Lifelong Learning Programme

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Responding to Diversity

Responding to diversity by engaging with students' voices

A strategy for teacher development

Accounts of practice

The ideas presented in these accounts of practice are a result of the collaboration of the following organisations and people:

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The logo in the front cover has been designed by students in St Peter's RC High School in Manchester.

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Note: The accounts can be read in the order the reader chooses.

Introduction

These accounts of practice were developed as a result of a three-year collaborative teacher development project entitled "Responding to diversity by engaging with students' voices: a strategy for teacher development", funded by the European Union Executive Agency. The project involved three countries, Spain, Portugal and the United Kingdom. Five universities and eight secondary schools - two each in Hull, Lisbon, Madrid and Manchester - were the partner organisations of the project. The focus of project activities was on what is arguably the biggest challenge facing teachers across Europe: responding to learner diversity in schools.

The eight accounts are intended to be read alongside the guidance manual, which explains the project strategy and gives suggestions as to how it should be used. Each account comes from one of the eight secondary schools that took part in the project. Whilst they all used a similar process - the one described in the Guide - each one illustrates the different forms the process can take as teachers adapt the recommended strategy. In order to enable the reader to understand the contexts in which these accounts developed a brief description of each school is offered.

The accounts of practice bring to the surface the benefits of using the strategy as well as the challenges, by offering examples of what occured in each of the schools. They are not descriptive of all the details that took place over the period of two years, but they each try to tell a story based on teachers' use of the strategy in their schools. They also show how the strategy incorporates all the elements that research suggests create powerful forms of professional development. Specifically, the strategy:

- Is located mainly in classrooms;
- Builds on the expertise available within the school;
- Involves teacher collaboration;
- Helps to develop a language of practice; and
- Uses evidence as a stimulus for reflection and experimentation.

What is added to this list by the current project is the value that comes from involving students in the process.

1. Rethinking classroom practices

An account of practice at Archbishop Sentamu Academy*, Hull

Although the work that took place in this school involved only a few teachers, a large number of students took part in a variety of ways. In addition, what was distinctive was the fact that the teachers worked closely with support staff, as well as with student researchers. In this way, teachers rethought classroom practices and made necessary changes based on students' suggestions. This had an impact on teachers' thinking and practices, as well as on the students' participation.

Focusing on seating arrangements

In the first year of the project, a trio of Modern Foreign Language (MFL) teachers worked closely with two learning mentors in the school to gain the views of students about learning and teaching in French. Learning mentors have a specific role in supporting individuals or groups of students. They do not usually work within classrooms, but they take students out of classes to provide additional support, especially to those who are struggling. The learning mentors have a school-wide remit and do not have a fixed timetable. For the project the learning mentors focused on facilitating the process of collecting the views of students.

In discussing the notion of diversity in the school the staff team decided to focus on a particular group of students who had joined the school from a neighbouring school. The students had previously received very little French teaching and, as a result, they struggled to engage with the level of teaching offered to their year group, despite the fact that they were doing well in most of the other subjects.

In collaboration with the three teachers the learning mentors designed activities to explore students' views about French. These included: a questionnaire; a rating scale regarding what helps them learn; and an activity which required students to draw their ideal classroom. These activities provided useful information about what students felt was most conducive to their learning, and this was all passed on to the teaching team.

The three teachers then designed their lessons taking into account the students' views about French, which were gathered using the methods mentioned above. What was significant was the way that attention was paid to matters of detail about learning and teaching. There was a very specific focus on areas that the teachers themselves identified in relation to each of the skills (speaking, writing, listening). The suggestions about each of the areas came from the students. Whereas in some other project schools, students' views about learning and teaching were at a generic level (e.g. more interactive activities, fun learning, group work etc.), here, attention was given to very specific areas.

The teaching staff reflected that they had benefited from hearing directly from students. One commented that even after years of teaching, they had never directly asked students about what they wanted in the classroom. The student suggestions prompted staff to try new approaches, such as using I-Pods in the classrooms, which worked very effectively.

As stated above, a key role in facilitating the whole process was the support that the learning mentors provided. In particular, they

* Archbishop Sentamu Academy is a Church of England Academy which educates 1389 students aged between 11-18 years. In England, Academy Schools are a relatively new model of schooling which are funded by central government but are also encouraged to engage in partnerships which attract corporate sponsorship. The student population as a whole consists of mainly White British students.

coordinated the whole process of gathering students' views and summarising the findings to share with teachers. This might have implications for other schools that wish to engage in similar process, in thinking about the involvement of others in the school, beyond teachers, and how they might facilitate such processes. Having said that, this has to be approached in a careful way, so as to ensure that the teachers truly engage with the whole process in order to listen carefully to what the students are saying and respond accordingly rather than just focusing on planning their lessons as part of the lesson study approach.

A shift

Moving on to the second year, a significant step forward was that, this time, teachers handed over control to the students themselves in deciding the focus of their exploration. So, whereas in the first year we saw the teachers still feeling that they need to be in control of what would be researched (hence the decision to focus on speaking, listening, writing), in the second year there was a shift. So, a group of student researchers took the lead in identifying the area that they wanted to focus on.

The student researchers received training at the university about how to collect and analyse data. During the training the students explored a range of methods, (including visual images, questionnaires, interviews, observations etc.) and looked at how the data collected through these methods can be analysed. Since the focus of this project was on students' voices, the fact student researchers were setting the agenda for exploration was quite important. The area that this group of student researchers chose to focus on was seating arrangements in the classrooms and how these can impact on students' learning.

The same trio from the previous year (all modern foreign language teachers) carried out another cycle of research lessons, where they focused on seating arrangements in their lessons. The student researchers (year 9 – aged 13-14) gathered the views of all Year 7s (a total of 120 students, aged 11-12), using a questionnaire, and identified students' preferences about seating arrangements and how these can impact on their learning. There was not an agreement amongst students as to which seating arrangement they preferred. However, groups, in rows and horseshoe shape were the top three preferences.

At that time, the three teachers all had their students seating in horseshoe shape, with some tables in the middle. As a result of the student feedback, each decided to focus on a different kind of seating arrangements. At the same time of thinking about how to organise tables, the teachers also thought about who should sit next to whom and each one approached this decision differently.

One of the teachers kept the one big horseshoe shape but did not have the tables in the middle, so she could move around easily from inside. This teacher made the decision about where students sat in the classroom. The second teacher arranged the tables in groups and allowed students to decide with whom they sat. The last teacher placed the classmates in rows and gave out post-it notes so that individuals could write the names of two students they would not mind sitting next to. This teacher placed them next to one of their chosen students. So, she gave the option about seat placement but, at the same time, retained some control over the final decision as to who sits next to whom. Interestingly enough, there was one student who did not want to sit next to anyone and the teacher respected this and allowed him to sit on his own. Of course, teachers need to take care that this does not happen all the time, since an important purpose of education is to foster young people's social development.

Then the teachers sat together and planned the lessons. Planning lessons together is what usually happens in the school. Each of the lessons was observed by the other teachers in the trio and at the end of each of the lessons the student researchers came and gathered feedback by giving out questionnaires and carrying out interviews with some of the students in the lessons. The students' feedback was used to refine the next lesson.

Impact on practice and thinking

After the completion of this cycle, two teachers left the tables as they organised them for the purposes of the project. However, the teacher who organised the class in a big horsheshoe with no tables in the middle, went back to the original arrangement with tables in the middle, simply because of space limitations.

