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Ensuring more accurate of responses from child respondents in school based research.

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Abstract

The researcher is engaged in a study to evaluate and disseminate an initiative involving a group of designated 'gifted and talented' pupils and the Post-Graduate Teacher Training Business Education cohort of the research University. This project is seeking to develop exciting and innovative ways to introduce and teach Business Education to 14-16 year olds. This partnership initiative is being evaluated with a view to drawing up standards/recommendations for a template of future good practice.

This paper describes the research, the nature of the data collection, the problems of its interpretation and how the researcher has addressed these issues. In particular, it looks at the issues regarded as problematical when dealing with children and how these might be solved. The paper explores how the researcher tried to overcome certain of these problems and suggests a method of peer involvement by which data collected from children may be made more accurate. This particular study may be deemed to be research on a small scale, undertaken within the general context of the larger research aims. It is specifically to test the theory that childrens' responses will be more genuine under a particular set of circumstances.

There are times, however, when small scale research is appropriate and indeed where it is both desirable and valuable: for example, where a localized problem is identified....(Greig and Taylor 1999:7)

Introduction

This paper is based on experiences within a learning project that has been taking place since 2002. It initially looks at the background to the research project and at the outcomes of a number of 'light touch' evaluations. These have been reported in the EBEA Journal and IACSEE journal.

A light touch evaluation is one where the methodology is not exploited in any great academic detail but which may be used to provide indicators for more thorough and in-depth evaluations at a later date. (Denby 2004:14)

The main focus of the paper is the technique that was then developed to try to ensure that the 'pupils voice' (Convery 1992) that was being listened to was as genuine as possible.

To evaluate the project requires a paradigm that will allow for the interpretation of written and oral contributions from chosen respondents. The paradigm chosen is a non-positivist one, which therefore includes interpretative perspectives. The interpretative approach is viable as the researcher will be seeking to understand the different perceptions of the groups approached. It is not expected that participants will provide a homogeneous view of (for example) benefits, disbenefits, inputs or progress, but that a more complex picture will emerge. The researcher has an open mind regarding the benefits that pupils may quote but intuitively that social and behavioural benefits (such as a gain in confidence) may emerge and be just as important as educational benefits. There are also inherent problems in defining the target group's composition:

As they are measured in top percentages, the 'gifted and talented' of one area may not have made the definition in other, higher achieving, areas. Also, once a pupil is in the cohort, it is not necessarily the case that they will remain in the top 5-10%. Pupils develop at different rates and are likely to 'peak' at different times. There is also the possibility that being labelled (or not labelled) as 'gifted and talented' may boost or depress performance. (Denby 2006:44)

The underlying assumptions that make up the research perspective may be stated as limiting significance to the interactions that took place within the framework of the partnership; giving due credence to the opinions and views of pupils and allowing all the voices in the study to be heard with equal clarity. (Clarke, 1996).

Background and participants

The project is a collaborative one between a University Department and a secondary school. The participants – the Researcher, the Research Institution, the School and the Excellence in Cities programme are briefly described below.

The researcher is Visiting Senior Lecturer in Education on Post Graduate Initial Teacher Training courses in Business Education and Citizenship.

The Research Institution is the Business Education department of the School of Education and Professional Development (SEPD) at a University in the North of England. The SEPD has, as one of its focus areas, Initial Teacher Training in a number of subjects. The Business Education department trains teachers to teach Business and Citizenship in Secondary (11-19) schools and colleges. The School of Education is one of seven academic schools. It has over 3,000 students including around 1,500 post graduate students and 85 research students. Post Graduate Certificate in Education students are on a one or two year course leading to a teaching qualification and Qualified Teacher Status.

The school is an 11-16 comprehensive school situated in a village near Barnsley, a town in the North of England. It has been made anonymous throughout the paper by the use of the pseudonym 'Westway School'. It is in a relatively deprived area characterised by a number of indicators of relative poverty and deprivation, (Barnsley, 2005). For example 27% of children in the area are dependent on adults who do not work; 25% of all children live in single parent households; 41% of the population aged 16 – 74 had no qualifications in 2001 whilst attainment at all Key Stages of the English National Curriculum is below the national average. In addition, the 'staying on' rate is low, with 11.3% of all 16 - 19 year olds not in employment, education or training.

In the inspection report issued to the school by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), in 1998, amongst the schools strengths outlined were a very good culture of positive working relationships in a well cared for learning environment, with the majority of pupils with good attitudes to school. However, there were criticisms that pupils' skills in independent learning were underdeveloped. Teaching was at least satisfactory in 91 per cent of lessons; 13 per cent were very good or excellent; and 9 per cent were unsatisfactory, (Ofsted inspection report, 1998).

