

HELPING CHILDREN TO THINK FOR THEMSELVES

Beech Hill County Primary School, Lancashire

Setting the scene

One of our school's problems used to be the poor motivation of some pupils to make progress. We saw the promotion of critical thinking as an excellent starting point both for getting education for sustainable development (ESD) to permeate the whole curriculum and for tackling poor motivation in general. When we encourage children to ask questions like "Why?", we can begin to give them more ownership of their own learning. We think this is now starting to come through our school in a number of ways. We are also trying to promote critical thinking in subject lessons across several curriculum areas, and you will find a selection of suggestions for tackling this in the case study that follows. However, the main focus of the case study is the Listening Council, which has proved a stimulating mechanism for helping children to listen, question, express and justify an opinion and, finally, to suggest solutions and move to independent action.

What is the Listening Council?

The Listening Council is basically an 'assembly' or meeting – there is one for all the Year 5 and 6 children (9 – 11 year olds) and one for all the Year 3 and 4 children (7 – 9 year olds). There are about 130 pupils in each assembly. The Listening Councils last 15 minutes and take place at 9:10am, every Thursday for the upper juniors, and alternate Fridays for the lower juniors. We meet in the hall in a large circle, with the older year groups on benches and chairs at the back and the younger on the floor in the middle. This is to make it more comfortable than normal assembly.

How does it work?

Any child is free to speak on any subject – but only if they are holding the 'magic microphone'. Each speaker chooses who to pass the magic microphone on to. For their magic microphone, the lower juniors use a clear cube paperweight with a miniature globe inside it that a previous pupil brought back from holiday. The upper juniors use a long wooden staff found on a school visit to the Lake District. Of course, the magic is not really in the microphone – it's in the listening! The underlying principle of the listening council is that children don't just sit quietly – they listen actively to whichever individual is holding the 'magic microphone'. As well as children listening to each other, the teachers show that they are listening to pupils' concerns by attending or just reading the minutes they keep. Because everyone can speak, rather than just elected representatives, it's a bit like a mass-meeting version of 'circle-time.' Anyone in the whole Council can contribute.

What's it all about?

The Listening Council is part of the 'Values and Visions' of our school. By giving children the chance to be listened to, we are trying to promote space, time and quiet so that each person can have his/her moment. We try to encourage the other children not even to put their hands up while someone is speaking. This is to give the message that they are listening and not just thinking of what they want to say next. The Listening Council is central to our promotion of children's critical thinking, but there are a whole host of other benefits that spill over into the classroom.

Subject matter

We feel it is central to the philosophy of this approach that the children are genuinely left to talk about whatever concerns them, as teachers always have opportunities in class to set their own agenda for children to discuss. If you really want to hear their opinions on something, ask a child to bring it up for you at the next meeting – but don't be disappointed if nobody wants to talk about it!

Progression

The following offers an illustration of how children's thinking typically progresses, taking the example of animals.

- “My dog's had puppies,” is an example of a simple telling of personal ‘news’.
- “It's not fair when they bring dogs on our school field,” shows children beginning to express an opinion, showing social as well as personal concern.
- “I think children should be allowed cyber-pets in school because I'm allergic to animals and I can have something to take care of it,” offers not just an opinion, but a justification for it.
- “We are writing to the Council about the mini-zoo,” suggests solutions that are moving on to independent action not initiated by teachers, and inviting others to participate.

Even children as young as seven have learned to refer to previous speakers by saying, for example, “I don't agree with John when he said. . .” The issue of play dominates the lower junior Listening Council but some children show an amazing ability to think beyond their own need to play, and consider some much broader issues. Thanks to the Listening Council, children are exposed to such issues not just from teachers or other adults, but from their peers.

Acknowledgement of the parameters

Power: To be honest with the children, it has always been made clear that the council has no real power to make decisions; but that whenever the school management and staff can implement one of the children's suggestions, we make sure to let them know.

Ownership: When suggestions become silly or too personal, some child eventually points this out or puts the other side of the case, as long as the teachers manage to stop themselves interrupting! The format does work as the children feel they have true ownership and to some extent manage the meeting themselves. Because of this, the idea is very easily transferable to other schools. Honestly, all you need to do is have the confidence to stand back and let it happen.

Our pupils are attached to their Listening Council and use it to discuss a range of issues on a global, local or school scale. It has developed in its own way and will probably follow new directions in the future.

Interventions: There were rare occasions when it was worth a teacher intervening, eg:

- to manage a vote when someone calls for one;
- to remind individuals to listen attentively, in silence and with hands down;
- to restrain inappropriate actions; and
- to dismiss the children at the end.

Taboos? There are bound to be some tricky moments, like criticisms of named individuals. At our school we just give the accused the right to defend themselves on the grounds of natural justice. We find that actually facing real problems like these, or voting on whether to exclude somebody from the Listening Council for that week, is itself a valuable part of the development of the skills and concepts of participatory democracy.

Quality: Over the years, many visitors from other schools and elsewhere have commented on the surprisingly high level of respect, attention and true listening that takes place in the Listening Council.

