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Name: Helen Fisher (Dr)

Institution: University of Roehampton

Address for correspondence: School of Education, University of Roehampton, Roehampton Lane, London, SW15 5PJ

Tel: 0208 392 3742

E-mail address: helen.fisher@roehampton.ac.uk

Helen Fisher

Using pupil perspective in the primary classroom: an exploration of some of the potential issues

This article uses the author's original study of over hundred Year six children's perspectives of literacy and the wider curriculum, in English schools, to explore the potential challenges of exploring 'pupil voice'. Using collective case studies, with descriptive and time-sampled observations, and semi-structured interviews, across an academic year, it uses the findings to reflect upon how we can effectively distinguish, for example, between a genuinely broad and balanced curriculum, and children's insatiable appetite for particular areas; or how we can effectively manage and support children's expectations, where one child's satisfaction can be another child's dissatisfaction, and some children appear to be resigned to their dissatisfaction. The article argues that if pupil voice is to successfully penetrate classroom practice, children need to be taught the skills to self-regulate their 'satisfaction' and 'dissatisfaction' with their classroom learning. By encouraging ambitious, but realistic, responses, it is hoped that pupil perspective outcomes will be more meaningful for both teachers and pupils, supporting learning partnerships, where strategies, delivery and organisation can be negotiated within a shared understanding.

Keywords: pupil perspective; primary classroom; pupil dissatisfaction; pupil satisfaction; pupil self-regulation

Introduction

The importance and challenge of collating reliable pupil perspective is discussed within the literature (e.g. Sutherland 2006; Fisher 2011), where the feelings of a range of children are sought and valued, including those who currently appear to veil their dissatisfaction from their teachers through compliant behaviour (Fisher 2011). This encourages the exploration of teacher/pupil relationships and the type of classroom ecology (Doll et al. 2011) which promotes a culture of mutual respect (Riley and Docking 2004) and 'equitable autonomy' (Fisher 2011) for all.

A further challenge is the management of children's perspectives, once collated. After all, if previously intimidated or reluctant voices are encouraged to contribute, there must be an expectation that they are listened to and their perspectives acted upon. At first glance, this would appear relatively straightforward, suggesting the identification and implementation of desired areas which have emerged from the data. However, in scrutinising the dissatisfaction which emerged from a study of over 100 Year six children's perspectives of literacy and the broader curriculum, across an academic year (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013), it became apparent that the children's dissatisfaction raised further areas for exploration. For example: how do we effectively distinguish between a broad and balanced curriculum, and children's insatiable requests for favoured areas; how do we reconcile the fact that one child's satisfaction can be another child's dissatisfaction? Therefore, this article intends to explore these and other areas, in greater detail, with the aim of highlighting some of the potential challenges of penetrating pupil voice, and how we can begin to address them.

At the time that this study was undertaken, pupil perspective held a central position in Government policy (Rudduck and McIntyre 2007) within English schools, with Ofsted reporting on pupil satisfaction (e.g. 2005), and continued interest evident in the research literature (e.g. Alexander et al. 2010; Lord and Jones 2006; Robinson and Fielding 2010). However, some would argue that the commitment to pupil voice has diminished under the Coalition Government, with the demise of the 'Every Child Matters' agenda, including the outcome: 'Making a positive contribution', which states that children and young people should engage in decision-making, which Ofsted, until September 2011, also had to examine within school inspections (Cheminais 2011). The child-friendly letter to pupils, which accompanied each school's Ofsted report, has also been removed from the new Framework (Ofsted 2012a), indicating, perhaps, a less child-centric inspection process.

In suggesting that the Coalition Government's renewed focus in English schools is on achievement and academic attainment, and less on pupil well-being (Cheminais 2011) and, arguably, pupil voice, the contribution of the latter to learning and achievement needs to be acknowledged. By encouraging children to have greater ownership of their own learning, and developing the skills to self-regulate it, we are enhancing '... the degree to which students are metacognitively, motivationally and behaviourally active participants in their own learning process' (Zimmerman 2008, 167). In undermining this process through Government priorities, this article argues that this important element of learning is in danger of being compromised. This will be explored further in the next section.

Literature review

Theoretical perspectives

Self-regulation of learning also encourages children to '... self-generate thoughts, feelings and actions to attain their learning goals' (Zimmerman 2001, 5). In seeking pupils' perspectives, we should be encouraging them to reflect on their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with classroom learning, and identify their strengths and areas for development. This should also promote the self-orientated feedback loop during learning (Carver and Scheier 1981; Zimmerman 1989, 2000), in which pupils '... monitor the effectiveness of their learning methods or strategies and respond to this feedback ... (Zimmerman 2001, 5), in collaboration with their teacher.

This article also views self-regulation as context-specific (Schunk 2001); using Zimmerman's conceptual framework for studying self-regulation, including motives, methods, time,

outcomes, physical environment and social environment, it emphasises how the learner must have some choice in one or more of these areas (Schunk 2001, 126). This illuminates the trust and openness which must have developed between teacher and pupil for this process to be successful: a synergistic process of teacher/pupil interaction (Areglado, Bradley, and Lane 1996). It also encourages us to explore teachers' perspectives and their ability to develop open and trusting relationships with their pupils, and this will be returned to, in relation to recent historical and current educational policy in English schools, overleaf.

There are a number of other theoretical approaches which support the exploration of the child's perspective, as discussed elsewhere (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013). For example, the nature of curriculum, with an acknowledgement that curricula formulated at one level, is not always adopted and implemented at another (McNeil 2006), with the relationship between the formally adopted curriculum and the teacher's perceptions of what the curriculum means or should mean in practice, minimal (Goodlad, Klein, and Tye 1979). This is related to the 'experiential curricula' (Goodlad, Klein, and Tye 1979, 63), which considers what pupils think about the operational curriculum. McNeil reminds us that pupils' backgrounds interact with classroom activities, '... contributing to unique meanings from common instruction' (2006, 92) and, therefore, much can be gained from exploring the child's perspective in the classroom, to gain a greater understanding of how it is experienced by pupils.

