

Pupil Voice for Promoting Inclusion in Schools (PVPI)



Developing boys' writing: An account of practice from collaborative action research in Redbridge Primary 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 an area of concern for them, or an area that they wanted to explore in more detail, through the lens of pupil voice.

The school

Redbridge Primary School is a smaller than average-sized primary school with 207 children. The school’s ethos is summed up in the phrase ‘Working Together, Achieving Together’. The practices in the school are underpinned by ‘Star Values’ – Resilience, Integrity, Creativity, Emotional Intelligence, Ambition, Good Communication.

There are 7 classes in the school from Reception to Year 6 (4- to 11-year-olds) and one class per year group. Every class has children with different abilities. There are 45 members of staff.

The school is in an area of high deprivation, due to which many children start school with speech and language deficits as well as personal, social and emotional weaknesses. Most pupils are of White British heritage.

The focus of the school is to overcome barriers caused by deprivation so that children can access secondary education with the same equity as their peers nationally.

Research focus and process

Three members of staff were involved in the study: the Interventions Lead, the Year 4 teacher and the Year 5 teacher. The three teachers participated in a workshop that took place 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 chose to focus on improving boys’ writing in Year 4 and Year 5. This was an area highlighted as an area for improvement in the last inspection report of the school (Ofsted, 2019): the disparity in writing progress amongst boys and girls.

Three members of staff were involved in the study: a teacher who had the role of the school’s Interventions Lead, the Year 4 teacher and the Year 5 teacher. All boys in Year 4 and Year 5 (30 boys) were involved in this study. The Interventions Lead and the Year 4 and 5 teachers designed the plan and what they wanted to achieve, through two meetings. They chose the ‘students as researchers’ approach to address the following research questions:

- **What are boys’ thoughts about learning and teaching and writing lessons?**
- **What helps the boys in the writing lessons and what makes it difficult for them?**

In order to address these questions, the teachers decided to involve some students as student researchers. Four boys, two each from Year 4 and Year 5, were selected by the school's Interventions Lead and the two teachers, to be researchers. The criteria for the selection of the four boys to be researchers were boys who were underachieving in writing, not particularly expressive or confident, with poor attendance and poor engagement.

The overall process included training the four boys to be researchers, who would subsequently carry out some sessions with the all the other boys in Year 4 and 5, to capture their opinions and thoughts.

The Interventions Lead trained the four boys to be researchers, through two consecutive one-hour sessions. During the training sessions, the four boys were introduced to the research questions, their role as researchers and invited to share their views on writing lessons using participatory methods – post-it notes with unfinished sentences and photo elicitation.



Training the four boys as researchers

In this way, the teachers modelled to the student researchers how they were going to use the methods with the larger group of boys, whilst at the same time gathered their own thoughts about writing. The plan for the subsequent sessions with the larger group of boys was also discussed.

The remaining boys in Year 4 and 5 were later engaged in three sessions. During this time, the girls in Year 4 and 5 were sent with the Teaching Assistant to do a different activity. The first session took about 30 minutes, where the four boys were introduced as researchers and the focus area of improving writing lessons was shared. The teachers explained that there were no wrong answers that could offend them, and they invited all the boys to be as open as possible. The second session took about 2 hours and post-it notes with unfinished sentences was used as the method to elicit boys' opinions and thoughts about writing lessons. In the third session, which took 45 minutes, photo elicitation was used.

During the sessions with the larger group of boys, it was noticed by the Interventions Lead and the two teachers that some of the student researchers were confident leading parts of the sessions and speaking in front of the big group, whilst others were more hesitant. In addition, they noticed how student researchers needed a lot of encouragement and support, especially with follow-up questions and probing the responses that were received by the other children in the class. Therefore, while the four boys researchers had a key role in the whole process, the sessions with the larger group of boys became more adult led.

Following each of the sessions, the three teachers discussed the responses from students and identified implications for learning and teaching.

Participatory methods used

As mentioned above, participatory methods were firstly used in the training of the student researchers, in order to allow them to see the use of these methods in practice and be better prepared to use them with their classmates at a later stage.

Post-it notes with unfinished sentences: Unfinished sentences related to writing lessons, were presented to the boys on a screen. Each sentence was presented and then the boys were invited to complete the sentence in the way they wanted, by writing their responses on post-it notes, individually.

The following unfinished sentences were presented:

My favourite type of writing is...

I find writing best when...

In writing, I wish my teacher would...

I find writing tricky when...

In writing, I wish I could do more...

I wish I could write about



Using post-it notes to complete unfinished sentences

In the training of student researchers' sessions, the boys wrote their responses immediately after the unfinished sentence was presented. While in the session with the large group of boys, once the sentence was presented, the boys were given a few minutes to talk in their table groups, before writing their responses on the post-it notes.