The subsequent 2005 Ofsted Report adds the information that:

There is a small but increasing number of pupils who live in public care. Socio-economic circumstances are well below average. Indicators for the wards served by the school show high levels of unemployment, much of which dates from before 1995 and resulted from the demise of the local mining industry. Other indicators confirm a picture of high levels of deprivation, and low levels of education in the area. The school is part of Excellence in Cities, and receives funding from the Leadership Incentive Grant and the Single Regeneration Budget.

The report also mentions the Partnership as of positive benefit to the school:

Close links have been established with a neighbouring university and its staff and students, and reciprocal visits help to broaden the pupils' experiences and interests. (Ofsted 2005).

The Excellence in Cities (EiC) programme was launched in 1999, originally covering 25 Local Education Authorities¹ (LEAs). Partnerships are now running in 58 local authorities and more than 1,000 secondary schools. EiC proposes a set of strategies that are focused on better teaching to lead to improved learning, behaviour and attendance, and to develop leadership skills and potential. Joyce et al (1997:15) conclude that different experiences help pupils to develop:

Increasing the range of learning experiences provided in our schools increases the likelihood of more students becoming more adept learners.

A key strand of EiC provision is to encourage certain pupils into higher education. These pupils are described as those who have no family history of University learning: neither parents nor parental generation, nor siblings, have attended this level of education. The aim is to alter their aspirations so that they consider University to be an attainable and desirable target. Familiarity with University surroundings, in order to take away notions of 'exclusivity' or 'unattainability' is thus considered central to the provision. According to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Standards Unit (*accessed August 5 2006*):

Excellence in Cities...offers a real chance to transform urban secondary education in these areas where standards have been too low for too long.

The Gifted and Talented Strand

The Project works with the 'gifted and talented' cohort designated at Westway School. One thread of EiC support is this 'gifted and talented' strand which is described by the DfES Standards Unit as ensuring that

...schools introduce teaching and learning programmes and complementary out of school hours study support programmes for their most able 5-10% of pupils.(DfES Standards Unit, ibid)

But what are 'gifted and talented' children?

A thought

Who are the 'gifted and talented'? The DfES Standards Unit defines 'talented' students in just three subjects: Art, Music and PE. Talented students are the top 5-10% of pupils per school as measured by actual or potential achievement in these areas. Gifted pupils are measured as the top 5-10% of pupils by actual or potential achievement in the other curriculum subjects. Welding (1998) suggests the generic characteristics of gifted students; in general they have a 'thirst for knowledge', high powers of reasoning and the ability to understand abstract and/or difficult concepts quickly. They can also express themselves lucidly and show analytical and independent thinking.

In education, however, there is no clear definition although 'gifted' appears to apply to academic work, whilst 'talented' applies to more creative areas. Kendall (2003:2) concludes:

¹ Local Education Authorities are part of the local government structure in the UK, responsible for schools.

Pupils may be included in the gifted and talented cohort for a variety of reasons, including being talented in sport, music or art, not only because of their academic achievement or potential.

However, when schools are looking to decide on this cohort that is marked for higher attainment and possible future University entrance, they were often unclear on why pupils had been chosen:

*Schools were not, in general, able to distinguish between pupils identified as 'gifted' and those identified as 'talented'. (Kendall, *ibid.*)*

Gifted and talented cohorts are not 'absolutes'; as they are measured in top percentages, the 'gifted and talented' of one area may not have made the definition in other, higher achieving, areas. Also, once a pupil is in the cohort, it is not necessarily the case that they will remain in the top 5-10%. Pupils develop at different rates and are likely to 'peak' at different times. In many schools, and Westway was no exception, teachers feel uncomfortable with the name and tend to avoid using it. Whilst, in official documentation, both internally and externally (such as Ofsted reports) the soubriquet is used, Westway decided to call its particular cohort the 'Experiential Learning Initiative'.

The Project

The project takes place with reciprocal visits between the school cohort and the University on three occasions throughout the year. This serves the dual purpose of introducing the school students to a University setting in a non-threatening manner, and allowing teacher trainees to work with a specific group and type of student that they may otherwise not encounter. The school cohort comprises approximately 45 pupils drawn from Years 8,9 and 10 (approximately, 12 to 15 years old). The school does not include its youngest pupils (Year 7), considering that they are still bedding down into the school system, nor its oldest (Year 11), cutting down outside activities so that they can concentrate in their GCSE (16+) examinations. The school cohort is thus a 'rolling' one – each year two of the years move up (Year 8 and Year 9), one moves out (Year 10 into Year 11, and therefore no longer involved) and one moves in (Year 7 into Year 8). The cohort at the University is between 30 and 40 trainees, depending on the year. As they are all embarked on a one-year course, these personnel change annually.

