To what extent can students' perception of teachers' pedagogical approaches affect their option choices in KS4?

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Introduction

The focus of this research is to investigate students' perceptions of their own learning experience and provide evidence as to whether their experiences of teaching at KS3 affect their future subject choices at GCSE. This small-scale phenomenological case study was conducted in an OFSTED outstanding mixed grammar school in England. The aim of this study is to contribute to setting school improvement targets for educational practices based on areas requiring improvement, as identified by the students. I will also use the information on pedagogy to reflect on my own developing practice. I hope that the data will be used to evaluate and support effective planning of the KS3 curriculum at the school. The findings of this study suggest that the teacher's pedagogy and how they interact with the pupils is highly influential in shaping young people's subject choices and enjoyment of the subject. This I argue has greater implications for their educational attainment and future career trajectories.

Literature Review

The UK government has introduced the principle of 'Children and young people first', with a focus on ensuring that young people and their families are satisfied with the quality of their education and other child-related services (DfE, 2016). This supports a previous white paper publication 'Educational Excellence Everywhere', which aims to provide high-quality provision to all students. In these documents there is greater emphasis given to the increasing importance of an educated society for future economic growth of the country, as opposed to international competition for work in an increasingly skilled labour market.

Therefore, there is an essential need for practitioner-led research that focuses both on developing pedagogy that enhances and ensures children's effective learning, to ensure they excel in their studies.

Ireson and Hallam, (2005) have attributed students' enjoyment of school as an indicator of their relationships with teachers, which positively affects perceptions of teaching. Lodge

(2008) has examined the growing body of evidence in the UK context, which suggests that both students and teachers benefit from establishing a dialogue about learning. Their studies demonstrate the potential for teachers to further develop their pedagogic understanding whilst helping young people to become better learners.

Student voice can also be seen as an essential element in fulfilling children's human rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that students should be able to express their views and have a right to have their opinions heard in matters which involve themselves (UN, 1989). Baroutsis et al. (2016) have defined pedagogical voice as students being able to participate in shaping their learning, teaching and curriculum. They also identify how this encourages and instils the principles of democracy and civic engagement in young people at an early age. Schools should therefore aim to increase or further develop student involvement in school wide issues to support young people's opportunity to develop and exercise their democratic rights (Flutter and Ruddock, 2004). The *2002 Education Act* (section 176.) stipulates that it is the duty of all schools in Britain to consult with pupils on any matter within the school on any decisions that affect them. Despite the legislative framework in place to support student voice, there has been little theorisation as to the power relations embedded in schools that either promote or hinder student voice. This suggests that pupil voice, and consultation with students, are not at the top of the agenda when schools are evaluating their teaching and raising standards of attainment at schools. It also points to underlying hegemonic principles and institutional arrangements in education that at present prioritise the 'adult' values and experience of schools, at the expense of the learners that they are serving. This top-down approach to educating future generations does not inspire confidence in participatory and democratic principles which we strive to establish in young people to support them in later life.
In this study I hope to challenge this current attitude towards pupil voice and propose that it is an effective, valuable tool to assess school wide policies and teaching practices.

Methodology

For this study I have chosen to design a phenomenological case study. I am using phenomenology as a philosophical approach to study individuals' perceptions, feelings, and

lived experiences and the ways in which they interpret their social world that involves looking at small sample sizes of populations (Smith and Osborn, 2004). Due to time constraints, the study has a cross-sectional design, meant only to measure the responses of students at one point in time. The duration of the study was from the 9th-23rd May 2019. If time availability were not an issue, the study could have been designed to keep track of student perceptions over a few years, as a longitudinal study could perhaps include a wider geographical area, not delineated to one school. Hence, the scope of this study is therefore a case-study specifically designed to investigate the phenomena occurring within its real-life context for the application at the school.

Observation

My research topic evolved from an observation of a discussion between the students and their form tutor during form time registration. Students mentioned that they disliked certain subjects and when asked why, they described the lessons as being boring or difficult. Some of the subjects they said that they "used to enjoy", they now dislike and as a consequence, did not choose to study these subjects further at KS4. This initial insight into the study population's opinions led me to design a research plan to investigate student's' experience of teaching and their opinions on their social relationships with their teachers.

