Pupil Voice for Promoting Inclusion in Schools (PVPI)

Expanding children's future job aspirations: An account of practice from collaborative action research in Mason Moor 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

Mason Moor is a mixed community school with a total of 229 pupils. The school caters for children from ages 4 – 11, with a total of 8 classes (Reception, Year 1 to 6). Most of the families in the school are from white working-class backgrounds, though most recently there are families from other ethnic backgrounds as well. The school's work is driven by the motto 'be the best version of yourself.' This pervades everything children are required to do, and decisions adults make. Both pupils and staff reflect on whether they have been the best version of themselves and are encouraged to seize the opportunity that every new day brings to improve.

The school's vision/mission is anchored on three key words that sum up their core values, 'Nurture, Grow, Achieve' and the statement '*Our school is not defined by its context*.' Leaders ensure that the context does not place a ceiling limit on the learning experiences of the pupils. To achieve this, the school collectively upholds a culture of '*whatever it takes*.' Every decision is centred on providing the very best for the children, no matter what barriers exist along that path. Inclusion is everybody's responsibility and an integral part of the school's teaching practices. The school focuses heavily on 'pupil agency' and empowering children to sit in the driving seat of their learning.
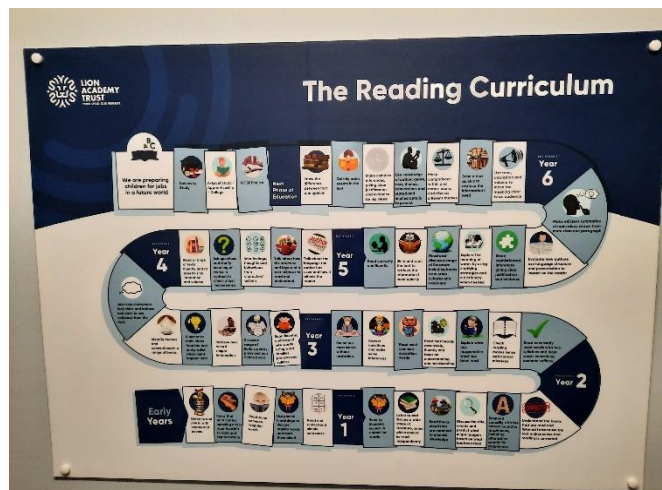
Research focus and process

Two female members of staff were involved in the study: a Year 3 Classroom Teacher and the Assistant Headteacher. The Assistant Headteacher and another classroom teacher who was going to be involved in the project originally, took part 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. Amongst the five schools that participated in this meeting, there were two schools with the same Executive Headteacher: Mason Moor and St. Mary's. Both schools, decided to focus on the same overall agenda, that would allow them to make comparisons between the two contexts.

The overall focus area of the project was to widen pupils' understanding of possibilities for their futures, as well as understanding their aspirations, feelings, and desires. This area of focus was decided because the school felt that, overall, the children did not have high aspirations for themselves. At the same time, this focus fitted in well with the overall vision of the headteacher and the school. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated:

