

Pupils also spoke about the importance of teachers asking questions as a way of sustaining deeper levels of active engagement among pupils:

He just talks to himself and talks to us all and tells ... He asks very little questions. And I think that if he asked more questions then we'd become more alert instead of just sitting there like just listening to him all the time ... If he'd ask us more questions we would have to think a lot for the answers and stuff.

Some pupils wanted their teachers to distribute questions more fairly and to nominate individuals to respond. Other pupils argued the advantages of oral questioning over written work as a basis for teachers' assessment of their progress. What is striking about this pupil's account is her ability to take the perspective of her teacher. She balances the frustration she experiences at not being able to render a full account of her understanding through writing with the priorities of her teacher's assessment strategy as she perceives them:

... then we had to write it down, which kind of took loads of time, when we could've just remembered it. But I suppose she has to mark it and stuff so that's understandable, but it kind of took up some time and I'd rather just sort of acted it out or something ... She could just sort of pull people out of the group in turn and say, 'Well, what are we doing at the moment then? What are you doing now? What character are you playing? Do you understand the story OK? What's the story about?' So then she understands like directly with the pupil rather than just what they've written ... Because if you're writing it down then it takes longer, you kind of cut bits out that you don't think are very important; but they could actually be important for the teacher, you see. 'Cos you try and get it done so you can do the drama. But if you're talking to a teacher it would be quicker so you wouldn't feel you were rushed and you'd be able to say all your ideas out.

Some pupils spoke about the helpfulness of the kind of support from their teachers that encouraged them to think and to have the confidence to take their thinking further.

This pupil describes the importance of her Drama teacher's amplification and affirmation of her thinking as a powerful support and impetus for her further thoughtful engagement:

She helps you with your ideas. She helps you make your ideas matter if that makes sense ... It helps you know that somebody else knows your idea and they understand your idea and your idea isn't gobbledegook [laughs] ... because someone else says, 'That idea's really good, you should ...'. And then you think, 'Yeah, it's good. Someone else has told me it's good. I can go into that idea'. And if it didn't make sense she might say, 'I don't really understand that. Maybe you could explain it more to me.' And then I did.

Through their suggestions for tasks that captured their imagination, pupils seemed to be calling for classroom learning to be driven by a different kind of dynamic: one that gave less prominence to the textbook or worksheets and the skills of reading and discursive note-taking and greater prominence to their own active involvement and decision-making.

However, some pupils told us about the kinds of writing activities that they found interesting. They emphasised their preference for graphic styles of writing such as spider diagrams, which pupils found helpful in thinking through connections among concepts, or posters, or tasks that combine writing with some form of drawing and colouring:

It was fun because everyone likes doing posters and everything. And then like you've got to draw and do stuff like that. I like that kind of thing. Like I like art and everything. So it's like if I don't always understand Maths, if you draw pictures and everything to help you get it, then it can help you to understand it more. So ... if you're enjoying something you're doing, then maybe you'll be more eager to do it more.

Nevertheless, pupils were arguing that Drama lessons contained too much writing and not enough time devoted to acting and pupils in English were arguing for more opportunities to engage dramatically with texts. These kinds of changes, they argued, would lead to higher levels of motivated participation.

Another pupil made the comment that they thought it would be useful to learn from their mistakes in planning and carrying out the experiments. The teacher responded:

That's one comment I do disagree with really ... I can't see the point in having them plan an experiment if it's not really up to standard or if it's basically wrong.

Selecting pupil suggestions for use

The teachers were invited to select suggestions from their pupils which they could incorporate into their practice and in general they had little difficulty. The easiest suggestions for teachers to accept were of course those which encouraged them to do more of the good things they already did, and there were plenty of suggestions of that kind:

Everybody liked the role playing. So I'll try and include that. I've always done that, so that's something I'll try and maintain.

The idea that being given more space, kind of literal space, you know, go down the corridor and work, one of them said that that really helped them ... and I did notice that they worked better when they were all spread out separately.