Questionnaire

I decided to sample 10% of students from year 9, which resulted in a sample size of *n*= 24. As Guest et al. (2013) have said, large samples are not needed for qualitative inquiry and excess numbers can lead to diminishing returns. Therefore, quick and targeted analysis is more desirable, especially with time constraints. Another issue that the authors highlight is that samples in qualitative research are usually small and non-probabilistic, meaning that the samples cannot be representative of the entire cohort of pupils and as a consequence, statistical generalisation is not possible.

After considering no-response or a low turn-out, I decided to introduce snowball sampling as a precautionary additional technique. This meant that students that were aware of the study through word-of-mouth by other students could also participate. As Black (1999) explains, this is an inexpensive way of ensuring sufficient numbers of a study. In addition,

there is no way of knowing whether the sample is representative of the population as there may be no identifiable clusters or characteristics. But as I have highlighted earlier, this is usually inescapable due to the nature of small qualitative research. Etikan (2016) has described this type of convenience sampling as a practical technique, as participants are included due to geographical proximity, willingness to participate, especially when the researcher has limited resources and time.

I have also attempted to reduce biased samples by predominantly using a random sampling technique in addition to the one described above. I used a random number generator to select 5 students from each of the 7 form groups (planning for non-response). Form tutors were then presented with these random numbers to select students to give consent forms to, using the registers. In total, 22/24 students that gave in their consent forms and filled in the questionnaire were selected by random sampling and two students participated of their own volition.

Structured interview

After collecting and analysing the results of the questionnaire, I decided to conduct an in-depth semi-structured interview with a focus group of year 9 students. The interview was audio-recorded for transcription purposes and used as a validation method, or triangulation, to check whether the beliefs were shared across the cohort and to further clarify some of the issues that were raised. I used a purposive, non-probability sampling method, so hand-picking subjects on the basis of specific characteristics. I chose a group of students from two of the year 9 forms, as these students had recently identified issues with teaching methods in one of their classes. In total, 12 students participated in the questionnaire. Tongco (2007) has described the inherent bias that is produced as essential to efficiently gathering data from key informants.

Analysis

For my analysis, I have decided not to transcribe the interview data to include intonation, incoherencies or hesitations in student's speech. I am aware however, that Lemke (2012) has remarked that this ultimately is reductive and thus discards some of the essential parts of the data. I felt that this reduced the clarity of the data and would have been more of a

distraction to the reader. I have instead followed the transcription layout suggested by Simpson and Tuson (2008).

I have referred to Sullivan (2011) who promotes a dialogical approach to qualitative data analysis. This involves using both a bureaucratic as well as charismatic approach as a way of exploring and analysing qualitative data. In this respect, I will embed quotes into the main body of text to include evidence of the participants' viewpoints. Finally, I will structure the subsequent analysis to reflect the overarching themes that I have identified in the course of the study.