- **What do pupils want to be (in terms of jobs)?**
- **What skills do the pupils feel they need in order to achieve their job aspirations?**
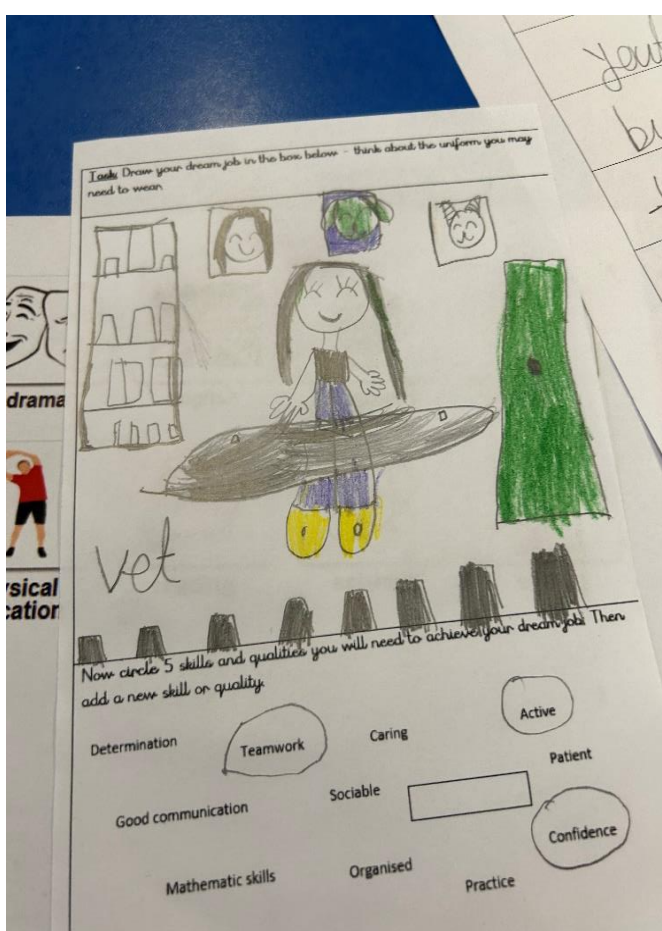
The research process started with the Year 3 teacher doing a lesson – what was called a baseline lesson- to explore what children's jobs aspirations were. This lesson lasted around 45 minutes. It started with the pupils watching a video which showed children talking about what they wanted to be when they were older. Then the teacher asked the pupils to write down what interested them, in terms of future jobs. This was followed by a class discussion where the teacher used her role as an example, asking questions such as 'What attributes do you need to be a teacher?' The pupils responded with attributes such as 'knowledgeable' and 'strict' which led to further discussions. At the end, the pupils were asked to discuss their own ideas with their partners and then draw what they would like to be.

An example of a students' drawings

The pupils' drawings highlighted a range of jobs such as: police officer, vet, beekeeper, doctor, cleaner, gamers, youtubers etc. Children were also asked to show the uniform that they may need to wear for their 'dream job' and to circle qualities and skills that they may need in order to achieve their goal.

Following this lesson, the Year 3 teacher took her class down to the corridors of the school, where they have the curriculum pathways for each subject:

A snapshot of the reading curriculum

They then had discussions about each one of these. For example, each school subject is broken down for each year group and this allowed the teacher to speak about the importance of learning as children progress from one year group to the next one. They also talked about topics within each subject and discussed how these related to particular jobs and had more in-depth discussions about the importance of learning and why we learn specific topics at school.

In the next lesson, students were reminded about the focus of the project and were asked to make a list of possible jobs, in a whole class discussion. Those ideas were summed up on a flip chart.

A list of possible jobs being summed up on a flipchart

During this lesson they also went back to the original drawings and the ideas discussed back then and explored if there were any changes to their aspirations. Some children changed their views, whilst others did not. The teacher noticed that in this lesson children had a better understanding of the attire that people need to wear for specific jobs, whereas previously they mostly had people in jeans and t-shirts.

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In addition, during this lesson there were discussions about the school subjects and how they could help with their job aspirations. The children had the opportunity to make direct links to school subjects but more importantly justify those links in whole class discussions and then writing these on their worksheets.

A student writing on the worksheet

Participatory methods used

Drawings: Asking children to draw their dream job at the start of the project, was a good way to explore their thoughts. It was also good that the drawing was used in an interactive way. The teacher went around the class and discussed children's ideas whilst they were drawing. This gave the teacher a better understanding of children's thoughts and specific aspirations.


The teacher moving around the class discussing children's ideas whilst they were drawing

Walk around the school: A walk in the school corridors where direct links between the curriculum pathways posters and children's own aspirations were made was an engaging way to explore children's thoughts in more detail, outside the classroom walls.

Outcomes

In terms of the focus of the school, which was to expand students' ideas about future jobs, the teachers felt that this was indeed achieved. Children were able to see a range of ideas about future jobs as well as learn words that they did not know before. At the same time, they were able to see that these ideas could change, which is what happens in real life too. For example, as the class teacher explained, there was one child in her class whose adults in the family had changed a few jobs and the child seemed to have adopted a similar mindset. In the first lesson, this child said that she wanted to be a bus driver whereas in the second lesson she said that she wanted to work in a salon. She then explained that she wanted to be a beautician, a word that she picked up from the earlier sessions. She was also able to explain why she wanted to do that now, instead of the other job.