I think the strongest point that came out was the idea of trust, the fact that I'd allowed them to go off around the school in pairs or threes to collect their own leaves in the sites they chose. They all seemed very pleased with the idea they'd been trusted to do that ... and it had some impact on how one or two of them have worked.

The other most easily accepted suggestions were of things that the pupils remembered having done on previous occasions with that teacher. Sometimes these suggestions were made in comparative terms, the previous approach being said to be preferable to what had been done in a recent lesson. The teachers seemed to value such feedback and, in some cases, to concur. In other cases, the pupils seemed simply to be telling the teacher, either explicitly or implicitly, about how valuable or enjoyable the remembered activity had been:

There was the bit about feedback that they felt that they needed more time ... going back into a circle ... and I think that suggestion, thinking of that other lesson, would have been much better, actually ... they seemed to quite value finding out what other people were doing ... more than I imagined they would do really. So, spending more time on the feedback ... yes, in the circle.

It's a technique I've used before but having read it reminded me that that would be a good start for them, to give them that chance to interact ...

The pupils were also ready to identify weaknesses of specific lessons or of the individual teachers, and the teachers were often ready to accept these judgements:

I talk too much. I agree with them, generally ... But it does depend on the circumstances.

I think I was quite aware of what was wrong about that particular lesson – rather boring way to introduce a six-week project to read out that part of the story, so I wouldn't repeat that exercise of reading it.

While many of the pupils' suggestions came directly from what they did or did not value in their teachers' practices, there were many suggestions too that depended on new ideas that the pupils themselves had developed. Quite often teachers welcomed these ideas as sensible and as entirely consistent with their own thinking. Some suggestions, for example, were related by the teachers to things that they had done with other classes:

I like the idea of this fairy story suggestion which funnily enough I had done with another group ... it would be completely new for them and it would be quite a nice focus.

That was one of the ideas I thought I could use – to have individual extension exercises available for one or two ... It's something I used to do when we had a more individualised scheme really. It's bringing back the old ideas.

Middle- to lower-achieving working class girls perceived almost all the other social groups in the classroom as receiving preferential treatment from the teacher:

Candice: *I think boys like Timi and Hasmi are seen as more important 'cos they're the goody-goodies.*

Carlene: *And Paul and Dean because they get extra help.*

Alexa: *And it's the clever girls as well, they get treated better than us.*

Candice: *There are things I don't like about teachers and the main one is they have favourites and they let the clever girls do whatever they want.*

Jodie: *Yes, Katherine, Megan and Laura.*

Carlene: *And our English teacher loves Katherine. She can't do anything wrong.*

In addition these girls cited a further social grouping that sees itself as 'more important'. This male group of 'naughty people' prevented girls from learning by capturing the teacher's attention:

Carlene: *It's unfair because the naughty boys stop us from learning because the teacher can't teach us.*

Lisa: *And then the teacher will put 'Class very noisy' on the class sheet and it's not the whole class.*

Carlene: *And then they'll say, 'I can't come and help you. I have to stand here and watch who is being naughty'. So they can't come round and help us. So the boys stop us learning better.*

However, from the perspective of the SEN boys and the 'popular' male pupils, it was not so much teacher attention that they received as high levels of regulation. Having teacher attention can be a two-edged sword! Kenny and Jason comment:

Kenny: *The teacher doesn't ever give me any attention except for when I chat.*

Jason: *Teachers notice me too much, but you don't want them to notice you for bad work, only good work.*

However, it can be a good thing to be noticed by teachers, especially if such attention helps them with learning and is not about behaviour:

Neil: *It's quite important if the teacher does notice because say like you are stuck on a question, like - say you are stuck on something and you are too embarrassed to put your hand up and the teacher is like ...*

Carl: *So if the teacher is looking at you they can see that you are struggling so they come and help you, instead of you putting your hand up and getting embarrassed.*

Craig captured the subtle differences in teacher attention:

Well sometimes it's a bad thing if the teacher keeps noticing you and you talk ... But it is good if you ... are like struggling and they notice you and then come and help you. If we say something she will try and understand it, like if we say it in slang or something.