It was interesting to note the impact that the engagement with these ideas had on teachers' practices and thinking, as well as on their students. For example, the teacher who put them in groups and gave them the option where to sit left them like this after the project. As he said:

> "I found the kids were more comfortable in groups. I think in languages they need to feel comfortable when you are speaking because of the embarrassment factor, you have to be self conscious about how you sound. And I think when you are working with someone that you feel comfortable with you will relax more, you' ll engage more, you will participate more."

The teacher who put the students in rows said:

> "They were much more willing to participate. I don't know if it is the fact that because they are next to their friends they are not worried of giving an answer, they've got that confidence."

So, it is clear that through the work of this trio that there were changes in teachers' practices and thinking and, consequently, on student themselves. Interestingly enough, when the researchers interviewed the teachers and asked whether they were surprised that the student researchers focused on seating

arrangements, the teachers said that this was not a surprise since the students always asked for this to change.

The students also felt that they benefited through this process. For example, they made comments such as:

"I am quite tall and my name starts with C. And because my teacher asks us to sit in alphabetical order I am always sat in front of people and they are complaining. Because teachers think that generally it is easier to do an alphabetical seating plan, but we thought if we could do a practical one it would affect our learning, the ones at the back can also see the board."

"It was our opinion who to sit next to, so we knew we could get on with our work. And it was good because we got to help one another and people did not get stuck."

"We made a lot of difference to a lot of people. By sitting next to who they like the behaviour was better."
(student researcher)

"I feel happy that the teachers listened to the children for a change."
(student researcher)

Final thoughts

What was very distinctive in this school was the fact that the students could see clearly how their suggestions were taken into account for making changes in the lessons. In other words, the very specific suggestions they offered resulted in teachers rethinking their practices and making changes to promote the inclusion of all students. In that way, it made students feel that their voices were truly heard.

2. Students as allies

An account of practice at Dehesilla secondary school, Madrid*[1]

The implementation of the project coincided with a period of severe financial cuts, which were particularly significant for state schools in Spain. Dehesilla was no exception in this context. Although the school's participation in the project was attractive to many teachers, the atmosphere generated by the national situation made the project more challenging. Nevertheless, there was considerable evidence that the new relationships developed between teachers and students led to changes in practice and improved outcomes for students. As a result, colleagues in the school came to see students as allies who are able to help bring about improvements in teaching and learning.

Opportunities to stop and think

The project began with a group of four teachers from different areas of the school. Thanks to them, two cycles of action research were achieved, involving twelve teachers in all. Together, they found out how the views of students could help them to make their lessons more inclusive and effective.

Like students across the three countries, those at Dehesilla felt that lessons should be fun, creative and hands-on, with lots of practical activities. Moreover, they like teachers to explain topics by giving illustrative examples from real life. What they don't like are lessons that only involve reading, writing and looking at the whiteboard.

* Dehesilla is a state school (no fees must be paid by parents) located in the village of Cercedilla, in the northwest of Madrid region. The majority of students are Spanish, but other nationalities (especially, Moroccan, Latin American, and Romanian) are also represented in the student population. Students from the age of eleven to eighteen are admitted, regardless of their social or economic background.

[1] Unfortunately, during the project there was the sad death of Francisca Gil, an initial member of the group. This account is a small tribute to her memory.

However, through discussions between teachers and students, some more specific themes emerged, such as the degree of involvement of students, the use of varied materials, appropriate forms of evaluation, desk layout, and ways for students to help teachers. These observations were kept in mind.

Some proposals were relatively easy to address. Indeed, during the course of the project, there were many examples of teachers changing minor aspects of their practice that were seen to lead to improvements in learning outcomes. For example, some students indicated that sometimes teachers ran out of time, leaving no opportunity to explain clearly the tasks they had to do for homework.

There were, however, other issues where there were clear differences between the views of teachers and students. For example, some teachers blamed low participation on student passivity or lack of interest. On the other hand, students suggested alternative explanations, such as:

> "I'd like to be asked to answer more. The teachers always speak to the same students."

> "I rarely speak, because in class there is always a lot of noise."

> "I do not participate because I know nothing."

Gradually teachers became more willing to consider such alternative suggestions. As this occurred they also began to see their students differently. In this way, the voices of students became a powerful stimulus for joint lesson planning.

Planning together

During the second cycle of action research, the teachers involved in the project did not share responsibility for a common group of students. This aspect, plus the different subjects involved (e.g. art, English and technology), complicated arrangements for joint lesson planning.

After discussions, the idea of concentrating on one particular strategy, peer tutoring, as the focus of the lesson study emerged. This method is a simple form of cooperative learning in which student pairs have specific roles - one is the 'tutor', the other the 'tutee'. Sometimes, too, pairs will alternate these roles.

This method proved to be appropriate because it was applicable to a variety of subjects and could involve students identified as being at risk of exclusion from their classes. In using the method, the teachers agreed to follow a similar pattern that involved a 'pause, clue and praise' process. This meant that the tutor student had to ask their partners to stop to think, give them some hints as to how to continue the task, and praising when needed.

The teachers agreed to use this methodology in their respective classes. They found that it was relevant to students with different levels of knowledge, learning rates, motivations and capabilities. At the same time, it seemed to help reinforce important social skills, such as the ones needed to interact respectfully with colleagues. And for students new to a class, this method helped them to find a place in the group and feel more integrated. All students were enthusiastic about this way of learning.

The work was quite daunting because the teachers did not have experience in using this approach. Consequently, they began by reading about similar experiences in other schools. This raised many questions about this methodology, particularly as the teachers began planning their 'research lessons'. For example, they debated issues such as: How can we motivate students to interact among themselves, focusing on the task rather than irrelevant issues?

In taking the approach forward an important factor emerged. That is, the teachers found that their students were able to help them both in determining the criteria for forming student pairs and in deciding how they could help each other. So, for example, students from the classes involved generated their own criteria to form the pairs. The most frequent were: 'differences in level, so you can learn

one from each other'; 'couples in which there is a partner with difficulties - he/she should be placed with one that has many capabilities'; and 'couples should be formed with people that always come to class and get along'. Teachers should of course, be very careful, to avoid encouraging certain stereotypes amongst students. Rather, they need to emphasise that all are different, and all have strengths and weaknesses.

Relating to the question of how students can help one another, they came up with an impressive range of suggestions, such as: 'describe the task to your partner', 'explain what to do'; 'helping to focus on activities'; 'listen respectfully the difficulties posed by classmates'; 'try to be autonomous'; 'seek help from the partner before going to the teacher'; 'encourage your partner', 'give messages of encouragement, such as, come on, you can'.

Determining impact

As these ideas were trialed, the teachers' trust in their students was seen to grow. Indeed, the young people were increasingly asked to share responsibility for their own learning, something always desired but not always easy to achieve.

As in the first cycle of action research, the teachers agreed common criteria for lesson observation and drew up an observation framework with criteria, such as: Does the teacher remind students about the final goal of the activity? Does the teacher clarify the objectives of each step? Does the teacher test the learning process from time to time? Does the teacher insist on the clarification of the homework tasks, if needed?

Reflecting on what happened, the teachers expressed satisfaction with the approach they had developed, especially the improved involvement of some students who had previously missed classes. It seemed that the commitment of their peers had provided them with an encouragement to attend school more often.

For teachers, the learning process had been more active and motivating:

> "Students have stopped to think much more often."

> "All the students are less afraid to ask questions and are more aware of shared doubts and common mistakes."

> "It is greatly satisfying for me to see the students work autonomously and without going crazy on resolving all doubts."

Meanwhile, the students talked of their satisfaction of working in this way. In particular, they enjoyed explaining to their peers. Tutees claimed that they understood lessons more when they explained by their peers.