Ethical considerations

Denscombe (2014) has emphasised the moral obligations that researchers have to ensure that the data has been obtained ethically with the full consent of all individuals involved in the study. Following their advice, I will firstly seek permission from the school and gatekeeper as to whether I have the permission to conduct this study. If I am given permission, I will provide each participant with an informed consent letter for permission from parents for their child to participate in the study. Students will have a choice as to whether they would like to be involved in this research and they will have the choice to withdraw from the study at any time. As a practitioner researcher, I will also ensure that no students experience any physical or psychological harm as a result of participating in this study. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the course of this research and students will have their identities protected. Students will remain anonymous and will be referred to as student X, Y, Z and that there will be no record of their names kept beyond the course of this study. The consent forms, questionnaires and audio recording of the interview will only be kept for the duration of the study and will be destroyed afterwards.
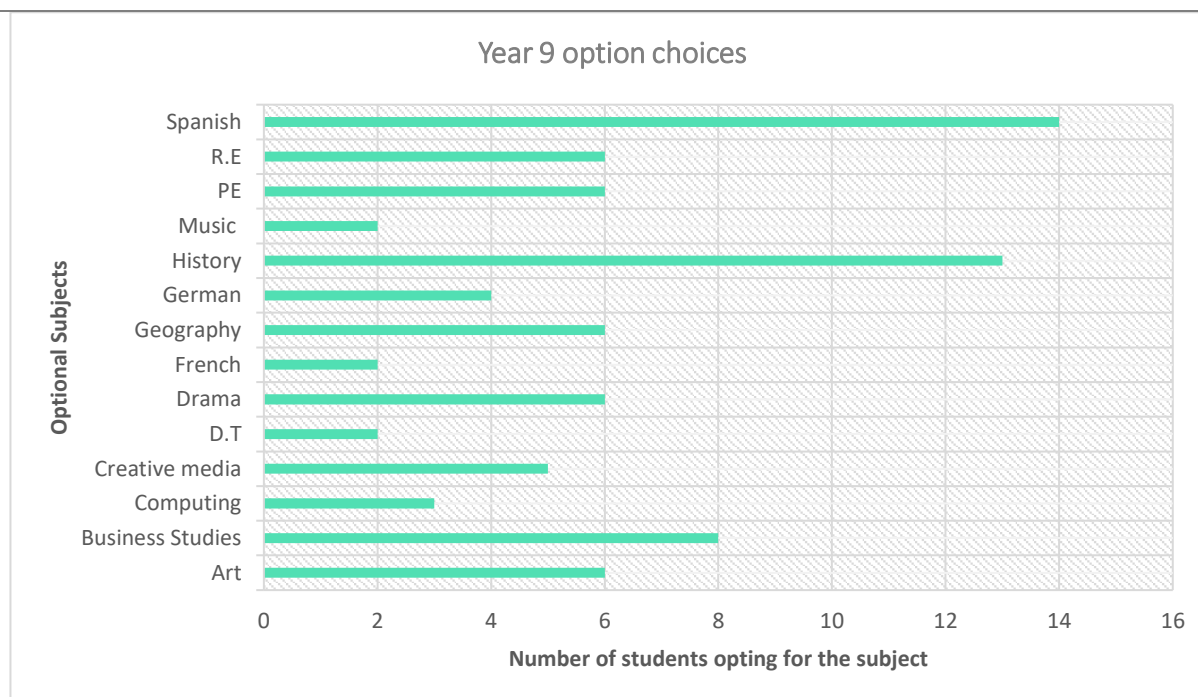
Results

Figure 1: Shows an overview of the optional GCSE choices of students. Some students chose not to record all their options in the study.
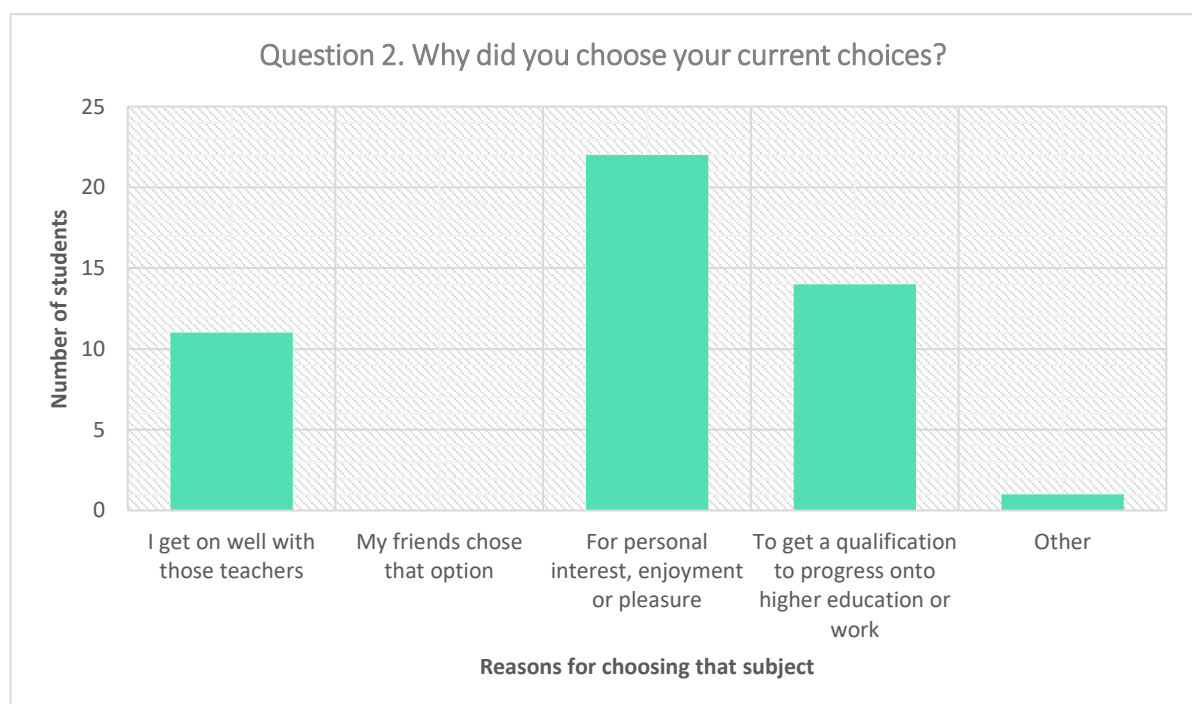