Aims

The overall aim of the project was to develop ways to deliver elements of Business Education, Economics, Enterprise and Citizenship in innovative ways using the skills and ideas of trainees and pupils. The group has met three times a year over a four year period and developed and recorded a number of activities and lesson ideas. From the observations, conclusions and evaluations, the aim is to develop a model that could be utilised to good effect by other institutions.

There are three main aims from the point of view of the Research University.

- To raise awareness and interest in pupils regarding the content of Business Education so that many would consider a possible career in business. This is linked to innovations in the curriculum such as work-related learning, enterprise education, work experience and personal financial management.
- To investigate how Citizenship teaching could be integrated into Business Education based on the high proportion of Business and Economics related content in the Citizenship National Curriculum.
- To enhance the Initial Teacher Training (ITT) course by allowing students a first introduction to pupils and an opportunity to work with them outside the confines of a school placement. In addition, it would help ITT students to reach certain of the Standards for Qualified Teacher Status.

Research *with* children

It is only in the last decade of the twentieth century that literature appears that begins to look at the child subject² as more than a cipher, or an incompetent respondent (Pilcher, 1995, Robson and Kellett 2004). It is generally deemed that children needed to be under adult supervision or the protection of (in particular in schools) *in loco parentis* teachers. That they could have thoughts and opinions that could help to shape research and policy was seldom considered, leading one commentator to state that;

“The views of pupils/students represent the single most neglected source of potential data for school improvement.” (Hannam 1998:3)

Since the mid 1990s, however, there has been:

A marked epistemological shift from research which objectifies children, placing their needs under the auspices of the family, to research conducted with children (Weller 2005:304)

At least two distinct movements have emerged. One, exclusive to educational research, is the idea of ‘listening to the pupils voice’. This is a development that considers that children as either the objects of research, or the recipients of policy derived from research, should have a role and a ‘voice’ in discussions, research and policy. (Convery 1992; Cooper and McIntyre, 1996; Dadds, 1998; Ruddock and Flutter, 2000). Nieto (1994), discusses the importance of listening, whilst Sammons (1995) points to increases in overall pupil achievement from listening to (and acting on) their opinions. Day (1992) suggests that one of the major ways in which teachers can act as role models for children as pupils is by listening to them. Not only should children be heard, but they should be convinced that, in the power balance, their views carry some weight. Co-operation is also key: Brown (1994:5) found that if the adult (teacher) co-operated with the child (pupil/respondent) then this

...promoted an atmosphere of joint responsibility, mutual respect and a sense of personal and group identity.

² ‘Child’, as subject, is taken to mean those under 16 (Holloway and Valentine, 2000); ‘teenagers’ are 13 – 19. The children in this research are thus both teenager and, by definition, child.

whilst other commentators have concentrated on the benefits to be gained from listening to children. For example:

Particularly, we learn how articulate and in touch even the youngest pupils can be when they are given time to talk about their learning and their experience of it at school. (MacGilchrist et al 2005: 65)

This has had particular applications in the classroom and in recommendations for teacher-pupil relationships:

When teachers dismiss student experience, they blind themselves to the way students learn, construct identity and negotiate their place in the world. (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998: 230–231)

Much of the research and commentary is, naturally, targeted at improving the learning process.

When students are engaged to take an active role in the learning process they are empowered to shape their experiences, what they search for, interpret, understand and apply. (Villaverde & Kincheloe, 1998:150)

The empowerment that invites comment here allows students a degree of equality with teachers, and a degree of influence over their learning process, although some commentators would still aver that there is a long way to go:

While pupils are often considered the key stakeholders in education, rarely are their voices seriously taken into account in policies devised to improve teaching, learning and achievement. (Wood 2003:365)

However, this is not to say that such techniques cannot also be used to improve the accuracy and efficacy of the research itself,

The other movement, in more general areas such as marketing and sociological research, is that of 'children-centred research' (Valentine, 1999) or 'child-centric research' (Bannister and Booth 2005). This stems from the increasing interest shown in children as respondents themselves, rather than as an anonymous or invisible part of 'education' or 'the family' (Corsaro, 1997; Holloway and Valentine, 2000). The field is international and interdisciplinary and has been dubbed the 'new social studies of childhood' (Barker and Weller, 2003).

