



Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Partnership

## **A Student approach to improving Teaching and Learning**

Everyone at the Bedfordshire School Improvement Partnership feels passionate about student voice. The advantages are numerous if teachers and staff are willing to be open minded and accept the sometimes radical views of their pupils and students. Traditionally, at the beginning schools start their journey in student voice with a school council which is made up of representatives from across the school. To begin with, this group focuses mainly on relatively superficial and “easy” topics, for example the outside environment or organising fundraisers for charities. There is no doubt that this is beneficial to the school and the pupils, not only improving their school, but it also raises the profile of the school council. Most importantly, it gives the students confidence to progress onto more challenging topics. At BSIP, it is considered that agenda items such as behaviour issues, and teaching and learning take a much more mature and advanced student voice team than the aforementioned items. You can almost split these into those which affect the environment of the school – things that are relatively easy to change such as the toilet facilities, and what actually goes on in school on a day to day basis. This sometimes involves changing the ethos or culture of the school into one which is more accommodating to the voice of their pupils and students. This is far more challenging, and where projects such as Students as Learning Partners help facilitate the change.

One of the first schools to embrace this project was Samuel Whitbread Upper in Shefford where it has been progressing well over the past two or three years. Many teachers are paired with students they feel comfortable and the already high level of teaching and learning has been pushed even higher.

However, the main school I have worked with has been Biddenham Upper School in Bedford. I have been working in conjunction with Mike Berrill and Nicky Kemp to launch this project since the beginning of the year, and it I am very impressed with how it has progressed. The Principle Mike Berrill is passionate about the values of student voice in his school and he saw this project as an ideal to boost the links between teachers and students. In January 2006 8 students and 16 students attended a training session at a nearby neighbourhood centre. The students were identified by their pair teachers as students who could both add something to the project whilst also benefiting from it themselves. Once each teacher had chosen their students, a list was passed round all the participating teachers to check that all the teachers would feel comfortable working with them. In this case there were no problems.

The training day consisted of team building exercises to try and develop the student-teacher relationship into one which is on a more equal level. This is a necessary and important part of the day as the teachers need to feel confident and trust in their students. Similarly, students need to feel that the teachers really value their opinions and they won't get in trouble if they're not 100% positive all the time!

Next, we explained to them exactly what Students as Learning Partners is about and the benefits and pitfalls of being involved in this project.

We then explained the ground rules using an acronym that Samuel Whitbread. SHORT (Sensitivity, Honest, Open, Respect and Trust) and asked them to come up with their own acronym to create a sense of ownership over the project. The group worked well together and bonded fantastically throughout the day. Other topics that were covered included advice on giving feedback to the teachers following an observation. This comprised of information on giving constructive criticism constructively, “sandwiching” bad news with two positive points, that the feedback should be a conversation not a dictation and that both parties need to be willing to compromise. In addition to this, the groups ran through some ethical issues such as confidentiality, being considerate of everyone’s feelings when dealing with such a sensitive topic and ensuring that all reports ensure that everyone remains anonymous.

The afternoon session consisted of a brainstorming session where the whole group decided where they wanted to progress with this project. They decided that the teacher did not have any specific foci they wanted their students to focus on and so it was decided that the first observation should be a general observation to find out where there were weaknesses and to gain a good all round evaluation of the teacher’s teaching style.

It was agreed that due to the way in which I am employed within Bedford Learning Community, that I would spend part of my week in Biddenham. The majority of my time would be taken up with administrating and coordinating Students as Learning Partners so as to take the load off Nicky Kemp, who deals with all student voice projects and issues. It was decided that I should spend 3 lunchtimes a week at Biddenham to run a “drop in” session so that if anyone had any questions concerning Students as Learning Partners or anything to do with Student Voice I would be available to help.

Upon starting my work at Biddenham I first went about collecting the notes and feedback sheets from the first observations and had a brief meeting with each pairing. In this meeting I wanted to find out about what they had thought of the project so far, whether they had any problems or suggestions for improvement.