Figure 2: Students were given the option to select as many of the following statements that they felt applied to their situation.
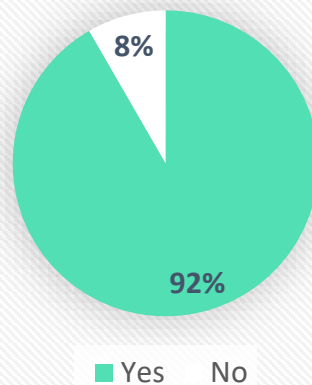
Figure 3 Overall this shows that students feel that they have had enough support when making their option choices.

Table 1. Responses to question 4
Were there any subjects that you liked but did not chose for some other reason?

Reasons	Results			
Grades	"I like art and would have chosen it but I do not feel I am at a GCSE level".	"I like DT but I didn't choose it because I don't think that I would do well at GCSE, I also don't think that for any jobs that I want, DT wouldn't be as significant".		
Other choices or options	"I like drama but I wanted to get a qualification in media, so I chose that instead".	"DT- the course did not suit me and I prefered my choices; Geography- I had to choose one and chose history; PE- I enjoy it but have no reason to pursue it".		
	"Maybe German but I had already chosen a language".	"Yes, I also wanted to do art but I couldn't choose another subject".	"I liked quite a few subjects, like creative media and Geography, but didn't pick as we only had two options".	"Food tech because I wanted to do Art and business more and I didn't have enough choices".
Clashes	"I couldn't choose computing because I only got 2 options".	"I like RS but didn't choose it as I didn't have enough option space		
Too much work	"Yes Drama- I didn't choose it because I didn't have time to do another lesson and it would've been too much work. Also I couldn't do it after school because it was on a night I couldn't do".			
Bad lessons	"German due to a dying interest after a particularly bad streak of lessons".			
Future careers	"Art does not take you into many paths".	"Art and P.E. I didn't think I'd need them for any of the future careers I would like. I also thought I wasn't good enough in comparision to the GCSE books we have been shown".	" PE, was not interesting in pursuing career in their subject".	"Yes- I did not choose RE however I have a really nice teacher. I didn't choose it as it will not help me as much in the future as DT for what I want to go into.
Yes	4			
No	2			

Q5. Overall, has the method of teaching at the school changed your GCSE option choices?
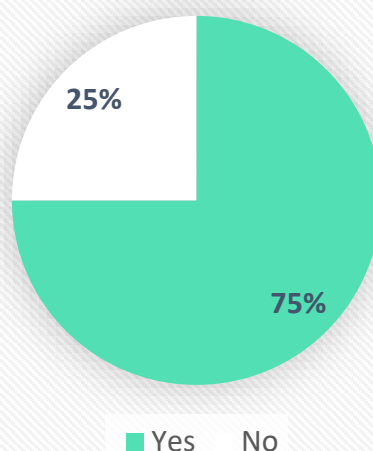
25%

75%

■ Yes   No

Figure 4 The majority of students feel that teaching has affected their GCSE options.

Table 2. Responses to question 6
Depending on your choices, could you give an example of how the teaching methods, have or have not affected your option choices?