Research methodologies and child respondents

There are many other methodologies designed to improve both responses and the validity of responses with child respondents. These have been developed across different disciplines, including health, welfare and education. Greig and Taylor (1999) list several classic ways of doing research with children, and several special ways. Classic methods include observation of various sorts, correlation, experimentation, surveys, case studies and ethnography. Special ways include testing and task development, assessment of development, psychobiological measures, cognitive tasks and tests, socio-cognitive and socio-emotional tasks, interviews and questionnaires. Other avenues may also be used, for example photographs, drawing and

diaries (Barker and Weller 2003). The description of a study (Martin et al:2002:121) carried out by 21 teachers in London and China is typical of the research instruments used; for teachers the use of questionnaires, vignette case studies, observation, journals, and/or focus groups; for children:

- ✚ *non-verbal paper and pencil exercises (for example classifying random animals into a scheme for designing a zoo)*
- ✚ *discussion prompter topics (for example, how to redesign the classroom learning environment)*
- ✚ *group investigation tasks involving the solving of a problem or the creation of an innovative idea (for example, using toy cars to create a smooth traffic flow around a toy town)*
- ✚ *enactive activities in order to illustrate an abstract creative or critical thinking strategy*

Although the list is long, it is not, however, exhaustive, and there is no suggestion that any of the problems, as perceived by Punch (2000), are being tackled. The closest any method comes to breaking down the barriers between child and researcher is that of participant observation where

The observer becomes a friend with her subjects and interacts with them in the most trusted way possible. (Greig and Taylor 1999:88)

Such friendships however are rare, and the power differential remains. Children need to be convinced that teachers and adults other than teachers:

... are really interested in what they have to say [and] that their views will be given careful consideration... (Ruddock and Flutter 2001:2)

An ethnographic approach is likely to be predicated on the use of participant observation, which may be described as the practice of doing research by joining in the life of the social group or institution that is being researched (McKernan, 1996). Here, however, is the major problem linked to research with children, and it is

... that adults are unable to be full participants in children's social worlds because they can never fully be children again. (Punch 2000:322).

It is this aspect of participant as researcher that this small scale research is investigating. Within their own worlds, children are the most knowledgeable and expert '*members of the community*' (Ruddock and Flutter, 2000:76) so why not use them as researchers? The hypothesis is that, if adults cannot full engage in the child's world, certainly other children – particularly peers – can. Is it possible to train peers in interview technique sufficiently well to allow them to carry out the interview as peer-to-peer events? If so, will this lead to more 'honest' and 'genuine' answers from the child respondents?

The aims of the research are thus to train a small number of 'pupil researchers'; to allow them to conduct and record interviews and to correlate the responses against those of a 'control' group of pupils and against adult and previous pupil responses. The similarities or differences in key answers are compared to see whether the peer interview technique is effective.

Ethical issues

Ethics in methodology

Bassey (1999) suggests three ethical principles: respect for democracy, respect for truth and respect for persons. O'Leary (2004) suggests responsibility for the production of knowledge and responsibility for the researcher. In this research, Bassey's three principles were fulfilled as follows. Respect for democracy was achieved by ensuring that all participant views, however collected, were given equal weighting. Within the realm of this principle, it was seen as important to make sure that data collection took place in a neutral situation that would not adversely affect the outcome. To fulfil the second principal, interviews and focus groups were openly recorded, with the specific permission of all research subjects. Here, it was particularly important to establish that school students understood what was being asked of them and to what use the data would be put. To fulfil the third principle, respect for persons, all participants and institutions were assured of anonymity and given the opportunity to withdraw at any time

In researching with children, Bassey's third principle: 'respect for persons', is seen as vitally important. Research with a group of children – even a group designated as 'gifted and talented', raises different issues to research with adults. In terms of informed consent, for example, permission for participation was sought from both adult 'gatekeepers' (parents and school) and the children themselves - with the final decision on participation resting with the child. Authority figures (such as teachers or parents), were only present or absent at the specific request of pupils.

Peer interviewing

Pupils from the Year 11 cohort who had completed a three year cycle of the collaboration were asked to volunteer to be interviewers, to have the opportunity to take an active role in the research. Robinson and Kellett (in Robinson, 2004) explain that this participatory role in research is important to children. The nature of the research was explained to them, and the reasons for using pupils to interview other pupils rather than adults. In particular, attention was drawn to reducing 'the power differential' (Maclure 2003) between children and adult researchers. This is a very delicate matter, as 'over-training' will unbalance the power structure and put the trained teenager in the same position of power as the trained researcher. However, training there must be, as Robson (2002:290) says:

You don't become a good interviewer just by reading about it. Skills are involved which require practice, preferably under 'low-risk' conditions where it is possible to receive feedback on your performance.

