

Jennifer Atkinson's Development Work: **Developing students as researchers** at Sir Frederic Osborn School, Hertfordshire

Jennifer Atkinson believed in the importance of involving students in evaluating their own learning and helping them to work in partnership. She was aware that students have clear views about the strengths and weaknesses of the learning opportunities available to them but they are rarely asked to share these views in a formal way.

Sir Frederic Osborn School has a history of student voice initiatives, the annual student/staff conference being one example. Jennifer wanted to try out a development of this consultation process. She was encouraged by her reading, particularly a book by Madeleine Arnot and colleagues at Cambridge (Arnot *et al.*, 2003) and the 'toolkit' that emerged from the 'Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning' project (MacBeath *et al.*, 2003).

Jennifer decided to launch a Students as Researchers lunchtime club with the aim of helping students to develop the skills to research an aspect of teaching and learning within the school. She was keen to work with students across the age range and particularly wanted to encourage the more challenging students to join the group.

All students at the Sir Frederic Osborn School received information from their tutor about an exciting new venture at their school. They were invited to 'Get your voice heard!' and were asked:

Is there something about Sir Frederic Osborn School that you feel really strongly about? Do you want to find out more about this issue and then share what you have found out with others? If you do then think about joining our Students as Researchers group.

Seventeen students responded positively to this invitation. These students were invited to an initial meeting to discuss what mattered to them in school and to share the areas they were interested in researching. The students' list included:

- What would be the good and bad points about starting Key Stage 4 courses after SATS¹ in Year 9?
- Would providing more activities at lunchtime affect behaviour during period 5?
- What types of homework in Year 10 help students to learn best?
- What makes a good lesson?

Jennifer then planned a series of sessions to support the student researchers in developing the skills to capture the views of their peers about these issues. The group looked at the ethics of carrying out research, learnt how to design a research tool and how to analyse data. The students also took part in a study visit to the University of Cambridge and produced a DVD outlining their areas of interest and the ways in which they intended to investigate them.

Jennifer realised from the outset the importance of keeping staff informed about what the students were doing. Regular updates were given at staff briefing, either by Jennifer or by some of the students themselves. Written news bulletins were also produced and displayed around the school. When the students had completed their research they produced a written report together with a powerpoint presentation outlining what they discovered. They shared this with other staff and students at a student/staff conference. Representatives from the group also presented their research to delegates at the national research conference, *Pupil Voice and Participation: pleasures, promises and pitfalls*, at the University of Nottingham in May 2006.

The impact of Jennifer's work has been greater than she initially expected. Her aim of finding additional ways to understand and share the views of students was realised but the real impact of the Students as Researchers project is deeper than this. Students have become more secure in their ability to contribute to the developing understanding of learning within their school. They have demonstrated a clear understanding of the link between participation and improving learning.

Students should be involved in working to improve learning at SFO because it is their school and it is their right to a better system but only if they take the bull by the horns and do something.

(Student Researcher)

¹ SATs: Standard Assessment Tests set for pupils at ages 10 and 13 yrs.

Jennifer hopes that their insights will have made a significant contribution to the ongoing process of school improvement at Sir Frederic Osborn School.

References

Arnot, M., McIntyre, D., Pedder, D. & Reay, R. (2003) *Consultation in the Classroom: pupil perspectives on teaching and learning*. Cambridge: Pearson Publishers.

MacBeath, J., Demetriou, H., Rudduck, J. with Myers, K. (2003) *Consulting Pupils - A Toolkit for Teachers*. Cambridge: Pearson