

Vicky Dean's Development Work: Improving writing through formative assessment at Icknield Infant and Nursery School, Letchworth

When Vicky undertook her development project in 2005 she had multiple roles: she was a Year 2 Class Teacher, English Subject Leader and a member of the Leadership Team. Her aim in joining the Certificate in Teaching and Learning course at Hertfordshire Development Centre was to raise standards in learning and teaching as set out in the School Development Plan. She believed that formative assessment could enable children to take ownership of their learning and in her initial reflective statement she made the following comment:

I want to bring some of the joy back into teaching and learning that has been somewhat lacking since so many 'top down' initiatives have been introduced.

Vicky taught a number of children who were reluctant writers and she wanted to have a positive impact on their disposition towards writing. In her role as Subject Leader for English she had looked at the way writing was marked across the school and concluded that, although teachers put a lot of time and effort into marking, it does not have sufficient impact on pupils' learning.

Vicky participated in a school INSET focussed on formative assessment and read 'Unlocking Formative Assessment' by Shirley Clarke (2001). This suggested that she should introduce formative assessment slowly, beginning with one area and extending it to others over a period of time. She wanted to have an impact both on pupils and on her colleagues. She began by focussing on writing and targeted a selected group of children – two more able; two middle ability; two lower ability; two with special needs. She hoped that there would be a noticeable effect upon these children's disposition, which would have a positive effect on their attainment. Vicky also read 'Inside the Black Box' which emphasises the idea that feedback should focus on the pupils' work rather than on comparisons with other pupils (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Maintaining self-esteem was important in building commitment to writing. Further reading gave her sound evidence – most of it from work with older children but the basic principles seemed to be applicable to Year 2 pupils.

Also influential were sessions with Diane Croston of the Herts CSF⁴ Assessment Team. Diane had been asked to lead two staff meetings in the Autumn Term to help the school update its Learning and Teaching Policy. At those meetings Vicky was able to share her ideas with colleagues. For example, a number of classes subsequently introduced

⁴ CSF – 'Children, Schools and Families' - the local authority.

the use of 'talking partners' which Vicky had found effective with her own classes (Clarke, 2003).

Vicky began her project by looking at pupils' responses to the Learning Styles Questionnaire and the Framework for Assessment of Personal and Social Development provided by Herts. CSF. These told her a great deal about such things as pupils motivation, learning strategies, attitudes to learning, resilience and self-esteem. Then, having first secured permission from parents, Vicky interviewed the target children to assess how they saw themselves as writers at that stage. She wanted to establish the ways in which they like to learn: the learning strategies they found helpful, and those that they didn't. From these interviews it was clear that working independently was extremely challenging for them.

In order to address these issues Vicky decided to work on the idea of the 'learning intention' (Clarke, 2001), discussing with the whole class the meaning of the term. She also introduced the idea of success criteria for each writing task and sometimes asked the pupils to suggest what these might be for a given task.

With her target group she concentrated on providing 'quality marking and feedback'. The presence of a student teacher in the class enabled her to spend time doing this. She was able to mark the work alongside the pupil highlighting, with a marker pen of the pupil's choice, three areas where they had met the success criteria. This involved sometimes quite lengthy discussion with the pupil as to what should be highlighted, which laid the foundations for self-assessment. At first pupils needed help to identify the areas they were pleased with and to identify those that were included in the success criteria. However, after just one or two sessions all the pupils understood what was expected.

The discussion also identified an improvement to be made to the piece of work in relation to the success criteria. The area for improvement was marked with an asterisk and the pupil asked to make the improvement at the end of the piece of work. Some were able to say for themselves what they wanted to improve and how they were going to do it; others needed more guidance on how to improve the work. On one occasion a pupil found it extremely difficult to record his ideas for improvement, but because his verbal response was so impressive Vicky felt it appropriate to act as scribe and write his ideas for him.

Vicky experimented with these practices over the period of a few months and then repeated the data gathering she had begun with. Her analysis of the data from the Learning Styles and Personal and Social Development instruments and her own five question interviews indicated considerable improvement in pupils' confidence in writing and in their dispositions towards learning. Their measured attainment also improved, in some cases by a whole level. This evidence, and an account of the process of her project, was shared with colleagues at an INSET day in the following term. The project has been very influential in discussions towards a new marking policy for the school. This is likely to specify that not all pieces of work will be marked in detail but where they are, reference will be made to the learning intention and the success criteria.

Vicky built on this project to embrace further formative assessment strategies including self-assessment and formative assessment which is now part of the School Development Plan at Icknield Infant and Nursery School.

References

Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998) *Inside the Black Box: Raising standards through classroom assessment*. London: King's College London.

Clarke, S. (2001) *Unlocking Formative Assessment: Practical Strategies for Enhancing Pupils' Learning in the Primary Classroom*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Clarke, S. (2003) *Enriching Feedback in the Primary Classroom*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

See also

Black, P., Harrison, C., Lee, C., Marshall, B. & William, D. (2002) *Working Inside the Black Box: Assessment for learning in the classroom*. London: Department of Education & Professional Studies, King's College London.