Each boy then stuck the post-it notes on the white board and follow up questions were asked by the adult/s to probe further discussion, seek more information, and better understand the boys' responses.

Photo elicitation: Photo elicitation was used to present images to the boys and elicit responses about what they could see in the image and how it linked with their own experiences in the writing lessons.



Photo elicitation session with the boys in Year 4 and Year 5

Three pre-decided images were used. The images that were chosen were not from the school but represented scenarios similar to what the boys may have experienced in their writing lessons. The specific choice of the images was also based on the responses that the adults received in the second session using post-it notes and unfinished sentences. Once each image was presented, follow up questions were asked, and time was provided to discuss ideas in table groups. The adults and the student researchers moved around the tables, facilitating discussions and probing with follow up questions. The student researchers were provided with a sheet with follow up questions related to each image, which they used, to aid them to facilitate the discussions. The student researchers also reported the responses shared by their peers, at the end of the table group discussions.

Outcomes

Following each of the sessions, the teachers discussed about the issues that emerged through the collection and analysis of the opinions and thoughts expressed by the boys during the various sessions. These made them to reflect on their own practices and how they can be modified to support all children in their writing. More specifically, the following modifications have been incorporated in writing lessons by the Year 4 and Year 5 teacher:

- Reducing the teacher input on the carpet and providing a choice to the students to return to the tables and seek help if needed.
- Designing longer writing lessons spanning over a couple of days.
- Providing more time to write.
- Providing an opportunity to students to talk to each other about their ideas and then invite them to share what they heard from the student they were speaking to.

In addition, looking ahead, a meeting with the Writing Lead in the school is planned to discuss the findings of this pilot and make specific suggestions for writing lessons across the school, especially with respect to:

- Movement breaks within the writing sessions.
- The use of calming music for some boys, to stimulate writing.
- Survey the boys' personal interests and include them in the writing topics.
- The use of computers for writing.
- Staff training for teaching methods that minimise the amount of teacher talk and adult input during writing sessions.
- Trialling afternoon writing sessions, since they were preferred by the boys.
- Thinking about the policy around putting hands up to contribute.
- Thinking about the balance between working independently and working in a group.
- Exploring dialogic teaching as the approach to pedagogy.

Based on the overall experience with the pilot study, the school has an action plan for the next year. The Interventions Lead plans to train some students - the Learning Council members - as researchers. The Learning Council is a body of students with two children from each year group. The children are selected through voting, and they have meetings once a week, where they discuss about the learning in

school, about what they like or what they do not like and make suggestions about what is happening in the classroom. The school plans to have the Learning Council students becoming researchers and completing a piece of research each half term, with a specific focus, that will involve collecting all pupils' views to be analysed and shared with the subject lead.

Key ideas emerging

Being a student researcher: The students find it prestigious to be a researcher and are willing to take on this role. The teachers observed an increase in self-confidence in the students who were researchers. Small things, such as having lanyards with their title, were seen to be important by students.

Training student researchers: Before asking student researchers leading a bigger group of students, there is a need to provide a space for them to rehearse in smaller groups. At the same time, as part of the student researcher training there should be an emphasis on asking probing questions, such as 'why?', when they receive responses from their classmates. In this way, adults may be able to trust that the student researchers will be able to facilitate discussions with their peers, and therefore, allow them to lead the discussions.

Details when employing participatory methods: The way that participatory methods were employed had an impact on students' willingness to share opinions and thoughts. Writing down one's thoughts before speaking about them was observed to be important to the students. It was felt that the boys were more active in the post-it notes and unfinished sentences session, as they had the opportunity to write, discuss and share and may have felt that they had contributed in some way. While in the photo-elicitation session, the boys did not have an opportunity to write, but could share their thoughts only by speaking with their peers or the teacher at the table or by putting their hand up. This may have impacted the engagement that all boys could have had in the photo elicitation session.

Time and support: Participatory approaches to pupil voice may not be successful without dedicating time for adults to design their lessons around these approaches. Having the support of senior leaders in the school is important, as well as having committed individuals leading the whole process. Implementing change and implementing new programs is possible with a receptive team and requires prioritising and understanding these approaches.

Teachers' thoughts

I think we always knew that we wanted to use the children, I think we always knew that we wanted to go down that route, that we wanted to hear it just from them.

Year 5 teacher

I loved doing this because even just since the last session...there are a lot of things I've just tweaked, nothing dramatic... just like small tweaks from what they've said to me.

Year 4 teacher

... it was such a beneficial session and the feedback we had was really thought

We do not want the boys' ideas to be lost.

Interventions Lead

Teacher team

- Alex Young (Interventions Lead)
- Robert Hay (Year 4 teacher)
- Harriet Stedman (Year 5 teacher)

Headteacher: Donna Clarke

Research team

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

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