Final thoughts

What looked like a project doomed to have unsatisfactory results, largely as a result of the economic difficulties and political context affecting Spain, ended up generating satisfactory results. Evidences from observations and post-lesson interviews suggested that many students made good progress in learning and participation, especially previously disaffected students.

It was found that the use of a similar teaching strategy, albeit in lessons that focused on different subjects, established a common agenda that helped guide discussions about practice. Moreover, it was interesting how the project opened up opportunities for discussion with other teachers who were not involved in the trios. It seemed that colleagues felt more confident to talk openly about their teaching approaches and concerns. In a sense, they had learned that problems experienced in the classroom are opportunities to innovate. And, most significant of all, they had discovered that students can be allies in this process.

3. Making learning meaningful

An account of practice from the Lindley Cintra* Cluster of Schools, Lisbon

Evidence from the project in Lindley Cintra Schools shows how collaboration can lead to a process of making teachers becoming more committed to respond to *diversity.* At the same time it is an example of how to involve students, both in the lessons, and as researchers collecting and analysing students' views.

Working cooperatively

The first step was when the coordinator group held an open session for the schools in the cluster, inviting all the teachers to participate. As a result, a first trio of teachers from two different curricular areas was formed. They chose to focus on human rights, a cross-curricular theme in the area of citizenship. This was particularly challenging, because it involved different school grades.

This initial activity had an important role regarding teacher involvement during the second year of the project, not least because those involved were able to support their colleagues. One teacher explained what happened:

> "At the beginning of the second year, another teachers' meeting was held with the coordinators and the first trio. Then two new trios were formed, and the first one gave support to all of the teachers."

Another cross curricular theme was chosen as one of the great challenges to be faced in the school, that of bullying. As a preparation for this work, students were asked to reflect about a bullying situation that they had already heard about or experienced, and to share it in a small group. They made a script according to a bullying situation consensually chosen, and each group prepared and performed its sketches. The teachers filmed the sketches in collaboration with their students.

The research lessons that followed each included five steps. First, in small groups, the students read and analysed a text, stressing the victim's feelings. The speaker of each group wrote a summary on the board, expressing the group's feelings. These ideas were the basis for brainstorming. After that, the whole class started the reflection upon

* AEPLC is a state cluster of six schools in Lisbon and has a common management and administrative boards, as well as a single School Educational Project. The six schools integrate a total of about 2500 students from a large diversity of social economic and cultural backgrounds, including a large number of families facing poverty.

this issue and defined the concept of bullying. Then, the students watched their sketches and made a comparison between what they had performed and the topic of the text. Finally, students listened to the song: 'I am the strongest' by Boss AC, and reflected upon its lyrics about how to overcome problems.

There was strong evidence of the impact regarding all students' participation, learning, respect for diversity and inclusion across the age groups:

6th grade

"It was a different kind of learning: life learning."

"I have learned to see that I am able to help myself to overcome a bullying situation."

10th/12th grades

"Some colleagues are shy and feel difficulties with talking to the whole class. But they were participating in the small group and talking to the colleague next to him."

"There was nothing in this lesson that made me feel apart. Since the very beginning the participation of all the students was encouraged."

9th grade

"In each small group we have done the script, then we chose roles and we acted, as well as filmed. And we achieved good results."

As far as the teachers were concerned, they had achieved a truly cooperative way of working and, as a result, became more aware of what is positive in each of them as practitioners. They felt the need to reformulate the initial plan, according to the analysis of each lesson, taking account of the specific needs of each class and its particular involvement.

Teachers also talked about how important this activity has been for them in terms of recognising and working with diversity in school:

"Regarding the ways we work with diversity, our colleague who has the 6th grade class played a key role in the trio. Her class is extremely difficult with regard to behaviour, demotivation and diverse participation. So she started our joint reflection by helping us to think about how to deal with this situation, preparing better lessons that could bring up more participation and learning to all students."

The practice of this trio allowed them to improve the plans and to concentrate a meaningful part of the work and joint reflection in the students' involvement in the process.

Students as researchers

One of the most significant developments was students interviewing other students. This created a good environment which allowed each student being interviewed to talk freely about the lesson in which he/she had participated. An example of this was an interview with a group of eight 9th grade students, chosen by their teacher taking into account of their diversity (socio-economic and cultural groups, levels of attainment and school results, gender, levels of participation).

The students were welcomed by a group of three 6th grade students wearing a badge, on which was written "interviewer" and first names. The badges signalled that they were research students having a role in school. These students were able to lead a process that overcame differences of status and age.

A room with a square table was prepared, with a chart on it, divided in two sections, one marked + and the other -, and everybody sat down around. The three student-interviewers sat together with the school project coordinator. They presented themselves as belonging to the students' researcher group acting as interviewers for this project. One of them invited the 9th grade colleagues to present themselves and asked permission to record the interview. Another interviewer was prepared to lead the interview. And the third student offered himself to act as secretary.

Then the participants were asked to write down, in an anonymous way, their positive and negative impressions about the lesson. An interviewer distributed small sheets of paper of two different colours, and presented two questions: What made me feel that I was participating in this lesson? (+); What made me feel apart/ that I was not participating in the lesson or in some tasks? (-). After a while she asked for a volunteer interviewee to mix up the positive answers and another to read them aloud. The group was invited to freely discuss the issues. After these discussions, the interviewers introduced some questions to help clarify some aspects or move the discussion forward. An important part of these questions was previously prepared in the research group, taking into account the school and teacher's development focus: *students' involvement for full participation and success in learning.* The same process happened for the negative answers, with little intervention from the teacher.

A large number of students had written on the sheets of paper statements like:

> "I really felt I was a part of that lesson and of that task and I felt I was participating because we ourselves were leading the lesson."

These aspects related to the feeling of belonging and of being a partner for teaching the lesson was stressed by the whole group. The students agreed and valued the fact that

> "There was a reversal of roles in this lesson, we ourselves were the teachers and the teachers were seated and listening at the bottom of the classroom."

In the students' words:

> "We became autonomous; it was also a good incentive for the future when we will have to present other works;" "We have learned to prepare and teach a lesson to our own classmates"; "This was a most motivating lesson, nobody felt sleepy, it was different: and in this way, yes, I can learn; It was different; in this way we are now prepared to face this more active kind of lesson."

Trying to better understand the barriers and the levels of participation and learning of different students, a student-interviewer asked about the difficulties felt and how they were overcome. Answers like the following regarding the support they got from the working group emerged:

> "I was all trembling before the presentation but I got support from my group and everything went well."

When one of the interviewers asked "How could this methodology be improved in the future?" students didn't hesitate in giving their teachers' suggestions:

"When a lesson is more practical and dynamic like this one and the teacher is able to engage students in tasks, they become motivated. In this way students are really able to learn."

Reflecting on the experience

Reflecting upon the whole process the teachers made comments such as:

"We succeeded in making our students more 'visible'."

"The students become more active, discover their abilities, become a group that start to cooperate, to create, some areas of activities at school, they start to believe they can do something, they believe in themselves, they want to change, to improve, to have influence on the school life."

There was also evidence that by the end of the second year of the project teachers felt much more comfortable working together and learning with each other.

"The great step is given by teachers and students in order to run away from the danger of exclusion at school, be willing altogether to cooperate to do and learn much more effectively, making it meaningful."

Final thoughts

Having participated in the project in a most engaged way, the experience of the Lindley Cintra cluster of schools had two distinctive aspects. First of all, it was important that the teachers from the initial group involved and supported new trios of teachers participating along with them. This was a learning process to find better responses to the diversity of students. Secondly, the involvement and participation of students in school, with cooperative learning happening in the classroom and with some of the students assuming research roles, was a vital factor in what occurred.