We are also aware of how pupil perspective can support both learning and metacognition, enabling children to become independent and reflective learners (Alexander et al. 2010, 155), with others encouraging us to view children as co-constructors of childhood/society (Qvortrop 1993, 14), as discussed elsewhere (Fisher 2011). 'Interpretative reproduction' (Corsaro 2005, 43) '... reflects children's evolving membership in their culture' (Corsaro

2005, 44), which, as explored in Fisher (2011), encourages us to take children seriously and to appreciate their contributions to social reproduction and change (Corsaro 2005). The trend in research has moved from research on children, to research with or for children, which ‘... reflects a direct concern to capture children’s voices, perspectives, interests and rights as citizens ...’ (Corsaro 2005, 45), which is also discussed in Fisher (2013).

The Government and individual school perspective

As explored earlier, the last Government did, undoubtedly, raise the profile of pupil perspective. The 2004 Children Act demands that children are consulted on their physical, emotional and educational needs (Greig, Taylor, and Mackay 2007, 96), although, as stated elsewhere (Fisher 2011), there was a concern that this has had less influence on classroom life (Ruddock and McIntyre 2007). Ofsted (e.g. 2005) made attempts to strengthen this, with schools required to take account of pupil views, but also consulting children during school inspections and, as discussed earlier, in the writing of the results (Alexander et al. 2010).

Although the new Framework still demands that ‘... inspectors ... talk to a range of pupils to ascertain their views on important aspects of the school’s work’ (2012a, para. 66, 21) and that data from surveys of pupils should be corroborated with other evidence (2012b, para 54, 15), it could be argued that with the demise of the Every Child Matters agenda, as discussed earlier, less attention is now given to student voice (Cheminais 2011), relative to before. However, one could also suggest that these

... ‘top-down’ approaches, which attempt to enforce change through external pressure, may lead teachers to overlook the more simple and profound rationale of pupil voice, which is that it affords teachers an opportunity to refocus their attention on what really matters – learners and how they learn best (Flutter 2007, 345).

It could be argued that it is easier to consult children on a change in uniform or playground equipment, as discussed by Alexander et al. (2010), but encouraging them to comment on the arrangement of guided reading, for example, where comments might reflect negatively upon the teacher's delivery or organisation, can be more challenging.

Equally, pupil voice can be seen as a covert way of trying to control or reform teachers (Robinson and Fielding 2010), with teachers also potentially questioning how pupil autonomy can be encouraged, when teachers themselves, arguably, have limited autonomy (Fisher 2011), within the prevailing climate of 'performability' (Alexander et al. 2010, 154). Acknowledging this, other literature discusses the need for teachers to reclaim their autonomy and experiment in the classroom (Riley and Docking 2004); after all, a curriculum, however prescriptive, cannot deny the individual teacher asking the children about the strategies which they favour, and adapting teaching methods, accordingly (Fisher 2001). Yet, this also requires support at senior management level, to prevent a teacher feeling that they are simply exposing their own weaknesses, together with appropriate support to allow them the flexibility within their teaching to accommodate at least some of the children's requests. It would also demand that teachers are aware of, or encouraged to become sensitive to, their own areas for development, so that they are in a position to listen to children's perspectives. Some evidence from the literature suggests that teachers are not always aware of the deficits in their own knowledge, understanding and/or skills (e.g. Earl et al. 2003; Sylvester 2011) and, therefore, critical reflection on one's own practice is also demanded.

Linked to this, is the need to create a sensitive environment which encourages children to share their perspectives, honestly. In the study discussed here, the majority of children were veiling their dissatisfaction behind compliant behaviour, to avoid upsetting their teachers

(Fisher 2011); for example: ‘I keep it within when I’m bored. I don’t know how the teacher would take it’ (Fisher 2011, 135), with concerns that discussing their dissatisfaction could potentially impact upon their national test results and secondary school reports (Fisher 2011). This is discussed elsewhere (e.g. Campbell 1993; Thornberg 2008) and challenges us to consider what type of environment would encourage honesty, but also sensitivity.

Alexander et al. suggests that the collation of pupil perspective should be viewed as a ‘... sustained principle informing a school’s ethos, culture and practice’ (2010, 153), aiming to respect and empower all members of the school community (2010). This encourages us to consider effective power sharing, with the literature reminding us of the power, dominance and control which teachers can possess in the classroom (e.g. Halstead and Jiamei 2009), as discussed elsewhere (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013). There is evidence of inequalities of power in schools (e.g. Lynch and Baker 2005) and when undertaking research with children (Allen 2005; Farrell 2005), which would not be conducive to the honest sharing of perspectives. Power can also be present within the data: as stated earlier, this article argues that without a multi-method approach, we are in danger of gaining a skewed picture of pupil perspective, unable to distinguish between insatiability and a broad and balanced learning environment, for example, and this will be returned to, in subsequent sections.

Children also need to be aware of pupil perspective from the teacher’s perspective, as ‘Suggesting that children should have a voice does not negate the importance of teacher voice ...’ (Alexander et al. 2010, 154). The perceived restraints placed on teachers by, for example, the Standards Agenda, might, potentially, impact on their ability to respond to children’s requests, and this is concerning, if the model of self-regulation, described earlier, is going to be realised.

Consideration also needs to be given to teacher professionalism and when their professional judgement on content, delivery or organisation should be exercised. For example, in our desire to ensure that our teaching supports a range of teaching ‘styles’ (e.g. Reid 2005), there is also an argument that practitioners might wish to strengthen children’s weaker ‘styles’, to broaden their repertoire and prepare them for the world of work.

