

Pupil Voice for Promoting Inclusion in Schools (PVPI)



'Unlocking' learners: An account of practice from collaborative action research in St. John's Primary and Nursery School



The project

The project (**funded by Research England – Participatory Research Fund, UKRI**) addresses the question: “**How can we promote inclusion in schools through an engagement with pupils’ voices?**” It involved a group of primary schools in the city of Southampton that carried out collaborative action research, to find ways that will ensure that all children’s voices are heard in order to promote greater inclusion in learning processes. The study employed participatory research methods. Each school developed their own research focus based on area of concern for them, or an area that they wanted to explore in more detail, through the lens of pupil voice.

The school

St. John’s Primary and Nursery School is an inclusive and accessible school with 435 students, located in the Old Town of Southampton. The school comprises of 15 classes that include a Nursery, Reception and Years 1 - 6 (3- to 11-year-olds, mixed gender). There is a total of 60 members of staff, including teachers and support workers. The school serves a diverse community: 54% of children have English as an Additional Language, 36% of children receive Pupil Premium Funding (both above national) and 14% of children have identified Special Educational Needs and Disability.

The school’s ‘Vision and Values’ are at the core of everything that the school does. Pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is promoted through the values of curiosity, courage, integrity and pride, which are embedded throughout every aspect of the school life. Driven by inclusion, respect, and a moral purpose, the school is proud to be a School of Sanctuary. The school embraces acceptance and tolerance, celebrates local communities, and explores local and national commemorations. Everyone works together to create a happy environment where all members of the school community feel safe, can enjoy, achieve, and make a positive contribution to the school and the wider community.

Research focus and process

Three members of staff were involved in the study: the Deputy Headteacher who led the whole process and two Year 4 teachers. All three participated in a workshop at the university where the purposes of the project were discussed and the use of various participatory methods to involve children in research in schools were explored, including the idea of children becoming researchers.

The school decided to focus on finding ways to ‘unlock’ some children, that they were seen as ‘hard to reach’. Some of these children had come from other countries, as refugees or asylum seekers, others were defined as having special educational needs and/or disabilities or were ones who do not actively participate in class, do not share their thoughts with others, do not get involved and are unusually quiet.

The school decided to investigate barriers to learning for these vulnerable children using the ‘pupil researcher’ approach, to offer these students the opportunity to take a leading role in the whole process. Following the school’s aim for investigating ways to support children to be more confident in their learning, the following research questions drove the project:

- **How can we support children to be more confident in their learning?**
- **What are the barriers to learning?**

The Deputy Head Teacher worked with Year 5 and Year 6 children, and the two class teachers in Year 4 worked with their year group. They each chose three pupil researchers from each class. Six pupil researchers were selected from Year 4: 3 girls and 3 boys (quiet pupils and pupils who were not making progress). Year 5 and 6 researchers included three girls and three boys (one was a refugee, two were defined as having special educational needs, and three who hardly ever spoke).

The project in Year 5 and Year 6 classes was led by the Deputy Headteacher, who had responsibility for the overall process of the project. The Year 4 teachers collaborated and led the process with their classes.

The school organised five sessions for this project:

Session 1: Introducing the project: During this session the aims of the project were introduced with a focus on the meaning of carrying out research and becoming a researcher. The Deputy Head conducted the session with the six selected children from Year 5/6 training them on how to become researchers in a small group in her office. The Year 4 teachers held a whole class session to introduce the project.

Session 2: Thinking about learning: During this session, the aim was to explore children's thinking about what helps them to learn and what makes it difficult for them, as well as what supports them with being confident in their learning. Two participatory methods were used during this session: post-it notes and the photo elicitation.

Session 1 and 2 were combined in a one-hour session with the Year 5 and Year 6 student researchers, whereas the Year 4 classes did the two sessions in two separate afternoons.

Session 3: Practising observations: Having explored the student researchers' thoughts about learning and what helps them being more confident, they then practised classroom observations in other classes. The Y5/6 student researchers observed Year 4 classes whereas the Year 4 student researchers observed Year 3 classes.