4. Creating opportunities to talk about teaching and learning

An account of practice at Newland School for Girls, Hull*

Each of the eight schools involved in the project recognised that they had different starting points with regards to engaging with students' voices. At Newland School for Girls (NSG), there was enthusiasm and commitment to the idea from senior leadership and from the staff involved, but there was also a concern about pushing teachers too far and too fast. Choosing to be involved was, therefore, both exciting and challenging.

First steps

A small project team was formed within the school. This team took responsibility for deciding upon the 'target group' of students for the study, and also working as a teaching trio. They selected a particular cohort of students who they felt were not achieving their full academic potential and might therefore be considered marginalised. The teachers were cross-curricular (Geography, Modern Foreign Languages and Science) but all taught the same year group. Two were on the senior leadership team, and one had particular responsibility for leading on 'student voice' work. This placed them in a strong position to direct the project within the school.

For many of the group of students, participating in the project signalled the first time that they had been asked to engage in discussions about teaching and learning. They were enthusiastic about sharing their views during facilitated discussions with university researchers. Four strong messages were identified:

* The school is located in the city of Hull, in East Yorkshire in England. It is an all girls school with approximately 840 students on roll, ages 11 to 16 years old. 15% of the school population has English as an additional language, coming from a range of ethnic backgrounds (such as from Pakistan, Bangladesh, China and Eastern Europe).

- Students wanted lessons to be **more creative** and hands-on. They enjoyed lessons that incorporated practical activities. They did not like lessons which were purely about reading, writing and looking at the whiteboard. They strongly argued that they learnt more from 'learning by doing'.
- Students wanted to be able to **choose the groups** that they worked in. They did not like being put into groups with people they did not get on with as they felt it interfered with their ability to learn. They appreciated that teachers might think that they would 'mess about' if they were with their friends, but they wanted to be given a chance.
- Students did not like feeling as if teachers had **favourites** and that rules did not apply to everyone equally.
- Students wanted **more feedback** on their work, and not just in terms of assessments. They needed to know how they were doing. They also wanted to be able to **ask questions** more often, and for teachers to **check whether they understood.**

The university researchers sent a detailed summary of the students' feedback to the teachers involved with the project. At this point, something interesting happened: the teachers decided that they would only share 'edited highlights' of the feedback with the rest of the staff team and in particular, they chose not to include direct quotations from students. Knowing their colleagues well, they felt that the students' comments would be too challenging for some to hear and, thus, would be dismissed rather than taken seriously (for example, by asking "are they talking about me?", "well, I don't do that in my lessons", or "that's just not true"). This is an indication of the cultural shift that needs to occur in many schools (NSG is only one example) if engaging with students' voices is to be taken seriously as a mechanism for enabling teacher development.

Studying practice

The teaching trio decided to focus their efforts on the first two of the highlighted themes: to attempt to make lessons more creative, and to experiment with enabling students to choose their own groups. There is, of course, considerable research evidence regarding the best ways to organise such cooperative groups. However, what was important here was that the teachers were taking note of student views.

In the first lesson (German), students were allowed complete control over the size and composition of groups they worked in. The lesson was more interactive than usual and involved far more movement and noise. Following discussions with students, the second lesson (Geography) placed a limit on group size but was also highly interactive. The final lesson (Science) specified an optimal group size, as agreed by students, and continued to be creative and hands-on. The feedback from students about the lessons was extremely positive, and a post-class test revealed that they had retained the information from the lessons.

The staff team, though initially sceptical about allowing students to choose their own groups, were extremely positive about the process. All of them had also worked hard to incorporate interactive activities in ways that were unusual for them. Two of them agreed that it took them

> "out of our normal ways of teaching and that was a good thing because it challenged us as professionals ... it actually boosted our self-esteem to see that trying these new things had worked ... it had paid off".

In particular, they highlighted the value in being able to plan together and being given the opportunity to observe each other in practice.

In NSG, as in most schools in the UK, 'observation' is used as a formal way of assessing teacher performance. By contrast, when used as part of lesson study, it is an entirely developmental process. Teachers commented on how valuable it was

> "to actually have some reflective time just as three professionals to share that and it nice to be able to collaboratively plan with a colleague ... again sharing ideas ... discussing ways of refining a process ... and that was a really positive experience as professionals."

Following these lessons, some of the teachers continued to use interactive activities in lessons where they could, but they were keen to stress that they could not do this all the time. One explained that he still used his more familiar methods for teaching, but that this project had made him

> "more thoughtful about my lessons".

At times though, he argued, interactive activities were not the most effective way to learn. This created an interesting dynamic with students, with one, for example, saying to a teacher:

> "I thought we weren't meant to be using text books any more ... thought you were meant to be putting a bit of effort in Miss".

This highlights an important consideration for teachers who make efforts to engage with students' voices: once dialogue has started, it needs to be ongoing. In this instance, the student clearly felt that because she (and others) had said that she did not like reading from a text book, then this would mean that teachers could no longer use text books. The need for dialogue – two-way communication – becomes obvious. In other schools, where students were deeply involved in planning and developing lessons, they started to understand the range of factors which affected a teacher's decision to organise a class in a particular way. They started to be able to appreciate the complexity of lesson planning in the light of topic, assessment requirements, and class dynamics. At NSG, where the process was so new, the process of dialogue had not yet been developed to this extent.

Moving up a level

In the second year of the project, NSG took the challenge of engaging with students to a new level: they decided to develop a small group of student-researchers *(The Voice of Learning)* to work alongside staff on the project. Fourteen students, all of whom had been in the 'target group' of the previous year, were invited to undertake training to help them in this role. The training day encouraged the students to participate in a range of interactive activities (thus generating useful data in itself), with a view to then using some of these activities with their peers. The day also provided a new opportunity for students and teachers to have two-way dialogue about teaching and learning, and for the first time, students were able to hear some of the dilemmas experienced by teachers. These types of opportunities, experienced by NSG and a number of other schools in this study, were an invaluable part of a process of collaboration between teachers and students.

Two new trios were formed: one in history and one in modern foreign languages. The target groups of learners were slightly different in terms of characteristics and age. Both trios canvassed for students' views (with

some support from student-researchers), and interestingly, similar feedback was received as the previous year. Students wanted more creative, hands-on teaching methods, and they wanted to be able to choose their own groups. These themes were not limited to NSG: across all eight schools, in three countries, students gave similar feedback. This does beg the question as to how frequently it is necessary to ask for students' views before teachers start to make changes to their teaching methods. Nonetheless, for the teachers in these trios, this feedback was important and they developed their teaching plans accordingly. Again, the teachers' reflections on the processes that they had experienced were extremely positive. One commented:

> "I know it's changed my practice. I do incorporate more practical work and kinaesthetic-style activities because they do enjoy doing them and do get a genuine delight out of doing them."

The vision of working alongside student-researchers at NSG had mixed levels of success in practice. Although initially enthusiastic and driven by the training session, some of the students lost their motivation soon after getting back to school. They started to see some of their tasks as being an additional 'chore' and several of them dropped out. The project team within the school reflected on this and came to two conclusions: first, by being invited to participate, the student-researchers had been thrust into a leadership role which, with hindsight, did not suit some of them; and second, NSG experienced many unforeseen complications with staffing which meant that, in practice, the level of support offered to the student-researchers was less than they had planned. Both of these factors are perhaps indicative of the organisational culture of NSG with relation to engaging with students' voices: it was an exciting but a challenging prospect – for teachers *and* for students.