Methodology

To discuss the issues arising, it is important to have an understanding of the original study (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013), which explored Year six children’s perspectives of literacy lessons, with the aim of answering the over-arching research question: to what extent is current literacy practice a source of satisfaction/dissatisfaction for children? Four classes, in four different English primary schools, were selected for their relatively varied socio-economic intakes and national test results, to present as broad a sample as was possible. Over one hundred children and their teachers/teaching assistants were involved in the study, with each school visited weekly, across one academic year (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013).

Influenced by symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) and recognising the social construction of the classroom (Firestone 1987), the original study was broadly interpretivist, in approach (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013). It was theory-seeking, rather than theory-testing, suggesting that it fits more comfortably within an exploratory design (Bassegy 1999). It should also be viewed as an ‘instrumental case study’, which is selected to understand something else, rather than simply the case (Stake 1995), although my decision to include more than one case also redefines it as a ‘collective case study’ (Stake 1995).

Methods were identified broadly, initially, to reflect upon how the original research question could be answered effectively. This included the use of semi-structured interviews with individual children, teachers and teaching assistants. A semi-structured approach was selected, as it gave more control of the interview to the participant, particularly important with children, where the unequal power relationships between the researcher and the child have been acknowledged (Allen 2005; Farrell 2005). It was hoped that the use of a prompt sheet (Fisher 2011) would be less intimidating and would enable children to more easily digress, bringing to the fore areas of personal interest to them.

As discussed elsewhere (Fisher 2011), Waterman, Blades, and Spencer (2001) found that children will often say 'no', when they do not understand a question and, therefore, '... exemplar prompts were provided for when they did not understand or did not wish to answer a question (for e.g.: "Pass" or "Can you repeat that?") ...' (Fisher 2011, 127), although were rarely required. In addition, as discussed elsewhere, the children's desire to please, within interviews, was also acknowledged (Greene and Hill 2005) and, therefore, open questions were favoured (Alderson 2005). Attention was also paid to '... tone of voice, body language and facial expressions, following a child's response' (Fisher 2011, 127). Confidentiality and anonymity were discussed, but with the understanding that if they shared something which might imply that they were unsafe, this would need to be shared with their Head teacher (Fisher 2011): 'The children appeared to understand this difference, although this could not be presumed and, despite my best efforts, might, potentially, have influenced their responses' (Fisher 2011, 127).

Child interview data were initially categorised descriptively, establishing whether the children's comments identified the content, organisation or delivery of a lesson, enhanced

through inferential coding, which identified whether comments revealed broad satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction to the specific part of the lesson being discussed (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013). ‘Satisfaction’ and ‘dissatisfaction’ were adopted (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013) because, by definition, ‘satisfaction’ suggested that the needs and wishes of the child were being met, and therefore, ‘dissatisfaction’ suggested that they were not. The inclusion of terms which are not widely used by teachers also enabled me to control the definitions and lay the boundaries of coding more easily. A decision was taken not to provide elastic meanings of ‘dissatisfied’ and ‘satisfied’, which included both extreme and mild forms, as this was seen as beyond the range of the study, and it was felt that feelings could not be categorised accurately to such a detailed degree.

Interviews were also undertaken with teachers and teaching assistants, to support data provided through child interviews and observations. A semi-structured approach was deployed, as with the children, with similar attention paid to issues of confidentiality, anonymity, body language and tone of voice. As with the children’s interviews, I was aware that interviews would be ‘... limited by perception, memory, evasions, self-deception ...’ (Walford 2001, 96). We are gaining access to their reality, their truth, and, therefore, a multi-respondent approach was supportive, as it provided an opportunity to explore different realities, different perspectives and different interpretations of truth.

At the early stages of the study, observation was established as an essential tool: ‘Interview ... responses are notorious for discrepancies between what people say they have done, or will do, and what they actually did or will do’ (Robson 2011, 316). Therefore, the initial descriptive observations, influenced by Spradley’s prompts (1980) (see, Fisher 2013), were seen as an opportunity to gain a broader understanding of the children’s experiences of

literacy and their areas of satisfaction/ dissatisfaction, as well as to support interview data. However, when it emerged that many of the dissatisfied children presented with the same behaviour as children who expressed satisfaction, in interview, a new dimension was added to the study: the exploration of the dissatisfied, compliant child (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013) and, therefore, the place of child observation was heightened within the study.

After problematisation, I used the descriptive observations to identify the ground rules of each classroom and used these to support me in coding behaviour as displaying: (1) compliance to the ground rules of the classroom, or (2) non-compliance to the ground rules of the classroom (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013). Although a continuum would have acknowledged that there was a variation of behaviour from extreme compliance to behaviour which was extreme non-compliance, I did not feel in a position to accurately judge where an observed behaviour should fall within a category. Exploring this further would have required, among other things, the child's intentions and thought processes, which I did not have full access to within this study. Therefore, where behaviour fell within a category was not the focus, but rather the fact that it fell into that category in the first place.

An additional category was added to the two previously established groups: 'non-remarked non-compliance to the ground rules of the classroom' (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013). This included behaviour which appeared to be unnoticed, as well as behaviour which was simply ignored/dismissed by the teacher (Fisher 2011). Therefore, this suggested an implicit set of ground rules within those presented explicitly. This new category of behaviour also had the potential to be concealed from the teacher.

The pilot study (which included one week of observations in a different Year six classroom,

together with interviews with 30 children, prior to the fieldwork commencing) revealed the weaknesses of simply observing one child for an entire lesson: it was impossible to focus on all aspects during observation and significant events were more likely to be recorded as they often attracted my attention (e.g. a child being reprimanded). This meant that non-compliant behaviour, which was often less prevalent, had the potential to be recorded accurately, as it happened, whereas during long periods of compliance, where a child simply worked in silence, one risked being distracted and, therefore, presenting a distorted picture of the child. In addition, only one child could be observed during each lesson, which meant that this would lengthen the first part of the study, where all children were observed once.