Student responses
"Teaching methods are mainly consistent throughout all of my subjects".
"They have not as I mainly based it on my skills and interests. Although I think the teaching methods are efficient and most of the teachers I've had do communicate well with students".
"My Spanish teacher has really good teaching methods so I fell like I learn more in her lessons that in French so I chose Spanish".
"The teaching has changed by it becoming more focused on what will be in GCSEs".
"Some new topics for GCSE subjects influenced my decisions".
"I would've chosen art for my other GCSE instead of Business but I felt the teachers targeted the students that were better and excelling in that subject. Instead of encouraging and talking more about how you do something".
"If the teacher is strict and just makes you work in silence the whole lesson then it gives me a bad attitude for that lesson. However, if you can talk with one another about the work and its not all writing tasks then I would enjoy the subject more".
"Collaborative teacihng and being involved".
"If I didn't get on well with the teachers of a subject I didn't pick it".
"It hasn't affected my choices because of the subjects itself not the teacher".
"When I was doing computing the media course offered more enjoyment and coursework than computer science. I chose history because its less boring than geography".
"DT- not explained properly; Music- Not liked the method of teaching".
"German was one of my choices but I overall chose spanish because the teacher had been absent and we got an endless stream of supplies, and just doing sheets without learning. This continued when she returned".
"Methods of teaching are generally consistent, so I din't make my option choices on how certain teachers teach".
"My RE teacher has explained everything really well for me and made RE interesting. I have chosen to do PE as my old teacher was extremely good however she has now left the school".
"More practical teaching methods, but still no talking, note taking etc".
"In my opinion if the lesson is fun I'm more likely to pick it"
"One of my teachers dosnt get out of their seats and sets lots of text book work. Another teacher speaks only in a way that makes the lesson extermely boring".
NA
"Certain teachers make the lessons more exciting or enjoyable so I am more likely to choose their subject. Other lessons I enjoyed anyway so I chose them".
"Some teachers make the subject intersting".
"Because I know what I want to do".
"Some teachers make boring lesson plans and don't seem to try to engage with us or they move on too quickly without properly explaining or giving help to certain people".
"As subjects that are taught in a way that is easier to understand prompted me to choose the subject as I feel I am more able to get a good grade in the GCSE".

Q.8. Were you able to choose all your favourite subjects or were there any clashes in the timetable which have prevented you from studying one or more subjects?
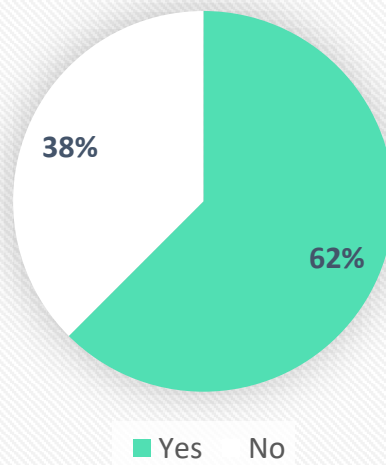

Figure 5 In summary, students were unable to choose their subjects due to timetable constraints.

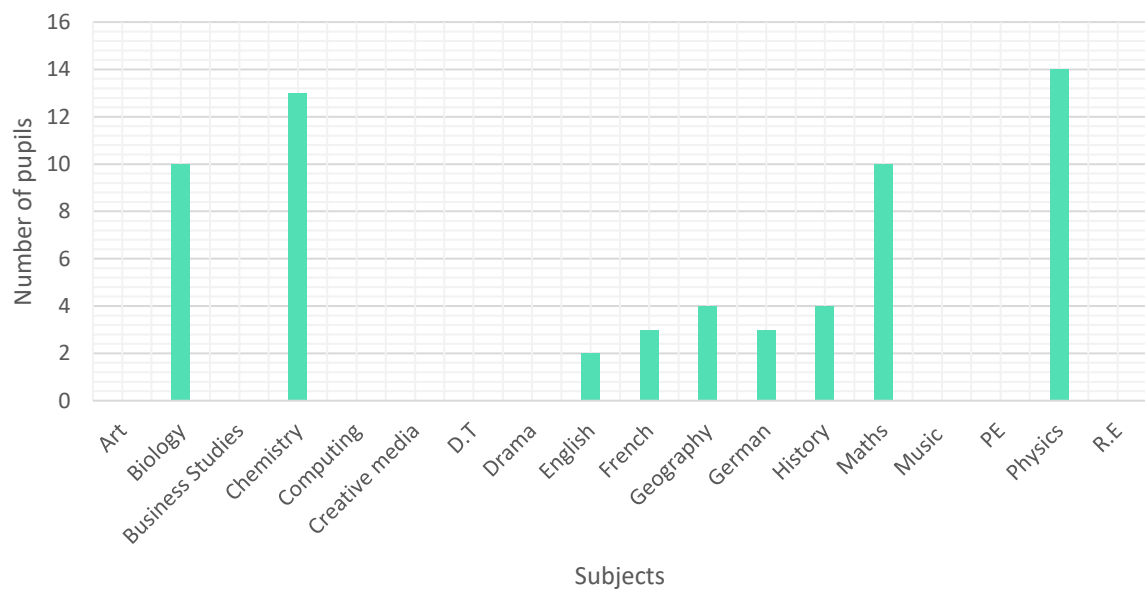## Q9. What subjects (if any) do you feel that you struggle with?