Encouraging critical thinking across the curriculum

Beech Hill County Primary School has used this opportunity to further encourage children to think for themselves by developing critical thinking across the curriculum. The following examples highlight our efforts.

Tackling pre-conceptions of Nairobi in geography: Year 4 teachers use a suburb of Nairobi in Kenya for a locality study in Geography, because Nairobi is a large, modern and diverse city. Activities with photographs of traffic and skyscrapers as well as more traditional buildings promote critical thinking by stimulating questions that may challenge stereotypes.

Guided reading in groups: Teachers of Year 5 (9 – 10 year olds) have deliberately chosen texts relating to sustainability that can be used to stimulate questioning. Children are encouraged to recognise consequences and explore alternatives.

Open-ended questioning in maths: Although the content may not deal directly with economics, citizenship or the environment, maths has provided us with opportunities to reflect on the thinking process itself. Asking “How did you do that?” has helped to suggest that there is more than one way of finding a correct answer, and that some ways may be better than others. Investigations have been structured so that the children make and try out suggestions in pairs or small groups. When it works, this has led on occasions to genuine reflection and evaluation between pupils. We have made a lot of use of programmable toys and the computer language Logo for this purpose.

Critical studies in art: A technique from Drumcroon Education Art Centre in Wigan has been successful with older juniors to raise critical thinking in aesthetic matters above the level of “It’s cool” or “It’s rubbish”. When studying the work of other artists, the children are asked to respond in terms of the content, the form, the process and the mood. With younger pupils, this would take the form of showing them that there is more than one way of representing something visually.

Geography – crossing the floor: This took place in a Year 6 Geography lesson about a particular issue arising from a change in land use, in this case a proposed by-pass. Those who initially liked the idea were asked to sit at one side of the classroom, with opponents on the other side and the 'don't knows' in the middle. During the debate people could move to take up a different position as they were persuaded by the arguments. Understandably, this generated a great incentive for the speakers to appeal to those pupils who were undecided.

Geography – the “Thengapalli” Project: This pack, published in Hampshire, has proved very useful to us in helping pupils in the important skill of making connections. Its very well thought-out activities link Geography, RE and the Arts through a strong and inspiring real-life story of sustainable development in the Indian village of Kesharpur.

Comparing different historical periods: Instead of comparing Tudor Britain with the present day, a Year 5 teacher wanted to compare it with Ancient Greece that the class had already studied. She used the idea of 'quality of life', as opposed to 'standard of living', to ask the children to work out reasons for choosing which society they would prefer to have lived in. This activity raised as many questions as answers and inevitably reflected back on the children's own experiences of living today.

Managing toilet visits: This is an attempt to promote personal responsibility in a Reception class. Each child has access to a special card with his/her name on. Before leaving the room to go to the toilet a child must hang the card on one of three pegs and remove it on return. When all three pegs are occupied, no-one else can leave the room until someone comes back.

Personal, Social and Health Education: As a staff we recognise that certain knowledge, skills, values and attitudes are important pre-requisites for improving behaviour and raising educational standards. They are also part of personal development for life in general. We always had them in our minds as incidents occurred from day to day, but now we are trying to plan for them more systematically:

Attitudes/values/personal qualities:

Self-esteem: seeing yourself in a positive light; recognising your strengths and weaknesses; being true to yourself; being able to laugh at yourself

Personal responsibility: recognising the consequences of your decisions and actions; taking responsibility for them; self-reliance; honouring your commitments

Social responsibility: taking responsibility as a citizen for your part in collective decisions and actions; a belief in a positive future; a desire to participate; a questioning approach

Environmental responsibility: a commitment to the well-being of living things; a commitment to the future of the planet.

Skills:

Self-awareness: observing yourself and recognising your feelings; building a vocabulary for feelings; knowing the relationship between thoughts, feelings and reactions (especially on the playground or in situations of potential conflict)

Personal decision-making: examining your actions and knowing their consequences; knowing if thought or feeling is ruling a decision; applying these insights to issues such as those raised in drugs education, health education and sex education

Managing feelings: ‘self-talk/inner speech’; realising what is behind a feeling (eg a hurt – underlying anger); finding ways to handle fears, anxieties, anger and sadness

Creativity: an ability to imagine alternatives

Handling stress: learning about exercise, relaxation methods and new games to play on the playground

Empathy: understanding others’ feelings and concerns and taking their perspective; appreciating the differences in how people feel about things; (useful to counteract bullying)

Communicating: talking about feelings effectively; good listening and question-asking; distinguishing between what someone really does or says and your own reactions or judgement about it; reasoned debate

Assertiveness: stating your concerns and feelings without passivity but also without aggression or anger

Group-work: cooperation; negotiation; knowing when to lead and when to follow; problem-solving; taking fair turns; coping with other people's success

Conflict-resolution: how to 'fight fair' with other children, parents and teachers; the win/win model for negotiating compromise.

This case study was written by Peter Coulson, Beech Hill County Primary School. Beech Hill is a 3 – 11 school in urban Wigan, serving approximately 450 students. It participated in CMAS from 1995 – 1997.