Therefore, I sought the advice of the literature and selected the use of a time-sampling approach (Robson 2011), as discussed elsewhere (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013). This provided some structure to what was recorded (Fisher 2013) and, although it did have the potential to still be selective – after all, when I was observing, I might still have missed events through human error, it was controlled to a greater extent by the structure, rather than by me, and, therefore, each child received equal attention. A time-sampled approach also enabled me to focus on two children per lesson and provide equal time for both, with each minute split into two parts and additional time allowed for recording (Minute 1: Child A observed for 10 s; record for 5 s; Child B observed for 10 s; record for 5 s, etc.). After each observation, a description of the child's actions was recorded; at the end of the lesson, up to 120 observational descriptions had been completed for each child.

As discussed elsewhere (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013), Robson acknowledges that time sampling is '... likely to be a poor way of collecting sequential information ... because of the gaps between observation periods' (2011, 341), with the children being observed for only 50% of

the lesson. However, to enable me to observe all the children in a class, which would provide me with the optimum opportunity of exploring different feelings towards literacy and to ensure events recorded were, at least sampled, rather than simply those that caught my attention, it appeared the best available option at the time.

Therefore, a time-sampled observation was undertaken with every child in the study, enabling each descriptive code to be coded inferentially as displaying ‘compliance to the ground rules of the classroom’, ‘non-compliance to the ground rules of the classroom’, or ‘non-remarked non-compliance’. Finally, the thematic process involved identifying/clustering similar or identical inferential codes across the classes.

It was not possible for someone to verify what I had recorded in observation, for example, through the use of a co-observer (as discussed elsewhere, Fisher 2011); however, the decision to categorise after the event, limited the bias as I simply had to record what happened, and another researcher was involved in the coding stage. In addition, I did ask teachers/children if they noticed any changes/differences in behaviour/structure on the days that I observed, acknowledging the ‘reactive effect’ (Bryman 2012, 281), although none were recorded.

Undoubtedly, the ‘reactive effect’ can be reduced, but I am sceptical about whether it can ever be totally eliminated. Therefore, recording, and later attempting to categorise, discussing the behaviour broadly with the children, in interview, and later attempting to triangulate the data with other sources, as will be discussed below, was useful. Yet, even then, we must acknowledge the subjectivity involved, even if it is not explicit or conscious, and, in later identifying a child’s behaviour as within a specific category, for example, we must acknowledge that the results are not conclusive.

However, the use of a variety of methods was also an opportunity for findings to be corroborated and, therefore, triangulation was used to enhance the validity of the data (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013). I did not wish triangulation to be deployed in any naïve sense: it was not anticipated that methods would meet at a precise point, rather simply point towards a similar direction (Fisher 2011), with the aim of avoiding the ‘... presumption that use of methodological triangulation can prove that the data or analyses are absolutely correct’ (Denscombe 2003, 134). Therefore, if children expressed dissatisfaction, in interview, with the closed questioning deployed by the teacher, a descriptive observation might provide further insight and understanding; the results may even point towards the same direction. However, this could not be presumed to be the reality of this classroom: for example, the nature of the subject matter might have demanded a certain type of questioning during this particular lesson.

Even where the data did triangulate, one should avoid the presumption that the data or analyses were absolutely correct (Denscombe 2003, 134): emotions and behaviours can be concealed, and these areas will require considerably more exploration in further studies before we can scratch beneath the surface. This study is merely contributing to the foundations in this area; however, by adopting an ethic of caution, we should not presume that this is contradictory to an ethic of interpretation (Stake 1995, 12).

Respondent validation was a further possibility. Interviews were validated at the end of each collection. However, the decision was taken not to share observations with the teachers and children in their raw form: the children or teacher might not be aware of their behavioural responses in different situations and they were likely to desire, quite naturally, a positive image of themselves. In addition, although they were aware of my observations, such detail

presented before them may illuminate my presence in the classroom and alter their behaviour in subsequent lessons.

Efforts have also been made to be explicit and transparent regarding analysis of findings and sampling, with the aim of pursuing greater reliability within the study and to ensure that it could be replicated in the future.

Ethical considerations

I consulted the British Educational Research Association's (BERA's) ethical guidelines, now updated (BERA 2011), to ensure that my fieldwork represented best practice in this area. Considerable attention was given to ensuring that participants understood the project and had given informed consent, that they understood that they could withdraw at any stage and that the data collected remained anonymous and confidential, as discussed elsewhere (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013). Code names were used, during the fieldwork, which were kept separate from the actual names of participants, and pseudonyms were used in the publication of the research.

Participants were made aware that the children were the focus of this project, yet the children's interaction and experiences with the teacher were also crucial and would need to be explored. This meant that I could not deny the fact that some children could be critical of their teachers, in interview, and that some of these issues would need to be explored in observation. However, it was made clear to the teachers that changes would be made to each class/schools' profile, to try to ensure anonymity of both the school and the individuals.

Again, the BERA's ethical guidelines were adhered to, to ensure that informed consent could be provided, and to address issues of anonymity, confidentiality and potential withdrawal.

Particular attention was paid to the children involved in the study, as discussed elsewhere (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013): firstly, their role in the research (Greig, Taylor, and Mackay 2007), in supporting the potential future development of both pupil perspective and the curriculum, acknowledging that the beneficiaries would be children in the future; secondly, their right to clarify aspects of the research (Danby and Farrell 2005) and their right to withdraw at any stage (Greig, Taylor, and Mackay 2007), including how to do this, acknowledging the imbalance in power which can exist between researcher and child (e.g. Allen 2005; Farrell 2005).