Final thoughts

Staff at NSG embraced this project with enthusiasm. However, participation was not without its challenges. The teaching team took the initiative in terms of directing the project within their own context, and they followed all of the steps laid out in the guide. At the end of the process, though, it appears as if the single most valuable component of the project was the opportunity to create spaces in which discussions about teaching and learning could take place. These included opportunities for teachers to plan together, to observe one another, and to engage in discussions which aided professional development, but equally importantly, it also included opportunities for **students** and **teachers** to engage in genuine dialogue about lessons and learning.

5. Structuring lessons in a cooperative classroom

An account of practice at Gaudem* School, Madrid

In setting up the project at Gaudem School, the decision was made to focus on the secondary department, where the issue of responding to diversity was seen as a significant challenge. The management of the school drew on work conducted in another school that had developed the idea of 'classroom multitasking'. Following this model, instead of having a single teacher in the classroom, at least two teachers were always together to teach the content of an integrated curriculum. This innovative context provided interesting opportunities for exploring the idea of working together to make lesson activities more effective for all members of a class.

The use of space

The cooperative classrooms at Gaudem are based on a form of school organization that responds to the great challenge of being able to work productively with the diversity of its students. This includes several deaf students, who are users of Spanish sign language. Larger than regular classrooms, the classes welcome a student population that would be typically two groups of students in other schools. We are therefore talking about a class of approximately 40 students who usually work in groups of four or five.

Instead of working on independent subjects from a traditional curriculum (e.g. language, maths, social sciences), subjects are grouped and integrated into what is called 'fields'. This new approach has undoubted advantages, but it also brings challenges. For example:

- It requires, at least, two teachers in the classroom, which can facilitate better management of diversity and discipline.
- It encourages collaborative work on the tasks of design, development and evaluation.
- The class times of the 'field' lessons are longer (2 hours minimum). This provides a time frame that makes it more practicable, for example, to use cooperative strategies.
- Teachers and students have more opportunities to establish a stronger personal and affective connection with each other.

The physical space of classrooms is divided into three zones. These are:

- The digital whiteboard zone, which coincides with the area to the front of the class.
- The independent work zone, which is situated approximately in the middle of the class, and in which students have the opportunity of working individually.
- The guided work zone, which is positioned at the rear of the room and in which the second of the teachers reinforces previously-studied content.

In their analysis of the functioning of the classrooms, the students paid attention to the fact that there was sometimes disorganisation in the sequence of work teachers followed. As a consequence, some groups of students had less class time in some of the zones, or there was insufficient time to complete tasks in each study area properly, with the consequent confusion with regard to possible implication for their homework or for the next class. For example, students commented:

* *Gaudem School* is a private school founded by the state (called in Spanish "*Centro Concertado*). The general socioeconomic background of families who attend the school is middle and upper middle class. The school population is around 1300 students, including a significant number considered as having *special educational needs* linked, most of them but not only, to deafness, hearing impairment or language disorders.

> "The classes in the zone have to be well organized and that, in general, after the start and the planned development will have a moment of closure where we remember the most important thing that we have learned and the remaining tasks to do at home as homework."

> "Some of the zones have less time for their development because there is bad organization of the time."

For these reasons, the collaborative work carried out by the trio of teachers focused, in the first place, on establishing and strengthening the activities in the different zones. Discussions focused on issues such as:

- The beginnings of lesson activities, in order to capture the attention of the group and promote its interest in the subject of study.
- The explanations and discussions given by teachers, using simple strategies of cooperative learning, to engage with students' previous ideas, promote understanding, highlight the content of subjects and make new ones.
- The conclusion of an activity, in order to help students draw together their learning and how this would relate to further lessons in the future.

It is worth adding that this form of organization has the disadvantage that it obliges each teacher to repeat every learning activity three times. On the other hand, it has the advantage that each time the teacher works with small groups of students there is an opportunityto respond more effectively to diversity.

Making changes

One of the classroom zones is intended to provide a space in which students complete specific tasks prepared by their teachers with the aim of strengthening their understanding. However, observations carried out by the trios revealed how, on some occasions, what happened distorted the overall functioning of the classes. Put simply, what was meant to be an independent study area frequently required aid from the teachers to clarify the tasks or activities to be performed. When this support arrived there was frequent disruption for some students. For example, following her observations, one teacher explained:

> "The class has been a small disaster. I have not been able to develop work in the area of the whiteboard as I wanted because the independent learning zone has not worked. The tasks that I have designed (algebra), were too difficult for the students to do alone and, for this reason, there have been too many distractions."

The trio of teachers discussed this situation in considerable detail, drawing on the views of their students and the observations they had carried out. Eventually, they agreed some changes and initiatives that were tested during the following two rounds of lesson study. For example, a pattern was developed whereby the students could check the work to do established by the teachers for each working space, and a pattern of self-evaluation was also implemented so that they could seek evidence of how their work in each area developed. It was thought that in this area the tables were separated in order to

facilitate the concentration and the personal work. It was also considered that in this area, students could be given open options to work autonomously.

Developing practice

The analysis of evidence collected by listening to students and observing practice led to detailed but, nevertheless, significant improvements in the organisation of the classrooms. This was exciting to see: teachers working intensively with their respective groups in the different zones, whilst taking advantage of managing a smaller group of students in ways that enabled them to pay greater attention to individuals. As a result, the virtues and benefits of the cooperative classrooms as a means of attending to diversity in a balanced and fair way were evident. Thanks to the opportunities that teachers had to think and rethink educational practices, they were able to develop innovative responses and gain more confidence and mutual trust in addressing the challenges of diversity in their classrooms.

In a school that places so much emphasis on cooperation, the recognition that it is possible to find answers, if not perfect ones, to the dilemmas of responding to differences in school education, opened up new opportunities for progress. This was reflected in some of the participants' comments, such as:

> "(What we have done in this project)... seems to me extremely enriching and positive because it has forced us to rethink constantly our practices in the classroom and our relationship with the students, as well as the role that we play both in the learning process. As teachers, it has allowed us to stand back (something that the pace of a day to day school does not always allows in the schedule), to evaluate how to program, develop the teaching units and to verify its validity on the basis of these reviews and opinions of students and not only of a review that reflects only their knowledge of the content."

> "The possibility of sharing the analysis of actual teaching practices, as exercised by ourselves, with the peers and the "critical friends" from the university, is a privilege to thank the project which would not be possible in other circumstances. Their advice and invitation to reflection has allowed us, in addition to being more knowledgeable about the reality of classroom that we have and what is our role and our roles, to encourage a more sensitive view to the diversity and learn and educate more to exercise better our work."

The students also seemed to appreciate what had occured:

> "Before the project there was not a beginning for our lesson activities but now the teachers explain to us how many rotations we are going to do, how much time and what we are going to do in each rotation; and at the end of the class, before, they did not explain the questions that we had and now, now they explain us the questions that we had and remind us what we have done."

> "Now everything is more organized."

Final thoughts

Thanks to the opportunities that teachers had to think and rethink educational practices, they were able to develop innovative responses and gain more confidence and mutual trust in addressing the challenges they faced.

6. Teachers moving out of their comfort zones

An account of practice at Manchester Academy*, Manchester

Inevitably, the depths of discussion within the teacher trios in the eight project schools varied considerably. An example of one that matured in this respect involved a trio of teachers of English at this high school in the United Kingdom.

Focusing on vulnerable learners

In planning their research lesson the teachers identified students within each of their classes who they saw as being particularly vulnerable. They felt that by thinking about the lesson with these individuals in mind they might create new and different ways of facilitating the learning of all of their students. So for example, one teacher talked about a student who had an understanding of language but would not speak, even when invited. Another teacher focused on one of his students who had severe dyslexia.