Figure 6 Students have highlighted specific subjects that they felt were difficult.

Q10. Rate the following statements using the 1-5 Likert Scale.

Figure 7 Average student rating of the following statements using the Likert 1-5 response scale with: 5= definitely agree; 4= Mostly agree; 3= neither agree nor disagree; 2= Mostly disagree;   1= definitely disagree; 0= Not applicable.

Table 3. Students responses to question 11.
Is there any other information that you wish to give which may be relevant?

Student responses
"Exams are useful for helping me test how much I know of a subject".
"I feel as though we get put under a lot of pressure to do well and don't really get much help if I don't understand but many others do. Also I feel like we get way too much homework and too many exams to cope with".
"Cover teachers take advantage of individual and form reports"
"Cover teachers aren't as stimulating as regular teachers"
"I would like teachers to help us more and go over topics again. For example if the whole class didn't do very well on a test then the teacher should perhaps revise some of the topics that were in the test. I think this would help me to become more confident for end of year examinations. Aswell as this I think that teachers should either sset homework to revise or something else as I think it is unfair that we are expected to complete homework and revise".
"I think that some teachers either set too much homework or set things that are too difficult to complete at home/when the teacher is not present"
"Overall teachers could change up the method of teaching and give more relevent homework to aid me with the lesson".
"When choosing Drama, I considered doing it after school and picking another option but I chose against it because I would like to do something else after school like a club".
"I would like teachers to check that all students understand the topic before moving on as sometime I see that the majority of the class have not understood something but the teacher carries on with the next thing so it forms a problem when we have an endd of unit test".
"I think that some teachers spend too much time on specific people and do not check if some people are okay with whats going on. This I believe would be my only concern that is relevent to the questionnaire".
"Sometimes teachers only aid to the class as a whole and do not focus on if people are struggling or not. Also, if one person is struggling they may spend half the lesson re-capping which can slow down the learning of others and prevent them from expanding thier learning".
No or N/A- 13 Responses

Critical Analysis and Discussion

To what extent can students' perception of teachers' pedagogical approaches affect their option choices in KS4?

Student-teacher relationships

Referring back to my initial research question, I can confidently support the view that students' option choices have greatly been affected by teacher's pedagogical approaches. In Figure 4, 75% students reported that the method of teaching at the school changed their GCSE option choices. In addition to this, in Figure 2, 11/24 students reaffirmed that teachers played a significant role in their choice of subject, with many students focusing their written responses on how their perceived relationship with the teacher affected their choice. In a positive light, many students opted in to study subjects where they felt they had better rapport with the teachers. This outcome is supported by the study conducted by Harris and Haydn (2006) who have demonstrated that the way history lessons are taught directly affects students' engagement or disaffection with the subject.

I then decided to follow this line of questioning in the interview:

> **Interviewer: Have teachers affected your option choices?**
> All: Yes… Yeah.
> Student 1: If you like the teachers.
> Student 2: Yeah if you like the teacher.
> Student 3: I probably wouldn't choose it.
> Student 4: Yeah if you like their lessons.
> Student 5: If you don't like the teachers or their lessons then how could you choose it?