It was important that the children were made clear of my intentions for the study, as well as my role within the classroom. In asking the teacher to explain this, it was also an additional opportunity for the children to ask questions or discuss anxieties, which proved particularly valuable. With regard to observation, the children were informed that I might come and chat to them, in class, and would support them with spellings etc, but that I would not be formally supporting a group or individual child. They were made aware that comments could be anonymously recorded, just as in interview, that they would be provided with a code name and that no names would be placed on tapes or on interview/observation transcripts.

As acknowledged by Morrow, a major challenge, when undertaking research with children, is the disparity and status between adults and children (2005), which I have also discussed elsewhere (Fisher 2011). Therefore, I made attempts to alleviate this power base by allowing them to choose the time and place of the interview, where possible (Greene and Hill 2005), as

explored in Fisher (2011). At the initial interview, children were shown their parental consent form and a brief summary of the project was, again, discussed with them, with a particular emphasis on confidentiality and anonymity. The children were then asked whether they consented to being interviewed: this provided the children with the opportunity of changing their minds or declining if the form had been signed without their knowledge or understanding. The children were also asked, again, whether I could tape the interview and I discussed my reasons for doing so. Very few children chose not to be taped, while others asked to hear an abstract from their own interview, which appeared to be more out of interest, rather than anxiety.

It was also important to inform children of a 'let out' clause, should they wish to terminate the interview, or decide that they do not wish to be interviewed again. Therefore, at the beginning of the interview, they were reminded that they could reply 'pass' (Fisher 2011), if they did not wish to answer a question, and 'I'd like to stop now', if they wished to terminate it. The children in the pilot seemed to find comfort in agreed expressions, rather than having to articulate any anxieties, themselves, and so I continued with this practice during the fieldwork. In addition, the children were informed that they could ask for something not to be recorded at any point during the interview and, when I was summing up their ideas at the end, if they did not agree with a point made, they could also raise their concerns.

Findings

General findings from the initial study

As discussed elsewhere (Fisher 2011; Fisher 2013), the study revealed that the children were

generally split between those who were satisfied and those who were dissatisfied. Their dissatisfaction and satisfaction was based around an over-arching theme: an appreciation of, and desire for, greater autonomy in their learning. This emerged from four sub-themes: an appreciation and desire for greater:

(1) creative opportunities (including explicit examples, such as an appreciation of, and a desire for, greater story writing and drama, together with implicit examples, such as an appreciation of, and a desire for, greater reflection or broader use of questioning);

(2) flexibility (for e.g., flexibility in the use of partnered work);

(3) breadth (recognition of the limited use of resources, such as ICT in the classroom, as well as regularly omitted areas of lessons, such as guided groups with the teacher);

(4) support, leading towards greater independence in their learning (for e.g., a desire to be taught the skills to work effectively within a peer-led group or with a partner).

Through these, it became evident that the delivery and organisation of lessons was more important to children than individual content or subject area. In contrast to the other case studies, Class 1 was generally satisfied and further exploration revealed that this was due to the fact that there was greater evidence of the four themes within this class. However, there were still elements which contributed towards dissatisfaction, which will be discussed later within this section.

Comparison of interview and observation data revealed that most children engaged in

compliance or compliance with non-remarked non-compliance, irrespective of whether they were satisfied (Fisher 2011). This ‘dissatisfaction behind a veil of compliance’ was explored further, through ‘progressive focusing’ (Parlett and Hamilton 1972, 18), where twenty children (five selected from each class: one satisfied and compliant child; three dissatisfied and compliant children, to explore this profile in greater detail; and one randomly sampled child) were interviewed and observed, using the same methods (except that only one child was observed, each lesson), across the curriculum.

The tracked children’s dissatisfaction continued to relate to the four identified themes. However, many tracked children becoming increasingly dissatisfied as the year progressed, due to a lack of extension/understanding; repetition/limited structure/lack of understanding during national test preparations; disappointment as the year progressed. The tracked children also continued to conceal their dissatisfaction from their teacher, sometimes engaging in complex behaviours, to avoid reprimand (Fisher 2011). Compliance was most commonly seen, although ‘non-remarked non-compliance’ did increase slightly, although did not indicate greater dissatisfaction than those who remained compliant and was often presented spasmodically within lessons (Fisher 2011). Non-compliant behaviour was evident across the four classes, but, again, this behaviour fluctuated across the lesson and therefore, only one boy was coded as generally non-compliant. Again, this behaviour did not indicate greater dissatisfaction than those who remained compliant (Fisher 2011), who were in the majority.

An exploration of some of the potential issues emerging from the data

Yet, as discussed earlier, it was in exploring the findings that areas for further discussion emerged, and it is these which are the focus of this section.

Insatiable requests

As was evident previously, the children's satisfaction and dissatisfaction related to an appreciation of, and desire for, greater creativity, breadth, flexibility and support, leading towards independence, in their learning (Fisher 2011). In particular, a desire for greater drama, play reading and reading aloud was often discussed, for example:

'We could have acted out the part of Grandad, today; not just written about him. I'd like to do plays more. It would be interesting, and helps you learn more' (Danielle, Class 3).

'I'd like to do more [reading aloud]: we don't really do it in Year 6 and I'm quite slow when I'm reading aloud' (Adam, Class 2).

'I'd like to do more play reading because it's great fun' (Nicholas, Class 1).

Data from the multi-method approach revealed that a study of Shakespeare was one of the main opportunities for drama in Classes 2, 3 and 4. In contrast, in Class 1, play reading/drama was completed during most lessons, either in shared reading, or during the plenary, although the children remained at their desks which, through discussion in interview, appeared to be the usual practice. Data suggest that there were far greater opportunities than in the other classes, where it was observed less frequently and the children provided fewer examples. However, the frequency of play reading/drama still featured as contributing to considerable dissatisfaction among the majority of children in Class 1. This suggests that the opportunities provided had whet the children's appetites for it, as was also observed with story writing and poetry, implying that the greater the exposure, the more that it was desired by the Class 1 children.