This led the teachers to discuss how they might plan their lessons differently; for example, they talked about getting the students to write on the whiteboard, and getting students to rehearse verbally what they wanted to say, rather than writing arguments down.

In addition, the trio decided that they needed to work with some of their students *before* teaching the lessons to get an idea of how they preferred to learn. They also wanted to consider how best to plan the lesson to support the many differences amongst the students. They therefore selected seven students, each from a different ethnic background, six of whom were born outside the country.

The teachers got these students together at lunchtime and asked them to rank their preferences regarding different classroom activities that can be used when studying poetry. As a result of these discussions, they decided that they as teachers would have minimal input into the activity. One of the teachers explained:

> "Initially, they were quite reluctant to perhaps voice an opinion that they thought we wouldn't like.... We stepped back for a bit and just left the recording device on the table and let them talk about what they liked and what they didn't like, because if we're not imposing our views on them, they were more likely to be honest."

Sometimes there were surprises. The teacher explained that although the students' initial responses were much as they had expected, their comments became less so as the discussion continued:

> "At first the students did the obvious and were quick to give their opinions, i.e. put "teacher talking and copying off the whiteboard" at the bottom of the list, and "getting up and being active" at the top. However, as they started to rank the other approaches their reasoning became more nuanced and they started to move their rankings around. Drama remained high but some of the others were not so clear."

The overall aim of the lesson that was planned was to develop confidence in and awareness of a variety of dramatic techniques. Each teacher taught the lesson with their colleagues watching, making changes in the light of the regular discussions that took place as they proceeded. It was

* Manchester Academy is a mixed multicultural 11-19 school, located in an area of Manchester defined as being one of the most deprived in the country. In addition, the school faces problems of high crime rates in the area. Many students are new arrivals in the U.K. with a consequence of this being that nearly 10% of the students are at the early stages of learning to speak English.

noticeable that these became increasingly focused on matters of detail and, as a result, led to a greater emphasis on mutual challenge and personal reflection. All of this led on to a consideration of the different teaching styles used by the members of the trio.

By the end of the process the three teachers all commented that they had been challenged to rethink their lesson planning and facilitation. Through this, they realised that new approaches gave members of the class the opportunities to learn out of what they referred to as their 'comfort zones' and, in so doing, move beyond their expectations about the capabilities of their students.

Getting started

During the first year of the project, activities were carried out by a small group of teachers. First of all they conducted detailed surveys in order to gather student views on teaching and learning in the school. With this in mind, they distributed questionnaires to sample groups of students across the school. In these questionnaires, all students were encouraged to respond openly in detailing their views on teaching, learning and school life more generally. The survey questions themselves were designed in such a way as to take account of different learning styles, asking students to draw diagrams, write notes and answer in detail. Further information was collected through a series of focus group interviews with year 9 students (aged 13-14), carried out by colleagues from the university. The teachers felt that these initial investigations were informative and that the careful structuring of the questions ensured that most students answered seriously and in detail.

Next, a group of Year 9 students were invited to select a particular teaching and learning strategy about which they felt strongly, and then research and present their proposals for strengthening the use of this approach to a staff panel. They would then select the most realisable proposals. The teachers felt that this initiative was successful in engaging students, many of who put in a considerable effort to communicate their ideas regarding ways of improving teaching and learning. Their recommendations included: lesson plan ideas for more kinaesthetic activities; suggestions regarding classroom and seating rearrangements; proposals for student voting for books to be read in lessons; and suggestions for physical exercises to start each lesson.

The next stage of the project was to conduct a cycle of lesson study research, building on the suggestions that had emerged from these various learner voice activities. Over the previous three years Manchester Academy had had considerable experience of using lesson study for the purpose of teacher professional development. Consequently, it was decided to experiment with the idea of involving students themselves in the process. Specifically, the staff group decided to involve students in planning the research lesson and also for them to be additional observers of the taught lessons.

Taking risks

Early in the second year, ideas from the project were introduced at a professional development day for the whole staff, when time was given for groups to form and begin the planning of their lessons. The experiences from the first year were helpful in giving teachers ideas as to how to move forward.

Over the following months a range of activities took place, including:

1. In Maths, three groups of teachers worked on project activities. Each group was made up of three teachers and a teaching assistant. Their work was focused on the question, 'What engages students?' The groups each planned one lesson which required different approaches to learning, i.e. visual/audio/ kinaesthetic.

2. In Music a group of teachers working with older students on a lesson about structure. The students themselves were required to take on the role of teaching the lesson to a variety of classes and contributed towards the developments of the lesson plan.

3. In Science a trio of teachers worked in a slightly different way. Two teachers identified a difficult class and, together, they shared ideas on how to engage students in learning and, as a result, how to reduce off-task behaviour.

Drawing the lessons

Clearly some of the teachers at Manchester Academy experimented with what many might view as a radical and potentially risky approach. However, their conclusion was that all of this had been worthwhile, in the sense that the results were encouraging and that the teachers had witnessed the potential of greater student involvement in making teaching more effective.

In particular, the teachers felt that it was significant that, in some instances, students had helped plan lessons that they imagined would not simply be about having more "fun". Rather, it had led to the development of lessons that they hoped would be more effective in facilitating the learning and progress of all of the students. Some of this focused on what proved to be important matters of detail. For example, when students recommended the use of group work, they did not merely assign students to work with their friends, but planned constructive groups that would motivate all students.

The staff also felt that it was important that student involvement in the planning and execution of lessons empowered them to have a practical influence over their own learning, as well as that of their classmates. At the same time, it seemed that many of their peers, knowing of their friends' involvement, seemed to be motivated to try their best in the lesson and for it to be a success. It was also apparent that students did not want the experiment to fail, since they looked for the initiative to be continued and for their turn to come to be involved in planning.

Evidence from the observations and post-lesson interviews suggested that many students made good progress in learning. The findings were also that more students who took part felt that they enjoyed and engaged with the lessons, particularly where it involved them in working in groups.

In response to some less positive feedback about the research lessons - mainly related to the level of challenge within the activities - the teachers looked into ways of combining teacher knowledge of what stretches students, with the students' own suggestions of what engages them. It seems, therefore, that handing the reigns over entirely to students did not provide enough challenge for some members of the class.

Clearly, there are still difficulties ahead that will need to be addressed. This is an approach to teacher development that requires a commitment of time, flexibility of organization, effective leadership and a degree of trust amongst those who participate. On the other hand, the impact in Manchester Academy so far is already very promising in relation to an aspect of the school's work that has to be central to its future success.

Final thoughts

The evidence from Manchester Academy indicates that the approach developed through the project can be a powerful way of moving practice forward. What was distinctive in this particular school, however, was the added value that comes from engaging students themselves in planning the process. This being the case, during the coming period the school intends to continue developing the approach, not least in exploring how students can contribute to thinking and practice regarding ways of responding positively to learner diversity.

7. Students and teachers ready for innovation

An account of practice at Pedro Alexandrino Secondary School (ESPA)*, Lisbon

"Diversity in our school is now seen as an opportunity, when approached through collaborative work. The exchange of ideas and research work in teams makes diversity evolve from a problem into a challenge."

"By deepening our perceptions of diversity we find new ways to address it. Collaborative work is the key to a new way of facing the issue of diversity."

"As a result of our experience we have became more autonomous, and at the same time more aware. We have arrived to a point where we, as teachers, realize we have taken our self-development process in our own hands."

