-solving skills but, there is also an urgent need to teach our young people about thinking and learning as social activities – indeed, as social responsibilities. Schools can provide fertile ground in which to sow the seeds of tolerance, understanding and respect and, in listening and responding to the voices of pupils, schools allow teachers and pupils to experience membership of a democratic community where the need to talk, think and work together is recognised and valued. The work of our Network Project schools indicates that there is growing awareness of the importance of pupil voice, echoing this positive view expressed by Michael Fielding (Fielding, 2001):

The reciprocity between student and teacher, school and community that have always been at the heart of a widely and richly conceived notion of education seems to be expressing itself in new ways and new forms that may hold out much for the future.

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Our Network Project, Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning is part of the Economic and Social Research Council's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (Phase I). Further details about the Network and its research can be obtained from: Mrs Nichola Daily, Network Project secretary, Faculty of Education (Homerton site), University of Cambridge, Cambridge, CB2 2PH or please see website: www.consultingpupils.com.

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