This project had the luxury of a multi-method approach, across an academic year, which had the potential to challenge comments made in interview, with a judgement made between a broad and balanced experience, and insatiability. The danger is that without this multi-method approach, we are reliant on, perhaps, a pupil questionnaire, and one could argue that it does not have the sensitivity to distinguish between the two. Therefore, results could, paradoxically, potentially manipulate the breadth and flexibility which the teacher has already created. Therefore, in exploring pupil perspective, at what point do we suggest that current provision is appropriate and, therefore, view children's requests as insatiable? This also encourages a reflection on the teacher's role and when their professional judgement on content, organisation and delivery of the children's learning should be exercised. Equally, you cannot miss something which you have not experienced and, therefore, children's perspectives will often only be based upon the diet which they have been exposed to. Therefore, children could indicate 'satisfaction', simply because they have not known anything different.

Children's resignation towards their dissatisfaction

Equally, when exploring pupil perspective, one can presume that dissatisfied voices will seek change. This was not always the case, as the profile of Rhiannon revealed. Although she was often dissatisfied, she appeared to have resigned herself to this dissatisfaction: I don't really take part: I just do the work and it's kind of like food shopping – just get it over and done with'. She appeared to have settled with something which she could control and manipulate – her participation. However, such resignation could also be interpreted as fostering lower aspirations.

This was similar to Jamal who stated: ‘I am in the top group and I am bored. I would like it to be a bit harder, but I don’t mind.’ Alex revealed a slightly different picture: in contrast to Jamal and Rhiannon, he presented as generally ‘satisfied’: ‘Sometimes it’s [the lesson is] not a challenge, but I wouldn’t change it – it’s fine with me.’ This suggested that Alex was almost apathetic; however, further exploration revealed that this was misjudged. By definition, this implied a lack of interest or concern, whereas Alex’s discussion suggested that his thoughts were more considered than this. Instead, Alex appeared to be a child who preferred to work slightly below his true capabilities, to avoid, in some cases, failure or disappointment: I do have the fear of not doing too well. I am aiming for Level 4 because Level 3 is a fail, basically, and Level 4 is just in the middle. I don’t really want a really high score; I just want it to be in the middle. Level 5 is harder to aim for, and when you go for a high score, you’re less likely to get it and it’s sort of disappointing if you don’t ... On other occasions, working at this level also enabled him to ‘multi-task’: ‘Instead of the lesson dragging on, when I know the work, I can keep a conversation going, which is great. I know that I won’t miss the work because I already know the answers...’. Consequently, Alex did not seek change in the interviews conducted with him.

Therefore, the children’s perspectives appeared to veil other challenges: low aspirations, perhaps learnt, perhaps due to unfulfilling learning experiences and a lack of change; and a reluctance to experience failure. By penetrating pupil voice, these areas emerged and can potentially be challenged; however, it begs the question: would these areas have emerged within a standard pupil voice questionnaire?

Interestingly, by the end of the Spring term, Alex’s comments suggested that he was finding the lack of challenge and extension more concerning. He began to discuss aspirations for

secondary school, for example: 'I'd like it to be a bit more challenging. Some new tests – not tests – but achievements: goals to work towards'. In addition, in the weeks leading up to the national tests, he became increasingly critical of the preparatory revision lessons:

'Well, when we do, like, reviews of last year and you sort of remember it, but the teacher tends to go on and on about it, to click it in your mind. That tends to be a bit boring. It tends to be before Sats, May time. I find revision very dull. It's just one of those things that goes on for a long time. It keeps going on and on ...'

This, again, suggested increased dissatisfaction as the year progressed and, therefore, Alex's profile did not remain 'satisfied' in the summer term: his satisfaction progressed to disillusionment, and, therefore, his dissatisfaction encapsulated resignation and increasing disillusionment, which is discussed below.

Management of children's expectations

Alex's increased disillusionment was also evident among other children, for example,

Samantha, who stated:

'First of all, when we came into Year six, we all had different sections in literacy, like myths, legends, story writing, all different types of story writing and poetry, and I thought: 'This is going to be really fun in Year six cos we're going to do all of them!' But, so far, we've only done, like, a quarter of it; we haven't got onto myths and legends; we're not doing any stories or poetry: we're doing, like, sheets ... We have to read the story or this bit of writing, and then we have to answer questions. That's all we do, now, because we're building up to Sats and we're just ... getting ready for them, and so we haven't really had time to do anything else, but I would have liked to do other things'.

Indeed, Samantha's comments reflected the feelings of many of the children: a dissatisfied, but hopeful, stance, at the beginning of the year, which progressed towards disillusionment and disappointment, as the year progressed, with desired changes not forthcoming. This was

often influenced by Sats, as evident in Alex's example earlier, and also reiterated by Jamal: 'For Sats, we have to do things over and over again. It's so boring' and

'Sometimes we do the same things over and over again and ... it gets boring after a while and the teacher doesn't care if you're bored – we just have to get on with it and if we finish, we just have to read a book, which is quite boring' (Nicholas).

At other times, it was more specific, for e.g.: '... I've wanted this [to use the computers] all year' (Nicholas). However, many of the children appeared to maintain some hope, with regard to secondary school, for example:

'I think that the ... lessons will probably be a bit better at secondary school because they have, like, a teacher for each subject, so they know exactly what they are doing. They'll be knowing more what they are doing, and so they'll be more into it and so it'll be more fun for us' (Charlie);

'I think that I might be more interested in secondary school ... because it will be more advanced' (Sophie);

'I think that the work will be more interesting, with more variety because it will be harder and ... um ... we'll be learning new things and not repeating the same things over and over again. That's what we do at the moment' (Jamal)

which, again, made reference to the Sats revision lessons.