Finally, through the projects' work, in the way that the school planned it, children could now see the connections between what they learn in school and their futures.
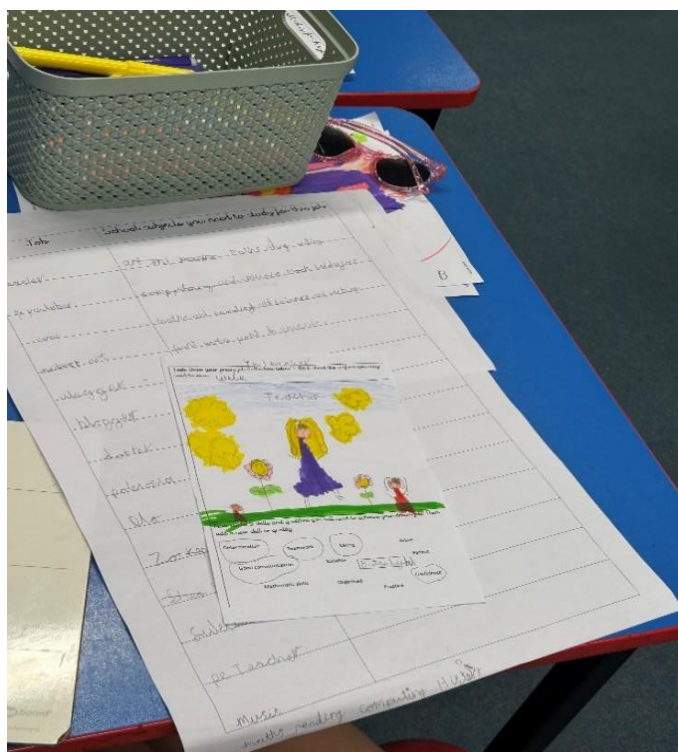
An example of student's completed worksheet

Key ideas emerging

Teachers getting to know children better: Engaging in this kind of work allowed teachers to understand some of the children's perspectives better and to get to know them in a better way.

Surprises: There were also surprises amongst teachers about children's responses. For example, one child said they wanted to be a beekeeper when they grow up. Though the teacher knew that this child was interested in nature, she did not know that he had this thought as a future job. In addition, the teacher was surprised at the connections that the children made between school subjects and specific jobs. For example, one girl said that Art would be helpful if you want to become a policeman/policewoman. When asked to justify this, she explained how if the police are searching to arrest criminals, they may need to sketch these people's images, hence the need to be good in Art.

A student writing responses on the worksheet

Children getting to know their classmates better: In addition to teachers getting to know children better, the children also got to know both their classmates' interests as well as their thoughts for the future. This allowed them to think more widely in relation to their own choices as well.

Working collaboratively with another school: The Year 3 classroom teacher, was not the one who was originally going to be involved in the project. Due to some changes in the school, the teacher joined later the work of the project. Having support from the Assistant Head, was important, as well as linking with the group of teachers in the other school, who were working on the same focus.

Participatory methods as the starting point for more in depth discussions: The two methods that were used in this school, were seen as the starting point for more in depth discussions. The work was structured as a lesson, but the use of the methods allowed for discussions between the children and the teacher to be more in depth as well as personalised.

Teachers' thoughts

It's given me a real opportunity to listen to the children. Because, I feel like sometimes in school when you're like in a daily day-to-day sort of scenario, where you have to do so much, sometimes it's tricky to spend that time listening to the children. So, I felt like this has been really beneficial in hearing the children's opinions about things that obviously they contribute. But I feel like this has got a real personal element to things. So, you know, it's given myself, a really good opportunity to hear.

Year 3 Class Teacher

And the children have really enjoyed it. I think they've enjoyed that opportunity to have that collaborative talk with their peers and that kind of open discussion around what they want to do when they're older. And just kind of opening their eyes to actually a bit more out there.

Assistant Headteacher

Teacher team

- Kathryn Deakin (Assistant Headteacher)
- Dani Hallowes (Year 3 teacher)

Executive Headteacher: Daniel Constable-Phelps

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.