This quote further illustrates the point that the way in which the curriculum has been delivered in specific topics has determined student's choices. Frymier and Houser (2000) have described the nature of student-teacher relationships as being important for effective learning. They explain that focusing on building these interpersonal-relationships is a necessity to effectively communicate ideas and positively increase cognitive learning, student motivation and it supports students' emotional wellbeing. Hughes (2011) has summarised an extensive number of longitudinal studies and their findings suggest that positive relationships influence cooperation and engagement in the classroom as well as a predictor of long-term achievement.

Engagement in lessons

Students reported that they wanted lessons where they felt they were more involved, as opposed to 'boring textbook lessons'. McIntyre et al., (2005) has also emphasised that adopting interactive approaches to teaching and learning in addition to connecting learning tasks in new, unexpected ways facilitates long-term understanding. Fishman and McCarthy (1996) have described that teachers need to motivate students by making learning interesting, emotive and relatable to their lives.

"Certain teachers make the lessons more exciting or enjoyable so I am more likely to choose their subject. Other lessons I enjoyed anyway so I chose them".

Student A, Table 6

Of pressing importance is that students are engaged with lessons as motivation and engagement underpin their achievement and enjoyment of school (Martin, 2008). The DfE (2012) report showed that student wellbeing is significantly correlated with academic achievement. Increased school engagement at age 13 was also a key predictor of academic progression from KS3-KS4, which demonstrates the need to motivate students throughout KS3. Biddulph and Adey (2004) also suggest that both history and geography are in decline as they no longer capture student interest. They also find that enjoyment at KS3 determines student uptake in GCSE. However, the challenge is how do we engage learners? Engaging students every lesson is often complicated due to varying interests and levels of motivation, which often vary on a wide variety of factors. McFadden and Munns (2002) have highlighted how there is still no consensus as to how to provide engaging pedagogies that motivate disengaged learners, despite the best efforts of teachers. Yet they also concede that there is also a need for the teachers to develop their teaching approach, to become culturally sensitive to the needs of those learners.

Dialogue

"If the teacher is strict and just makes you work in silence the whole lesson then it gives me a bad attitude for that lesson. However, if you can talk with one another about the work and it's not all writing tasks then I would enjoy the subject more".

Student B, Table 6.

In the interview, I asked students whether some teachers encourage or allow them to talk during lessons. The students said that it 'depends on the teacher' and that some lessons such as in art, DT or PE, they are allowed to talk more. They also said that this was a significant reason why they enjoyed these more, which is apparent in the quote I have included above. Lyle (2008) has described dialogic teaching as having the greatest cognitive potential for pupils. They also believe that teachers do not have the necessary pedagogical skills to plan effectively for whole class discussions. For instance, teachers may not be able to negotiate the power relationship to allow genuine discussions in classrooms. Wells and Arauz (2006) have said that learning is most effective when teachers have created the conditions for learning through active participation and dialogue, where students are involved in co-constructing meaning on topics.

Howe and Abedin (2013) have noted that dialogue has historical routes in Western culture, which has been used by classical Greek scholars such as Socrates and Plato amongst other philosophers. Yet over the centuries, transmissionary styles of teaching have dominated. Higham et al. (2014) recognise that the conditions for dialogue require establishing a culture of mutual respect and equality and students are not always kind to their peers when sharing ideas. Then they highlight other practical issues such as teachers' perception of dialogue as a time-consuming task and their primary focus on attainment and assessments. It is apparent that there needs to be a paradigm shift in teaching that places dialogue as a central component of all lessons. However, this may require government funding or increasing CPD expenditure to boost teachers' confidence at including dialogue in their teaching.

Relevance

Students' uptake of specific subjects is not necessarily based solely on teaching. Lord and Jones (2006) have also identified vocational and academic relevance as key in shaping students' choices. Perceptions of the usefulness of a subject take precedence over enjoyment as students approach GCSEs and will likely focus on subjects where they either feel that they will get better grades to pass exams, or as a necessity in the next step towards their future careers. In this study, 14/24 student responses support this idea, where they said that their option choices were directly affected by their future careers. Johnson (2000) sees students' derision of some subjects as not being relevant as worrying, as they do not see the connection to the subject and how it is used outside of the classroom and in later life. They argue that students need to see the value in studying a range of different topics, in helping them to become flexible thinkers with a range of transferable skills.

"Art does not take you into many paths".

Student B, Table 1.