Yet, the danger here is what happens if secondary school does not live up to their expectations. After all, as some of the tracked children revealed greater dissatisfaction as the year progressed, the concern is that negative feelings could increase, with greater evidence of non-compliant behaviour, as was experienced with one boy in the original study (Fisher 2011). This raises the question: how the children's expectations can be managed, particularly if they have represented, perhaps, unrealistic expectations in the first place, as was evidence in the insatiability section of this article. Again, it reminds us of the need to ensure children

are familiar with the wider picture: the requirement to have a broad and balanced curriculum, the emphasis currently placed on the Standards Agenda, the teacher's professionalism in deciding which aspects of delivery, context and organisation require particular attention.

However, it also highlights the need for children to be involved in decision-making, and informed of change, to help prevent increasing disillusionment.

Over-personalisation

'I like comments back on my answer: sometimes the teacher doesn't listen to the full answer and then someone else says it. They should say, 'You're on the right lines ...' Then someone might help. If the teacher encouraged me and helped me, it would be better. If the teacher replies with 'yes' it makes me feel as if she didn't listen to me. She sometimes looks away within five seconds. I would like her to look at me ... not look at me as if I'm a 'goody-goody', but not look as if she didn't care. The teacher's answers tend to be 'yes', 'good girl', 'almost'. Sometimes she says it as if she doesn't care' (Sophie).

Sophie's comments resonate with the comments made by other girls, where their dissatisfaction, although explicitly linked to the four themes, was also encapsulated in their relationships with their teacher and/or peers. In this way, it could be argued that their dissatisfaction was personalised more than other children, focusing on the responses which they received from their teacher and, indeed their peers, for example, Melissa:

'Sometimes people take over. It was kind of like that this morning. They boss you and tell you what to do. I feel more confident with people I know. I get nervous with people I don't know. If they boss me, I get quieter because I am nervous' (Fisher 2013).

Samantha, although disillusioned, also fell into this category, with her relationship with the teacher often explored, for example, when discussing feedback:

'I'd like the teacher to tell me [what she thinks of my work] because at least I'd know that she means it then ... when she's saying it she puts expression into it but you don't know when she's writing into your book, whether she's putting expression into it'.

At times, the girls' responses provide indicators as to how they could be more effectively supported; for example, in Melissa's case, she needs to be provided with strategies for effectively working with a group of children. They also hint at the general vulnerability of some individuals, which would need to be explored further. However, such responses also have the potential to provide a platform for unrealistic expectations, and, in this way, they would be similar to the insatiability category. They suggest that some children need further support in identifying their own strengths and weaknesses, and not rely solely on the teacher's approval.

One child's satisfaction can be another child's dissatisfaction

One of the sub-themes identified in the study was 'an appreciation of, and a desire for, greater flexibility in the children's learning', as discussed earlier. However, greater exploration revealed that, in practice, implemented flexibility could, paradoxically, bring greater inflexibility for some children and, therefore, increased dissatisfaction. For example, David found the continual noise of flexible groupings (e.g. children could select to work with a partner, to discuss their work) disturbed his thoughts. Similarly, the breadth of opportunity to liaise with a partner was not experienced by Stephanie, as her partner refused to work with her and, therefore, she was isolated and unable to benefit from the flexibility enjoyed by some of her peers. There was also evidence that when children moved fluidly between individual and partnered work, they could avoid group formations, which they felt under confident with.

Equally, there were also examples where children did not have the ability to use the flexibility wisely. For example, one child, James, spoke about desiring a period of reflection

at the beginning of the independent session. At times, he was observed staring into space for relatively prolonged periods, suggesting that he was, independently, allocating himself this time. However, on other occasions, he appeared to be discussing other subjects, such as football, or was giggling with friends. Therefore, this desire for reflection would need to be implemented with caution. It requires great self-discipline, on the part of the child, to ensure that the opportunity is not wasted, and James's behaviour, at times, suggested that he would need support to implement this period successfully: 'I get distracted a few times ... Sometimes, when I talk to someone, I think about that stuff, and don't get back to the work.'

Therefore, children need to understand that, in gaining their perspectives, there will be times when they might still need to work in an area which contributes to their 'dissatisfaction', to reconcile a broad/balanced curriculum and learning experience with individual choices and perspectives. Equally, they might need support, like James, in effectively taking advantage of areas of 'satisfaction'. After all, just because children desire something, does not mean that they necessarily have the skills to utilise this time, effectively.

Distinguishing between a child's desire to enhance their learning, and identification of poor skills or limited teaching

In each class, the children were sensitive to aspects which they felt would support them in enhancing their learning, for example: 'I find modelling [where the teacher modelled some writing] quite helpful. It helps me get started on what I'm going to write. It helps me get ideas ...' (Joshua). However, there were also examples in the study where children desired particular elements to compensate for their poor skills (Fisher 2013); for example, the children often desired teacher-led group work, rather than peer-led group work, not

necessarily for the academic skills which they gained, but often due to the disciplinary support which they gained when working with the teacher in a small group: ‘The teacher tells people off if they mess around’ (Rhiannon); ‘It’s quite good because [if they] mess about, the teacher tells them off. Without a teacher, they don’t listen’ (Stuart). Aware that they did not have the skills to work effectively in a peer-led group, the teacher provided a welcomed structure for the children.

In addition, some of the children in one of the classes, as discussed elsewhere (Fisher 2013), discussed a desire to work more often with a partner, for example: ‘It we could have had five minutes discussing “dilemmas” with a partner – that would have made it so much easier’ (Chloe). However, the children also implied that this was sometimes to compensate for the whole-class session which they had experienced, and which had left them unable to understand the task. Therefore, it was not the partnered task which was desired, but simply further reinforcement/consolidation of the original task. It could be argued that subsequent peer-led group work should not be used for gaining a basic understanding, but, instead, for enhancing what has come before and to gain different perspectives. Therefore, it reminds us that children’s desires for particular areas can veil other difficulties/challenges.

