Consulting Pupils on the Assessment and Remediation of their Literacy Difficulties: Interim Report

Louise Long Saint Mary's University College Belfast

Dr Michael Shevlin Trinity College Dublin

Dr Therese McPhillips Saint Patrick's College Drumcondra

This exploratory study, *Consulting Pupils on the Assessment and Remediation of their Literacy Difficulties* aimed to consider the views held by primary pupils on their level of participation in assessing and remediating their own learning needs. The rationale for the study was based on three premises: the increasing recognition and commitment by the UK and the Republic of Ireland governments to give voice to children with special educational needs in research, evaluation and consultation; the growing body of research highlighting that when pupils are able to talk about learning and teaching there are positive outcomes from both an educational and citizenship perspective; and a holistic vision for education that reasserts the affective experience and concurrently aims to raise standards in literacy.

The researchers worked in eight primary schools in the North and South of Ireland. A vignette, solution-focussed brief therapy and participatory creative methodologies were used in the context of focus groups that were comprised of pupils aged between 8-ll year olds who were receiving additional within-school support for literacy. The use of collage provided an ethically secure, child-centered container for the pupils to communicate their inner and outer academic, social and emotional worlds individually and collectively and the end result was tangible products that can be revisited and revised.

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The key findings can be considered across four main themes as follows:

Positive relationships

Children spoke about the importance of significant relationships to support them in their learning. Parents, grandparents and siblings were mentioned as somebody to turn to for help.

At home, my mam, dad, brother, sister…..nanny….big brother …[help me]

[I can]…ask my grandad, then my uncle, my brother….

In school, the class teacher and learning support or 'help teacher' was seen as a positive support. The principal was suggested as an approachable person, somebody who could change things. Help from a good friend in class was also seen as an important way of supporting each other.

There was a sense of belonging among the pupils in the reading groups and they reported how they worked collaboratively *'you're not the only one doing the work'* and supported each other in an informal way, *we help each other'….(e.g) .Tara could ask 'her best friend'*.

Social / affective dimension of learning

The children had the capacity to verbalise how they feel about their learning. Labels such as 'special needs boy' caused embarrassment and upset. They wanted to demonstrate what they know about their learning, what they like and what works for

them. They had an understanding of the holistic nature of learning, a capacity to integrate the social, emotional and academic aspects.

The pupils reported they want to be consulted, they want to be involved in meetings concerning them, and they want the choice to be more involved in their own learning. They want to know their scores, to know what is included in reports and how they are progressing. Feedback was considered important, as one child said *'to see if they said anything bad about you'*. Others would like to attend meetings to '*hear what your teacher thinks of you, and how good you're doing at school, and how good you're doing at spelling and reading'*. Another suggested '*maybe you can improve it'*.

They want the class teacher to know too, not just the learning support teacher or Teaching Assistant or Special Needs Assistant. Some pupils reported '*missing all the fun stuff*' when withdrawn for additional support.

They want to hear more positive talk about what they can do. They want to be praised for their efforts, not their attainment level or scores.

Teaching and learning strategies

The pupils demonstrated an awareness of the teaching and learning strategies that supported them. Specific approaches mentioned included active learning, games and computer work. Working on the computer was descried as *'learning having fun'*. They reported that '*more practice',* and '*reading harder books'* helps them improve their reading skills. Other suggestions included   *more story books, Roald Dahl books…exciting stories, five spellings every day, games, ….could learn them easier, card games …*

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They were familiar with various word identification strategies, and could describe the strategies they used, for example:

If you don't understand a word or you can't pronounce it properly, you just break up the word and then you have it.

Reading meaningful texts and reading continuous text were referred to as important One of the pupils said

But when you are reading something you should know what you are reading about…don't just…its easy just to read words on a piece of paper, you need to read it and know what you are reading.

Pupils' self-knowledge

Pupils displayed a capacity for self- reflection that showed they are experts on their own learning. They were conscious of the importance of good reading and writing skills

'so you could have a good education, and get a good job'.

The pupils were aware of their own learning strengths and know what works for them.

' when I went into third [class], I started learning more'

'I can read faster

I can do attached {writing}. They recognised the progress they have already made. They like interactive methods of learning, in fact they want to model and help others in their group. They wanted more reflection time, *'time to think'*, during their reading.

It is evident the children are already working collaboratively in the small groups. They questioned why it seemed they were identified only for their weaker subject

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areas. Opportunities to use their interpersonal skills in the larger class such as organising the Green School Committee were identified.

The findings have implications for structuring opportunities to increase pupil participation in the management of their literacy difficulties; and also for encouraging teachers to move away from a protectiveness value system to one that facilitates participation by communicating high expectations to pupils and concurrently fostering an emotional climate based on positive and open relationships between teachers and pupils.

The outcomes of the study have been the presentation of papers at Educational Studies Association of Ireland annual conference in Kilkenny on 4.04.09 and at the in-house seminar series at Saint Mary's University College, Belfast; and the preparation of manuscripts for peer-reviewed journals. The research team are also currently drawing up a proposal for funding so that the study can be conducted on a larger scale.