These are typical of comments made by teachers at ESPA, a Secondary School situated in the Lisbon suburban area. For them, diversity is a central issue in their day-to-day work. In the words of the Head Teacher: *'It is the main feature of this school.'*

Since 2007, the school has made many efforts to address this concern. The project provided another opportunity to take this work forward through a process of collaborative inquiry that involved teachers and students.

Students as partners

In the first year of the project, a group of teachers focused attention on the question: *do all students participate in all the tasks of our lessons?* The findings of these activities led the teachers to go on to explore the issue of students as partners, including their participation in planning and, sometimes, teaching the lessons.

During the second cycle of action research different trios of teachers involved students from their classes as partners. A teacher from one group explained what happened:

"We chose the student partners, taking account of differences in motivation, language skills, behaviour, personality and gender. So that the students' workgroup would feel truly involved, we respected their choices regarding the lesson's subtopics and accepted their suggestions for classroom activities."

Following discussions with the students, this particular trio agreed that their lesson plan would integrate the activities that the students had suggested. Classroom management was felt to be a challenge, given that the plan involved students being more active than usual, moving around the classroom whenever they needed to, and also giving and accepting instructions from their classmates. Yet the teachers recognised that this experience could only be enriching if they took some risks.

Reflecting on the whole experience, one of the teachers commented:

"We went on making adjustments from lesson to lesson. For instance, for the third lesson, I tried to form more heterogeneous groups because we had noticed that there were groups where the students showed great difficulties in understanding the instructions. I chose five leaders, one for each group."

* The school has about 1200 students from Year 7 to Year 12 (11 - 18 years old) and is located in one of Lisbon's suburban counties. Diversity is an issue, namely with students from a large number of countries of origins. 19.2% of the students are included on the *Free School Meals* register (an indicator of levels of poverty in the school).

Students involved in planning

Another trio of teachers from the Portuguese department worked collaboratively with students from three different classes. One of the teachers talked about the way they organized the students' participation in planning and evaluating the lessons:

> "In the weeks before the first lesson, each teacher met twice with two students from their classes. These were the monitors, who would take on the guidance of the whole class. These working sessions with the students fulfilled the purpose of including them in the lesson planning and prepare them to monitor the teaching strategies we used."

The students assisted teachers in defining group membership, the reorganization of the furniture in the classroom, the order of approach to the contents, the distribution of the tasks among the groups according to level of difficulty, the management of time and the arrangements for evaluation. A teacher explained:

> "The lesson plan intended to involve the students in interactive collaboration and joint construction of learning. As teachers, we reinforced confidence in the collaborative attitude, especially with regard to the commitment of the students in the co-realization of learning activities (teacher-student, student-student) and in their involvement in the teaching process."

Reflections

All the teachers from the different trios valued having listened to the students' views, as well as working with students as partners in the process of teaching and learning. For many, this led to significant changes in thinking and practice. For example:

> "Listening to the students' voices in a systematic way was a major change in my practice. And it reinforced the pedagogical principles that guide me. It also showed me that if we prepare the lessons together with our students we will become more able to overcome the problem of their demotivation."

> "Student monitors prepared themselves before, both on the contents and the methodologies of the lesson. This practice reinforced a great deal of our conviction that students are competent when we empower them giving them responsibility: the more responsibility the better the performance."

> "After this experience, two 7th grade classes asked me to make the experience of students teaching the lesson and I immediately said "Ok! Let's do it". These two classes are relatively difficult regarding diversity, motivation, behaviour, skills and levels of achievement. I think that if this request had happened before the study lesson maybe I would not have agreed."

Evaluating the impact

In order to evaluate the work of the trios, it was decided to form a student research team. They decided to carry out a series of interviews on their own, with little adult support. Giving the students the opportunity to take a lead in this way represented a major innovation for the school and, of course, a challenge for the students involved.

After finishing their three research lessons, each trio made their own assessment of their experience, using data from the students' interviews as a source of challenge. One teacher explained what this involved:

> "During the interviews, students were unanimous in stating an increased motivation for the learning process. They also declared having felt a greater degree of integration in performing the activities. Additionally, students who usually reveal more difficulties expressed the opinion that they didn't feel constrained. On the contrary, they stated the ease in exposing their ideas in interaction with colleagues."

Another teacher commented:

> "Due to this new kind of more dynamic lesson, I think my colleagues and I were gradually participating more and, in my opinion, the lesson turned out to have very positive aspects, because students were more at ease."

For many of the students, the greater responsibility they shared regarding their learning, and the greater need for cooperation and mutual support in class activities, made them feel far more included in the lessons. This led to comments such as:

> "We felt more responsible."

> "I liked the feeling of having the power of decision."

> "It was the best lesson of the course."

Students were particularly fond of the group tasks. For example:

> "I really enjoyed being in a small group lesson and being in interaction in a more informal climate."

> "In small groups everyone has to participate."

They also liked to participate in the preparation of lessons:

> "I like to be one of those that helped organize the lesson because if someone in my group did not know something I would help."

Responding to diversity

There were many examples of teachers describing how collaboration with colleagues and with students had led them to think in new ways about how best to respond to learner diversity. Some talked about how this had given them greater confidence to experiment with different practices.

For example:

> "Although these strategies are described in the literature, most of the times we consider them difficult to implement. The involvement in a collaborative work project led us to try out new ways of interaction that proved to be useful and rewarding. We highlight the enthusiasm shown by students in the working sessions with teachers and the commitment that students' leaders placed in performing this role."

One of the most valued features of the project related to lesson observations carried out by other teachers. It was noted that often this focused attention on aspects that were not visible to the teacher leading the lesson. One teacher commented:

> "For me the most important thing was being observed by my colleagues. It was very much enriching and helped me to improve some aspects, because all three teachers are different. For example, I will pay more attention to some of the students because sometimes I think they are all engaged in the lesson. But I realised that they were not all participating in the lesson."

The idea of teachers working alongside students in co-leading learning activities was something that had a particular impact for some colleagues. For example:

> "The involvement of students in lesson preparation is clearly possible and desirable. We want to emphasize the importance of this experience in relation to the discovery of new ways of interaction with students both inside and outside the classroom."

Moving forward

In reflecting on what had happened during the two cycles of action research, members of all the trios agreed that their participation had promoted their professional development. In particular, it had made possible joint reflection on practice, and inspired collaborative ways of working. At the same time they pointed to challenges for the future, such as:

> "The project succeeded because the School Board was actively engaged in it. This factor was decisive. However, in addition to the support of the school board, we have confirmed that for the sustainability of this model schools need structural reform of teachers' timetable, coordination procedures among teachers and spatial organization of classrooms."

> "These collaborative practices have to become a school culture and become evident in school policies. There is a need to develop leadership and new leadership skills."

> "We suggest that students are also active observers, for example, by taking photographs at some moments of the lesson. Finally, in the future, there will be the need to study in greater depth the best way to select students who collaborate with the teacher in planning the lesson so that everyone's participation is ensured."

> "It is a worthwhile experience although it has to be a very gradual process of change."

Final thoughts

In conclusion, then, two aspects seem to distinguish the experiences at ESPA: the growing process of collaboration involving teachers and students working and learning together, in lesson planning and teaching; and the School's Board support for teaching innovation.

8. Developing a whole school response

An account of practice at St Peter's Roman Catholic High School*, Manchester

Student participation and achievement can only genuinely improve if all the teaching staff within a school are engaged in on-going reflection and development. An example of one school's extensive attempts to do this is St Peter's RC High School, in the United Kingdom.

Driven by the deputy head teacher, the school decided to use the lesson study experience of three geography teachers in the first year, to involve more colleagues in the process and to develop it as a whole school priority.