Conclusion

Therefore, to summarise, the six areas discussed have revealed some of the complexities of addressing pupil voice effectively in the classroom, where expectations can be over-personalised, insatiable or unrealistic, used to reinforce low aspirations for learning, or to compensate for poor skills. The article has also reflected on the other challenges which can

emerge from collating pupils' perspectives; for example, teachers lacking the empowerment to promote change; limited attention given to the methods of collation.

Therefore, in an attempt to address these, we are encouraged to explore more closely the children's and teachers' ability to undertake effective pupil perspective, in the first place. If we are going to continue to acknowledge its central place in children's learning, despite its arguably fading position within Government policy, appreciating children's contributions to social reproduction and change (Corsaro 2005, 43), we need to provide children and teachers with the skills to undertake it efficaciously, particularly as the luxury of a multi-method approach might not be possible within a busy classroom.

Using the ideas of Zimmerman (2001), Schunk (2001) and Areglado, Bradley, and Lane (1996), this article argues that children need to be taught to explicitly self-regulate their own 'satisfaction' and 'dissatisfaction' with classroom learning, ensuring that it is ambitious, but also realistic, empowering them to reflect on their expectations of school and the potential gap which can exist between these expectations and the reality of Government constraints and teachers' professional judgements on content, delivery and organisation. Teachers, here, need to re-position this potential gap, seeking opportunities for flexibility, where possible; this is an essential first step, if disillusionment and insatiability are to be avoided, and expectations managed.

In addition, by engaging with their own perspectives within the classroom, children need to explicitly recognise where resignation to their dissatisfaction can reinforce low aspirations, as was the case with Rhiannon, or where 'satisfaction' can be taken advantage of, as was the

case with James, or used to avoid breadth and flexibility, by allowing children to avoid areas they lacked skills in, as was the case with some members of Class 1.

This more realistic interpretation of pupil perspective would encourage teachers to promote it within their classrooms, although acknowledging, too, their need to identify their own areas for development (e.g. Earl et al. 2003), as discussed earlier, and to be receptive to discussion with children about strengths and areas for development. After all, this model relies upon both open and effective practitioners and encourages the self-regulation of both ‘satisfaction’ and ‘dissatisfaction’ within the teacher/pupil relationship initially, only attempting to embrace a wider audience, when realistic and sensitive practice has been embedded. This avoids ‘pupil voice’ influencing performance management, or being presented in an inspection-type format, as discussed earlier (Alexander et al. 2010). This is particularly important, while the link between learning and pupil perspective is being strengthened, in schools.

In addition, in promoting and pursuing the self-regulation of satisfaction and dissatisfaction as a precursor to the collation of reliable pupil perspective, we require honesty between teacher and pupil, embedded within a classroom ecology which promotes autonomy and respect for all (Fisher 2011). After all, we are aware that children can be eager to please within the teacher/child relationship and do not always want to state the truth, for fear of upsetting the teacher, as discussed earlier. It is often presumed that anonymity brings confidence and security. In a classroom environment, I would argue that it will simply neglect to address the issues of power and autonomy and also fail to personalise the views expressed and, therefore, its relationship to the individual child’s learning. Therefore, trust

(Fisher 2011) becomes a desired quality, and one which needs to be nurtured, in our enhanced classroom ecology.

Children also need exposure to different methods of recording their perspectives, from bullet points and drawings, to peer-interviews, videos and role-play, varied to encourage more reticent contributors, but also to seek views/opinions on different occasions, in different contexts. We should also be encouraging children to explore provision beyond that which they have experienced, and video clips, of other lessons, could be a source of discussion, to avoid satisfaction simply representing limited exposure.

By encouraging children to be ambitious, but realistic, in their responses, pupil perspective outcomes should be more meaningful for both teachers and pupils, encouraging learning partnerships, where strategies, delivery and organisation can be negotiated within a shared understanding. It also potentially promotes resilience, reframing dissatisfaction, including avoided areas or identified limited skills, as areas which can be strengthened and developed. Consequently, it seeks to prepare children for lifelong learning and for the world of work.

It has been argued that previous Government support for pupil voice has been ‘... strong on rhetoric but less forthcoming in terms of practical support’ (Ruddock and McIntyre 2007, 7), with the current Government showing signs of less commitment to it. Neither position appears to have centralised the role of pupil perspective to individual classroom learning, or acknowledged the potential challenges of the task, and the need to prepare thoroughly, prior to embarking on the collation of pupil views.

While its position continues to be misunderstood and/or undermined, I predict that it will

continue to fade in and out of Government approval, aligned more comfortably with pupil welfare, however valuable, and/or on the periphery of classroom practice. However, this article has shown that although undertaking more rigorous pupil perspective can be complex, challenging the very heart of our classroom ecologies, pedagogies and autonomies, it also have the opportunity to empower children to become more self-reliant and resilient learners; therefore, its intrinsic relationship to learning must be promoted.

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Notes on contributor

Helen Fisher is a senior lecturer in Special and Inclusive Education at the University of Roehampton, London. She was awarded the Talbot Scholarship at the University of Oxford, where her D. Phil thesis explored pupils' perspectives of literacy and identified 'dissatisfaction, behind a veil of compliance'. She was also awarded a School Teacher Fellowship at Trinity College Dublin, where she developed a model of 'intrinsic inclusion'.

Helen has published in the areas of literacy, inclusion and pupil perspective. She taught in primary schools for nine years, as a SENCo, an advanced skills teacher, a leading teacher of literacy and as teacher-in-charge at a centre for children with specific learning difficulties; she continues to undertake SEN consultancy work, in a range of settings.

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