Wherever these boys sit, they were aware of teacher surveillance:

Sean: *But there is front or back but if you are sitting in the front then the teacher is going to be staring at you all the time. If you sit at the back he'll be coming back over there ...*

Neil: *He comes to the back when he is explaining something on the board and he'll say 'Oh what do you think about this ...' because he automatically thinks you are not listening to him if you are at the back.*

In the boys' accounts, the teaching of knowledge was often completely masked by issues of control:

Martin: *Today, in Maths, yeah, this was a piece of paper like that, and it's got questions on it, and my friend was just going like that up against his face, and then the teacher said 'Don't wipe your snot; here's a thing to wipe your snot'. And he wasn't even doing that, he was just leaning on it, like that, while the teacher was talking. And he told him to get out and then he went outside and he didn't even close the door. And if that was me I would have just talked to the boy quietly and told him he was wrong to do that.*

Communicative competence

Many pupils reported difficulty in responding when asked about their learning – often replying in standard ways, such as ‘It’s all fine’. Pupils admitted to saying ‘only good things’ when asked by teachers. Strategically, such ‘politeness’ serves to keep the teacher ‘sweet’. Carrie, for example, was hindered by her view that it was rude to criticise people:

Qu: *Do you think now you would be able to tell the teacher what he could do to help improve your learning?*

Carrie: *No 'cos it would be like 'Uh I don't think you're teaching me right, you should do that and that'. They might get offended.*

Qu: *Would that be bad?*

Carrie: *Yeah.*

Qu: *Why?*

Carrie: *Because it's not nice, if you say, like, 'Your lesson is rubbish' and they'll ... like get upset about it.*

Pupils are also aware that talking to teachers requires considerable interpersonal skills and sensitivities because of their power and their moods. Some pupils were afraid of repercussions were they to inform teachers that their lessons were not effective:

Qu: *Do you think you can tell the teacher what you think about his lessons, if you did not like his lesson?*

Kylie: *[laughs] I probably wouldn't ... if you did he may shout at you.*

Qu: *Why?*

Kylie: *I don't know, he'd be like, if you told him he'd probably be angry. But maybe on these sheets ... but like if you write 'Oh I didn't like this lesson - maybe you can do a bit better' (and give an example), he wouldn't be so angry.*

Qu: *Do you think there's a difference between writing it and telling him?*

Kylie: *Yeah, yeah.*

Qu: *Why?*

Kylie: *He can't shout.*

Kelly believed that the teacher would say ‘If you can't say anything nice, then get out of my class':

Qu: *You don't feel free to criticise?*

Kelly: *No, I don't. That's why I like these sheets.*

Qu: *So, writing it down.*

Kelly: *Yeah, it's a lot easier because it's kind of different.*

Qu: *You could tell him on these sheets?*

Kelly: *Yeah, it's less scarier.*

Qu: *What did you think you learnt by filling these sheets out?*

Kelly: *I think I learnt, like, how to say what I feel, but in a nice way, without offending anybody, and to tell the truth.*

Nick, a working class pupil, remained wary even in the written evaluation and gave a middle ‘3’ rating for all items in order to make the teacher ‘feel good’. The danger of falling out with the teacher was, for him, serious. In such cases, evaluation sheets may need to be anonymous but handwriting can of course disclose identity. The problem with existing modes of questioning pupils in the classroom was, as Abby pointed out, that some pupils were more able to speak the language of school and were therefore listened to more by the teacher:

Abby: *... I think the teachers listen to, like who knows the most ... because the naughty people ... because they don't like care ... [then] there's people who actually want to learn; they know what to do but they just don't somehow and then there's bottom people are like 'Please help' ... then the teacher's actually busy with the top group because they find it easier to talk to them instead of the others.*