The quote I have used above is one of many responses that students have included in the questionnaire that downplay certain subjects, because of a lack of relevance to their future careers. It is a worrying generalisation, as this demonstrates that the students are undervaluing the importance of art in developing creativity for later life. Almost two decades ago, the UK government tried to raise awareness of the contribution that creative industries make to the economy, as well as emphasising that schools must develop a long-term supply of new creative talent (DCMS, 2001). However, there still appears to be a stigma associated with pursuing these subjects to GCSE level. Craft (2005) has said that we need to shape children's educational futures to encourage creativity and prepare them for an uncertain, social, economic and environmental future. It is therefore imperative that, at a school level, we continue to promote the value of arts in education.

Power dynamics

A key moment in the interview, where I aimed to explore the viewpoints of students that had recently expressed their concerns in one of their classes, was that they did not feel that their opinions had been acknowledged or at least superficially recognised.

Extract from Interview on whether students felt they had enough support in class.
Student A: She just talks at us and doesn't explain.
Student B: And you can't actually argue with the teacher, because she actually argues back.
Student C: Yeah.
Interviewer: So she should be listening to your concerns, and that's not happening, or has it been sorted?
Student D: No.
Student E: It hasn't been sorted.
Student F: She doesn't care if we're there or not.

This quote for me highlighted the issue of existing power relations, where the teacher-student hierarchy is more dominant. In the case of this extract, student voice has been given precedence over the viewpoint of the teacher and therefore, care should be taken when interpreting only one version of events. Taylor and Robinson, (2009) recommend using postmodernism as a way to examine these power relations in our understanding of how student voice is entwined within school practices. Using a postmodern lens, they describe the dynamic and changing nature of individual students' and teachers' identities and see power as the way in which certain individual viewpoints may take precedence over the multitude of other voices. This explains how difficult it is to address issues when all individuals involved have their own histories and subjective ideas that can ultimately instigate change. The dissonance created by the competing values is therefore a constant struggle, where schools must constantly negotiate changing power balances between pupils and teachers. However, despite this noble intention there is at present no consensus as to how to readdress these issues of power and create dialogue that can transcend the barriers created by the multitude of opinions. With no recommendations available there is a chance

that the typical teacher-student power relationship will continue and undermine student voice when their opinions are ignored (Keddie, 2014).

Future studies

I feel that this phenomenological case-study has shown the value of pupil voice in providing feedback on pedagogy and should be used as a template for future research. This study has produced a variety of data, which the school could use for future planning of the KS3 curriculum.   Unfortunately this was out of the scope of this study, but potentially the school could use these findings to supplement further research into teaching practice, in particular, Figure 6. Identifies specific subjects in which year 9 students feel that they are struggling. Overwhelmingly, it appears to be STEM subjects that are the most challenging to students. A future study should aim to explore this in more detail to ascertain reasons why students perceive these topics as difficult. This is especially important since these subjects are compulsory and could later impact on the schools progress 8 score.

Reflexive analysis

Pollard (2005) suggests using evidence-based enquiries to evaluate one's own practice. One of the most relevant findings relating to my developing practice was the student feedback on two of the other student teachers at the school. They described them as "talking at us" for the entire lesson rather than having more interactive lessons. As Berry and Sahlberg, (1996) have said, learners are not passive recipients and therefore, teachers should aim to improve students' learning experiences through creating problem-solving activities, not 'watching activities'. This has made me reflect on the types of lessons that I plan and has led me to consider whether my practice has enough 'interactive elements' and dialogue that engages learners. The students may also have been too polite to include myself, as I was interviewing them, but it is nonetheless, something I should bear in mind. Overall, the student feedback on teaching highlights that they are aware of good and bad elements of teaching practice and listening to their feedback could effectively enhance and raise standards across the school. Students also suggested that teachers ought to observe other teachers more to improve their practice and this should be encouraged.

I should also be more aware of the power hierarchies of the school that preside over students and that their individual experiences or interpretations of their own learning. From the interview, it became apparent that when students who do not feel their concerns are adequately addressed, led to feelings of resentment and disengagement from lessons. Therefore, perhaps in my own practice I should regularly consult pupils in my class as to how to improve a series of lessons that I had taught to demonstrate to myself, that as learners that their opinions and experience of learning is of paramount concern.

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