Session 4: Constructing dialogue with teachers: During this session teachers had dialogues with student researchers. Based on the main ideas that emerged through the activities and the lesson observations,

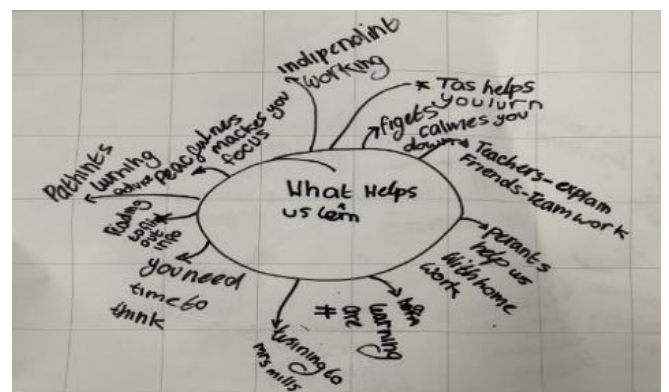
more discussions followed and specific areas to explore in more depth were identified. For example, in the Year 5/6 student researcher group, an area that emerged was the use of worked examples as a way of supporting children's learning. This idea was then explored with the other two teachers in Year 4 and was included in their lesson planning that was then going to be observed by the student researchers in Years 5 and 6 in the next session.

Session 5: More focused explorations and introducing changes: The direction taken at this stage was different between the different year groups. The Years 5 and 6 student researchers observed the lessons in Year 4, where the teachers included the worked examples, as suggested by the student researchers, as a practice that is helpful for children. In addition, the Year 4 teachers used sentence stems and asked their student researchers to complete, in order to explore in more detail specific areas related to learning.

Additional session: This session was not planned from the start. When the Deputy Head had the discussions with the Year 5/6 children about what they noticed when they did the second set of observations during the last session, she asked the student researchers if they wanted to share their feedback with the teachers that they observed in Year 4. The students were keen to do this, and this was arranged for another day.

Participatory methods used

Mind maps: Mind maps were used in whole class sessions to explore what helps/stops all Year 4 students' learning; what confidence means, what helps children be more confident in learning and what stops children from learning or being confident. Student researchers in Year 5/6 also used mind maps. They wrote down their ideas on paper or post-it notes that created a mind map and they then discussed the results together as a small group with the Deputy Head leading the discussion.



Year 4 mind map

Unfinished sentences: The Year 4 pupil researchers were invited to complete four unfinished sentences. Both of the Year 4 teachers were present for this activity. One of the teachers read the sentences and gave students post-it notes and encouraged them to write down as many ideas as possible. Students were given the option either complete the sentence by writing down their idea, or by drawing their idea.

The following unfinished sentences were presented:

- 'My favourite type of learning is ...'
- 'I find learning tricky when ...'
- 'When learning I wish my teacher would ...'
- 'In my learning I wish we could do more of ...'

Teachers gave many prompts to students and supported them one by one to express their ideas. Finally, they read all post-it notes and asked students to give examples and explain why they came up with those ideas.



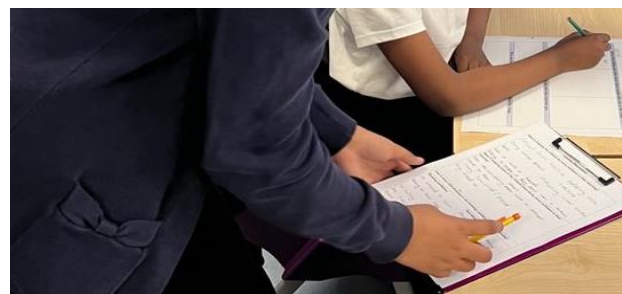
Year 4 pupil researchers completing sentence stems

Photo elicitation: Photo elicitation was used with all year groups that took part in the project. Nine photos were used. Six were identified by Google (by searching 'confident classroom') and three were ones taken by teachers in real classrooms. During the training of the researchers from Years 5 and 6 the printed photos were shown to students in turns, and the teacher asked to put their name under the two pictures that they thought that showed students who were confident in their learning. When they did that, there were two photos that were not chosen by anyone. The teacher explored why nobody had chosen those two pictures and students gave reasons such as: "they are not listening," "isn't paying any attention," "they are talking," "someone is looking at the window, someone bends over the desk." Following these justifications, each student was given two post-it notes to write down why they had chosen the specific photos.