Teenagers cannot just be 'let loose' to carry out research on other teenagers, but need to be trained in the techniques required, including empathy and acting as a facilitator of discussion.

The effectiveness of teenage-centred methods relies as much upon the researcher as a successful facilitator, as upon the actual techniques implemented (Weller 2006:306)

Three volunteers offered to be trained. The training was informal and, at times irreverent. This was deliberate as the researcher did not wish to give the trainees any sense of self-importance that would create a greater power differential between them and the peer group that they were interviewing.

Dampening the power differential between interviewer and interviewee is a vital aspect of any pilot, pre-interview or interview process. A significant power differential will adversely influence veracity to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the initial confidence and relative hierarchical position of the target group. (Denby and Swift, 2005:21)

A number of aspects of interviewing were explored. It was established that trainees understood the questions and the language in which they were couched. The research context and setting were seen as important, so advice from them was sought as to the best time and place for the interviews to be conducted. They were also able to 'pilot' the questions. The use of a tape recorder in the interview sessions was not perceived as a problem by either the pupil interviewers or the interviewees: they accepted that a verbatim record would be needed and had no issues of trust.

Criteria

It was necessary to establish certain criteria to judge whether or not more 'honest' answers were forthcoming. These were

- ✚ The use of natural language and idiom, both by interviewer and interviewee, as an indication of levels of relaxation and 'conversation' taking place rather than 'stimulus-response'.
- ✚ The correlation of answers with the 'control' group. The researcher interviewed similar children, in similar circumstances, but without any attempt to reduce the power differential.
- ✚ The correlation of answers with those given by previous groups of child respondents, teacher trainees and adults.

Results

In each interview situation there were several examples both of natural language and of interviewers allowing discussion to wander and then bringing it back on track. Simple prompts, that ensured inclusion, were peppered throughout the interviews, for example:

Interviewer 1: Any comments from you two?

Interviewer 2: What do you think S_____?

Interviewer 2: P_____ do you have an input?

Interviewer 3: What would you say L_____?

There were also examples of interviewers re-establishing control, for instance:

Interviewer 2: Can we settle back down children and get on to next question; that got too heated...

And clarifying questions where they thought that this was necessary e.g.

Interviewer 1: which do you think has had the most ... erm ... which do you think has done the most work to make sure what we've done has been successful?

Interviewer 3: Which session over the three years did you feel you had the most input, this means, like, making decisions and that

There were also plenty of examples of natural language, including idiom (which the researcher has, on the whole, translated) and bad language – as used naturally within the peer group - and inviting no comment or censure from them, in fact, passing unremarked. Typical examples that also indicated the relaxed and informal atmosphere included exchanges such as:

J___ Can we just do this more relaxed now instead of formal. I thought the second one was best because you had to make a product and then...

(Laughter)

N___ Second one was best cos you like made a product and could advertise it and everything and I just thought that it was good business skills.

A___ First one cos I was in a group full of birds... (Laughter)

So J_____ shone in Year 8 and is now... a child genius

He's like the boy with five brains

J_____ I've only got one

(Laughter)

J___'s now looking at C_____ with puppy eyes

Shaking his bottom lip

Shaking his foot like, wagging his tail

Followed by the interviewer bringing the discussion back to the point

Interviewer 2: Come on next question

One interviewer (2) even took votes on key questions to ensure an accurate response.

Interviewer 2: Ok so who thought first year was the worst

J: Put your hand up

Interviewer 2: That's three people, four, thought the first year was worse. Who thought the second year?

No people

Interviewer 2: Who thought the third. Just N_____, all by himself. OK, the next question

A number of key questions were chosen from the interview as being those most likely to elicit opinion rather than a factual statement. In some cases, answers concurred with those of teachers, trainees and the control group. In other cases, there were marked differences. This is an indicator that certain answers were given with greater honesty and frankness.

Interestingly, where there is agreement, it may arrive from different directions. For example, in the first pair of questions (Table 1) the criteria by which teachers and trainees are judging usefulness appears to be 'learning' whilst for the pupils, the criteria appears to be 'enjoyment'. Other reasons (and areas for further research to address) include the isolation and trepidation felt by younger pupils, and the feeling, for them, that it is the older children, and the trainees, who have the power.

The tables show typical answers and comments drawn from majority responses across the various interviews.