The main issue that came up was that really there were not a lot the teachers could improve on as they were already very good teachers. When I spoke to Nicky about this, she agreed saying that she had chosen teachers she felt were already competent and confidence in their practice. Nicky’s priority was that initially the project needed to become integrated into the school’s life and she didn’t want the first batch of teachers to feel disheartened at the criticism and drop out of the project. However, ironically enough I felt that certain teachers were maybe slightly frustrated that they did not have any/many critical comments during the feedback. They felt that they really wanted to improve their practice and currently were not being given enough information on their weaknesses. By this time, some eager pairs had carried out their second observation and were already feeding back to me about how they had

progressed. You can find a real example of an observation sheet filled out by a pair attached to this paper. It was agreed that all pairings would carry out a second observation to see if the teachers had improved on the weaknesses of the last observation. In nearly all the cases the teachers had made distinct development since the beginning of term.

Before the end of term I held a group meeting with all of the participating students and we agreed that the way forward was to switch the teacher-student pairings. This was because we felt that perhaps students were grouped with their "favourite teacher" and felt a certain sense of alliance with them and were therefore reluctant to comment negatively. In addition, these students were the ones who regularly had lessons with their pair teacher, therefore they were accustomed to their teaching styles. It was thought that this could possibly hinder the development of the project. So, unless a student-teacher pairing feels that they can do further work together, they will be moved to a new teacher to give a fresh pair of eyes to the teacher. It is proposed that this is the most effective way to gain the maximum impact out of both the teachers and students.

At the end of this year, Biddenham would like to have a "yellow pages" directory of good practice. This would include information on which teacher is a specialist in a certain area of teaching and learning, for example, dealing with low level disruption, starts and endings of lessons, plenaries and the interaction between teachers and students. This would be used for both existing and new teachers who feel they would like to improve their teaching practice but are not specifically part of the Students as Learning Partners project.

Eventually, Mike Berrill would like to see all teachers in his school being involved in this project and being linked with two students. The constant evaluation and appraisal of his teaching staff is certainly approached with a positive mind frame. The whole process is a very positive one, it's purpose is not to find out who the "bad" teachers are, but to encourage growth and development in all teachers.

Another example of Students as Learning Partners is in Hastingsbury Upper School. Here it works in conjunction with the accredited Student Voice course which BSIP coordinate. Students as Learning Partners is a module the students partake in. They are assessed on their professionalism and effectiveness and as a result that the whole process very seriously. The students send letters to the teacher whose lesson they are going to observe to confirm that it will not be a problem and also to the teacher whose lesson they are going to miss to ask permission for their absence and saying that they will catch up with any work they will miss. They chose the teachers and lesson they were going to observe through a process of learning walks. These consist of a small group of students going into 3 or 4 different lessons for a period of around 10 minutes with a prearranged focus. From these, the students met and agreed which teacher could benefit and contribute the most from the project. All staff that have taken part have been impressed with the maturity and responsibility of the students, especially as the Student Voice

course caters for those students who are perhaps not totally suited to traditional education and who have previously been disruptive in classes. It is in the developmental stages right now. However, it has been suggested that all Newly Qualified Teachers are observed by students, not only to improve their teaching, but also to strengthen their relationships with the students and teachers.

This project is growing in popularity, which can only be a good thing for both the profile of Student Voice, and the development of teaching and learning across the county. I feel confident that Biddenham will soon become an example of good practice for everyone in Bedfordshire to look up and refer to. To help support its expansion it is vital that schools who want to take part have the right ethos and culture and would welcome a critical yet friendly eye on their teachers. The reason that the project has progressed so well so far in Samuel Whitbread, Hastingsbury and Biddenham uppers is because of the maturity and supportiveness of the students and the open-mindedness of the teachers. Without that, there is not doubt in my mind that Students as Learning Partners would have failed.

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