Using photo-elicitation to explore Year 5/6 researchers' views

Observations: All pupil researchers carried out classroom observations. Observation sheets were prepared in advance to help the student researchers keep notes whilst observing. Observations schedules were developed that included questions such as: What is helping the children to be more confident in their learning? What is stopping some children from being more confident in their learning? How is every child showing or not showing confidence in their learning? Keeping a record of what they observed helped with the discussions after the lesson observation. In addition, some student researchers had informal interviews with some children whilst they were going around the classroom observing.



Year 5/6 researchers conducting observations

Outcomes

Thinking about the aims of the project, which was to 'unlock' certain children, as the teachers explained, pupil researchers became more confident in their learning and were more talkative. This was observed both during the sessions as well as in their lessons as their teachers confirmed. In addition, the student researchers also explained during interviews how they now feel more confident.

Pupil researchers also mentioned that their teachers listen more to pupils' ideas as a result of the project. More importantly, based on students' ideas, class teachers changed some aspects of their teaching. For example, in Geography in Year 4, they offered more worked examples and redesigned worksheets, that enabled greater student participation in lessons.

Key ideas emerging

The important role of becoming a researcher: Being a student researcher allowed these children to grow in confidence and become more engaged in lessons.

Student-teacher dialogues: This was perhaps the most powerful part of the process, which allowed teachers to explore in more detail students' thoughts. The spaces in which these dialogues were taking place were also important. For example, big rooms or unfamiliar offices, are best to be avoided, since they can be intimidating for children.

Teachers' reflection on teaching practices: Student researchers observing lessons led to teachers rethinking some of their existing practices. This was achieved through the minor details that children noticed and made teachers be more reflective about what they are doing in class. For example, one of the students noticed how helpful it was when one of the teachers was breaking down their instructions before asking children to go and work in their groups by using specific words (First..., Then...). This is something that most teachers do to help children, but hearing it from children's perspectives, made them realise how important and helpful this is, especially for children who may be struggling with learning.

Practical issues to consider: Time is crucial for allowing such approaches to be introduced in schools. In this example, we saw how time was made available to teachers to complete the project. Having a committed staff from the leadership team actively involved was significant, for making things happen, by supporting colleagues throughout the whole process with logistical issues, as well as facilitating reflection amongst everyone in the team.

Looking ahead: The school will be expanding the ideas explored through this project in the future years to come. At the of this academic year, student researchers were asked if they wanted to be involved in training new student researchers for next year. They have already started doing this in an impressive way and this is a promising approach for the future years, that will allow the involvement of more children as student researchers from different year groups.

Teachers' and student's thoughts

Since we've done this, it makes us feel more comfortable in class.

Year 4
Pupil Researcher

Deputy
Head

I started off a bit cynical about this...what were they going to say, that was going to be meaningful to us as a school or to us as teachers? ...then the dialogue, that was really powerful and I can see exactly how beneficial it would be.

...but me telling them how to help them if they're learning isn't the same as them telling me how to help them with their learning, and I feel like it's really important to have those conversations.

Year 4 Class Teacher

Having them have their voice heard is really important and giving them the time and that's what we don't always do ... talk individually to children who we know might.

Year 5
Pupil
Researcher

I like the project because it was fun to see others' learning. I like to be able to go out of our class year, and it helps me become more confident when learning.

Teacher team

- Steph Mander (Deputy Head)
- Keesha Carter (Year 4 Cohort Lead and Class Teacher)
- Gemima Mills (Year 4 Class Teacher)

Headteacher: Kirsten Buist

Research team

- Professor Kiki Messiou
- Dr Jay de los Reyes
- Chinmaya Potnis
- Ping Dong
- Dr Vivienne Rwang

We would also like to acknowledge the contribution of many children and other staff in the school who have contributed to this work in various ways.