What feedback strategies can benefit both teachers and pupils in a primary school context?

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Staff and pupils at Cwmrhydyceirw Primary School, Swansea explored the impact of formative assessment strategies on teaching and learning.

Formative assessment is a term associated with a learning culture in which pupils and teachers are involved in the learning process. Such a culture is one where pupils are encouraged to develop self-belief, metacognition and shared ownership of their learning. This is based on enquiry about learning and learners, and is characterised by talk about learning. Feedback focuses on success and steps for improvement.

The school decided to focus on verbal feedback, written feedback using 'polishing pens' and pupil self-assessment strategies across the Foundation Phase and Key Stage 2.

'The most powerful educational tool for raising achievement and preparing children to be lifelong learners, in any context, is formative assessment' (Clarke, 2017:3)

Aims

The school wanted to explore the impact of these strategies on

a) teacher workload and
b) learners' engagement with their own learning.

What did learners say?

At the start of the study, younger pupils in particular felt that comments from the teacher related to how much work they had done in a lesson. Most pupils thought that written comments were evidence that the teacher valued their work. However, the younger pupils reported that they did not always see the comments as helping them in their next piece of learning – with some saying that 'I don't always look at it again unless Miss reminds me to'. Sometimes the comments caused confusion 'When Miss writes things down, I don't understand what I have to do.'
Pupils in Year 4 and 6 had a clearer understanding of written comments, and were generally appreciative of them, but once again didn't always refer back to them to help with the next piece of learning.

By the end of the study, pupils of all ages reported an awareness of the fact that comments from teachers were about making improvement to their work. Verbal comments were viewed positively by pupils of all ages. These were seen as faster, clearer to understand and personal - 'It's nice to know what's going on from a person.'

80% of pupils across all ages preferred the chance to talk about their work with their teacher compared to reading a comment. Younger pupils liked also getting a stamp in their books.

Pupils were also more likely to talk about the importance of making an effort in their work. 'Hard work beats talent'. They also showed an increase awareness of learning being a process of continual improvement 'I've learnt don't stress about it, just try and improve'.

What did teachers think?

Before the study, teachers typically spent 8-15 hours marking every week. As a general rule, some subjects had heavier marking loads, and marking increased in Key Stage 2. All teachers felt that they spent too long marking. They wondered 'Who are we marking for? 'They felt that the marking load took them away from other aspects of their role.

During the study teachers enjoyed the chance to talk to the pupils in depth about their learning. Verbal feedback helped create 'more of a relationship with the child- and that's got to be good. 'They felt that personal relationships improved, and that the verbal discussions about work were powerful opportunities for both themselves and pupils.

They felt that the impact of effective verbal feedback was seen in the pupil's achievements. Involvement in the study helped them realise that they needed to have the confidence to believe that this form of feedback had impact, and was sometimes enough evidence of learning. What was particularly memorable?

Pupils of all ages enjoyed using the 'Purple Polishing Pens'. They understood that these were showing how they had improved or 'polished' their work. They were able to talk with understanding about the changes they had made, and why they had made them. All the pupils showed an understanding that learning is a continual process, and they took pride in explaining their own learning.

'Feedback is information given to the learner and/or teacher about the learner's performance relative to the learning goals which then redirects or refocuses actions to achieve the goal' (Sutton Trust report (2011).

What was particularly memorable?

Scores on attitudinal scales indicated that after the study, pupils reported improvements in confidence, knowing how to be a good learner and knowing how to solve problems. They also reported a decrease in anxiety linked to learning new and tricky things.

Year 6 pupils were keen to note that the main purpose of their lessons was on improving – not getting all the answers right. 'Everyone likes improving – it's our main goal'.

What were the main challenges?

Teachers still felt that they were under pressure to comment – whether in written or verbal form – on every piece of work. This was particularly true of the need to note 'next steps'. Sometimes the teachers wanted to feel confident to make the decision not to write a next step. 'If a piece of work is excellent the pupil should be allowed to enjoy that moment without thinking 'what next'?'

Younger pupils in particular said self-assessment could be difficult. In lessons where they self-reported on their learning, where a green meant they felt confident and a red meant they hadn't understood they noted that admitting to being a red was hard. 'I said I was green, but it was hard. I just wanted to pretend that it was green.' Several admitted to saying they had pretended something was easy when they had actually found it difficult.

Key facts

Cwmrhydyceirw Primary School is situated in the north of Swansea. There are just over 500 pupils on roll, 18% of who are entitled to free school meals. Approximately 15% of pupils are identified as having additional learning needs. This project involved four teachers and 18 children in Year 2, 4 and 6 classes.

Verbal feedback: Teachers worked with focused groups of pupils to discuss their work during lessons and at other appropriate times e.g. during guided reading sessions or specific feedback sessions. This feedback typically lasted for 10 minutes, during which other pupils in the class were directed to independent tasks, or worked with classroom assistants.

Purple Polishing Pens: in response to the verbal feedback, pupils would use the polishing pens to correct, amend and 'polish' their work accordingly.

School Team: Mr Darren Casker, Headteacher;
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Mrs Rebecca Hollis, Assessment for Learning Lead
Pupils in Y2, Y4 and Y6

Summary

Although there is a need for teachers to demonstrate some marking of work, research indicates that the most effective feedback is that which is given immediately, and which makes 'invisible' processes visible.

In Cwmrhydyceirw Primary school moving from detailed written comments in favour of verbal feedback and focused techniques decreased teacher workload and helped pupils gain in confidence about their learning.

Recommendations

- Ensure that any written comments are pertinent, and as immediate as possible.

- Pupils see simple written comments as helpful, but when the feedback needs to be detailed or more complicated they prefer opportunity to talk it through with the teacher.

- Have the confidence to give meaningful verbal feedback when appropriate.

- Build in opportunities to talk to the children about their work – with their work.

- Consider the implementation of strategies which make feedback visible.

References

Clarke, S. (2017) *Outstanding Formative Assessment: Culture and Practice* London: Hodder Education

Sutton Trust (2011) Teaching and Learning Toolkit accessed from https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xn0G3MCMnFQ&feature=youtu.be

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGx7Yxgbfes&feature=youtu.be

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