Starting off small

The team involved in the first year project activities consisted of three teachers. Prior to planning their research lesson, the group discussed different aspects of diversity within the student body. This included discussions about ethnicity; language; students' economic background; age; gender; individual characteristics; reading ages; students with special educational needs and gifted and talented students; and ability.

Within the geography department, students were grouped for teaching in 'sets', based on their attainment in the particular subject. Since all three teachers taught across the range, the group decided to concentrate on how students of different identified ability levels could all access the curriculum. The teachers were also interested in how teachers' expectations were affected by the ability set they were teaching. In addition, they decided that they would consider other elements of diversity in their research, particularly ethnicity.

Before planning the research lesson, a survey had already indicated that less than half the students actively enjoyed their lessons, or understood how they could make progress, although they all felt safe and most believed they were making progress. The staff group wanted to explore the results of this survey in more detail, in particular, exploring how students felt about different kinds of classroom activities and interactions. University colleagues therefore carried out a series of focus groups with them. A range of views regarding how students felt about their own learning were gathered and synthesised. For example, on the positive side, students made comments such as:

> "This lesson was brilliant because we did lots of different activities and we were learning at the same time."

> "It was good because everyone was contributing to the activities."

> "We like it when we work in groups. You can help each other to learn."

There were, however, less positive comments that offered food for thought, such as:

> "Some lessons are boring. We just listen to the teacher and then write."

> "The teacher picks on children who don't put their hands up. If you know the answer you don't get a chance to answer."

> "The really quiet ones get left out in some lessons."

* This is an average-sized secondary school, in Manchester (508 boys and 395 girls on roll). 23% of students are White British, 17% are of Black African heritage and smaller proportions are from a wide range of other backgrounds. 66 different languages are spoken in the school. 47.5% of the students are entitled to a free school meal (this is used as an indicator of family poverty) and a big proportion are categorised as having special needs.

The process

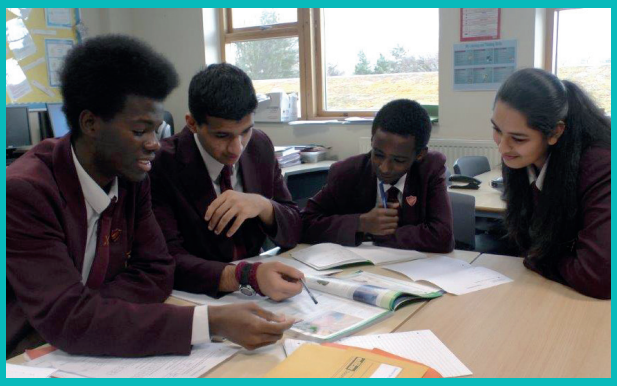
The teaching trio met to discuss the information they had collected from the pupils and the implications it had for the planning of their research lesson. Some of the pupil ideas offered what seemed to be contradictory feedback. For example, many students talked positively about group work, whilst others clearly preferred working alone during lessons. It was evident, however, that many of the pupils enjoyed lessons that incorporated thinking skills activities. They also felt that they engaged better in lessons where they were more *"active"*. There was evidence too that some individuals were unsure of their progress.

Using this feedback to inform their planning, the trio designed a lesson that focused on the theme of 'hurricanes' aimed at addressing a number of these issues. It was decided to use thinking skills as the core of the lesson to assess whether this did lead to greater levels of engagement across the ability range. They also decided to include a 'levelled task' to assess what progress pupils made during the lesson. Pupil progress charts were updated before the lessons and all pupils were made aware of their current level and their target levels.

Each colleague then took it in turns to present the lesson, while being observed by the other two teachers. The lessons were also video recorded. The first lesson was taught to Set 1 (i.e. the highest attaining class), the second to Set 3, and the third to Set 2. After each lesson, the trio met to discuss how effective they felt it had been and to make any modifications based on their experiences. The lesson content was then adapted. By the third lesson, the aim was to have created an outstanding lesson.

During the final lesson, a pupil from the first group observed the lesson to see how the lesson had been adapted. Simple feedback was then gathered from the pupils involved ("What Worked Well?", "Even Better If...") so that an initial overview of the impact of the lesson could be ascertained. The pupils in the focus group were then given the opportunity to discuss the lesson they had experienced in a second meeting with university researchers.

The feedback about the three research lessons was generally very positive. Pupils of all levels of achievement felt they had enjoyed the tasks and had been able to access the lessons, and the work they produced demonstrated clear progress had been made. More specifically, the pupils felt that they and their classmates were all equally included in the lesson, and that everybody knew what they should be doing. A typical comment was: *'Everyone was pretty much included'*. The idea of having a key question to solve from the start of a lesson was seen to be helpful to participation and learning; for example, 'Why did Dexter sleep on De Angelo's couch after the hurricane?'



One student commented that she felt more included because she could ask questions about hurricanes. She explained:

> "In the beginning when we could ask questions about what we were doing and how the hurricanes were formed and what places they were hitting, we could make up the questions."

She added that it was previously *"not normal to do that."*

The teachers felt they had benefited from the whole experience. It had given them an insight into how students preferred to study. It also gave them opportunities to share ideas and good practice, and to work together in a more supportive and collaborative way. They had been able to develop by using each other's strengths and learning from each other to improve their own delivery.

It was evident, too, that the process had stimulated considerable discussion amongst

the teachers involved regarding the ways in which detailed aspects of their practice impact on the participation and learning of different pupils in their classes: for example, one of the teachers was surprised by how often her colleague praised the children and how the children responded positively to this.

This was noticed when watching the video recordings. Such recordings of lessons have great potential to develop this process of collaborative reflection further. For example, the idea of editing recordings so as to juxtapose each phase of the lesson as it was

led by different teachers and responded to by different groups of students, pointed to interesting differences that were worthy of further discussion.

Spreading the word

In the second year, these earlier developments acted as a springboard for spreading the process in the Humanities Faculty. In the first year, the values, approaches and methods associated with the process of engaging with students' and responding through lesson study activities had been discussed face to face with a small group of teachers. However, it was becoming clear that it was not possible to work so closely with the increasing number of teachers involved. One of the Geography teachers, who had been involved from the start, had the idea of creating a prompt sheet to help guide the teachers through the process (this can be found in Appendix 1 of the Guide).

The teachers chose to focus on a group of children identified as making slow progress, namely, White British students from low-income families. Once the teachers were engaged with their lesson study activities, the trios were allocated two hours of collaborative planning time.

A major obstacle was the practical arrangements necessary to enable them to observe other colleagues teaching the research lessons. For example, one trio found that their research lesson was difficult to implement as a result of the demands of controlled assessments that took up large chunks of time.

Nevertheless, the view that planning teaching and learning collaboratively in trios in response to students' voices was an effective way for improving teaching and learning, was shared by all the participants in the project. Despite the challenges of time, both teachers and students felt that it had been worthwhile and was a process that they would incorporate into their teaching and learning practice, in the future.

Final thoughts

As the project developed, steps were to gradually involve the whole school. So, for example, at the end of the first year, a report was presented to the governors of the school explaining the principles, approaches and processes, and initial impacts of the project. Then at the start of the second year, a short presentation about the processes was given to all staff. A longer presentation was given to subject leaders a month later, and then to newly qualified teachers and trainee teachers new to the school a month after that. A further report was also presented to the school governors again at this time.

A key factor in all of this was that the focus of the project was seen as being an important element of both the school's development plan and its programme of staff development. And, of course, the fact that it was led by a member of the senior leadership team signalled it as a priority.

Notes


Comenius Multilateral Project, 2011 - 2014
Responding to diversity by engaging with students' voices: a strategy for teacher development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