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"*I don't know why, I just love it!*" What are the factors that influence children to identify a favourite subject within the primary classroom?

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Abstract

Whilst children will happily vocalise a list of school subjects they love - they struggle to explain why. Where research does include primary age pupils' perspectives, reductive thinking regarding subjects is already apparent at age six. This proposed study adopts a case study methodology, utilising mixed methods to capture quantitative as well as qualitative data, to explore what influences Year 2 children (Key Stage 1, age 6-7), when it comes to having a favourite subject at school and considers the implications for practitioners.

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Introduction

The National Curriculum states that there is a need for exciting and stimulating lessons (Department for Education, 2013) in our classrooms. These classrooms, it is argued, should also be embracing exploration and play as core parts of natural learning which are essential to neuroplasticity (Bethune, 2018). The disconnect being, as posited by Finn (1993), that eventual emotional and physical withdrawal from school is due to compromised engagement in school and with classroom activities; engagement, being the habitual form of behaviour that is achieved only when classroom conditions are optimal (ibid.). The importance of pupil perspectives on how they themselves determine a favourite subject is therefore greatly significant given this challenging landscape (Higgins, Wall & Smith, 2005), a landscape that may arguably impact children's learning presently and in future.

During one of my placements, in a Year 2 class, I became curious when the children vocalised, quite naturally and without ever being asked to do so, the subjects they loved. Fascinated by their reactions, I asked the children to respond with their favourite subject rather than 'good afternoon' when taking the afternoon register. Subject specific responses varied and some days, children named multiple subjects.

Like adults, children's perspectives can change (Einarsdottir, 2007) and given that pupils' understandings of their own learning is an underexplored element in educational research (Higgins, Wall & Smith, 2005), this is very much a space I want to explore in greater depth.

I am keen to establish what influences pupils to identify a favourite subject, given that, as David & Charlton (1996) suggest, we are only offering tasters of different subjects, rather than pretending to equip children with a life's supply of facts. This potential imbalance is complicated further by

evidence that suggests a teacher's own interest and level of engagement make all the difference in the children's engagement with the material (Miller & Nigh, 2017).

My research will focus on Year 2 children, as existing research studies, reviewed below, tend to highlight subject-specific evidence about engagement and attainment levels of children from upper Key Stage (KS) 2, KS3 and KS4. Alongside the main research question (RQ1), these two related questions (RQ2 and RQ3) will also be considered when reviewing the literature and planning the research approach:

RQ1: What makes a primary subject a favourite?

RQ2: Is there a connection between a favourite subject and being the best at that subject?

RQ3: Why aren't all primary subjects loved equally?

Literature Review

The starting point

The literature review for this project reflects on the following areas, all of which, it will be argued, have an impact on how and why children select a favourite subject within school. This is by no means an exhaustive list of influencing factors. These factors instead, demonstrate the scope of the research literature to date, the complex but undeniable level of influence over pupil perspectives and often prompt the most reflection for the project and indeed future practice.

An approach to defining 'favourite'

In the first instance, it is important to start this literature review by defining what it is meant by 'favourite' in relation to the proposed research question and from a pupil's perspective. This paper's starting point considers how a child might 'feel' whilst doing the subject they love the most, rather than thinking about how they might verbally describe the notion of favourite. With this approach in mind, I am aligning my definition of 'favourite' to how Csikszentmihalyi (1990) talks about 'flow' state: "A state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter" (p.4). Crucially, if 'flow' experiences in the classroom enable children to develop a love of learning (Bethune, 2018), then it is during these experiences that 'favourite' subjects are arguably forged in young minds. The idea that any enjoyable activity can become addictive (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990),

is an interesting standpoint with regards to learning encounters in the classroom. Perhaps the results from Attard's (2011) study of Year 5–8-year-olds in Australia, proving that lessons or activities cited as being a 'favourite' or the most fun were those that included physical activity, active learning situations involving concrete material and/or games, also had an element of addictiveness.

In Blatchford's (1992) study, which focused on UK children aged 7 and their perception of school, showed that 42% found school 'mostly interesting', 8% said 'mostly boring' and the remaining 50% said they found it 'somewhere in the middle' of interesting and boring. Given that half the children found school somewhere in between 'mostly boring' and 'mostly interesting', it is perhaps wise to consider that learning is contingent on a willingness to engage and to persist, and that this will not be forthcoming unless the learning task is assessed as potentially enjoyable (Lumby, 2011) and an element of intrinsic motivation is present. Blatchford's conclusion suggests that there is a decline with age in the interest found in school, so it is unsurprising that by the age of 16, 25% of pupils cited 'problems with particular lessons' as one of the worst things about school. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that measuring the enjoyment of school generally at an early age (perhaps Year 2 as this study proposes), may have long term predictive value to educators when it comes to attainment (Morris, Dorling, Davies & Smith, 2019), as pupils move towards continuing their learning journeys at secondary school.

The conflict with engagement

Although much desired, the reality of pupil engagement is problematic. When pupils participate and follow the rules, it does not necessarily mean they are deeply invested in learning (Fredericks, 2014). Equally, where levels of engagement by subject are concerned, with Art receiving the highest composite score, pupils themselves reported that Art was not experienced as 'academically' as other subjects (Brewer & Hogarth, 2015). Where teachers have employed critical and culturally relevant content, this has proven to engage pupils in classroom learning in ways that traditional, by the book methods do not (Jones & Sheffield, 2018). This example perhaps delivers on the National Curriculum's desire for teachers to go beyond the range of National Curriculum specifications (National Curriculum, 2013), much like the innovative examples Attard references above.

Also conflictingly with regards to engagement is Finn's (1993) point that engagement in the classroom contributes to students' social and cognitive development as well as academic achievement. However, some years later we, as teachers, find ourselves conflictingly noting that it

is also possible for children to attain highly in reading while not ever enjoying engaging with reading (Whetton, Ruddock & Twist, 2007). However, more recent evidence aligns to Finn's research in suggesting that engagement and enjoying school is linked to attainment in secondary school children, where boys' GCSE attainment is more strongly linked to school enjoyment than girls. These results highlight the importance of school enjoyment for educational attainment (Morris et al., 2019).

In addition, the evidence that children express little enthusiasm for the core curriculum subjects in Key Stage 2 assessments (Pollard & Trigg, 2000), is also intriguing considering the proposed research questions and what the current link may be between subject engagement, enjoyment, and attainment in the primary landscape.

Emergent motivational traits

Given that some pupils are pleased by being praised and rewarded yet others, by simply expressing their intrinsic pleasure in work they perceive to have quality (Robinson & Fielding, 2007), motivation is perhaps a key player in how children relate to subjects.

Motivational development, according to Reeve, Ryan, Deci & Jang (2007), is where one must identify relatedness, be able to show competence and feel autonomous in action. So, if motivation is also linked to 'liking' a subject and is strongly correlated with choices the learner makes as to what and how to learn (Dierking, 1991), is attainment even a consideration when considering subject preference?

According to a study on underachievement - low motivation, low self-regulation and low goal-valuation were prevalent in academic underachievers (Reis & McCoach, 2000), suggesting perhaps that motivation and attainment are inextricably linked? If mindsets are the beliefs that people hold about their most basic qualities such as intelligence, talents and personality, motivational development can perhaps be framed as a mindset. Mindset crucially plays a significant role in the exercise of personal agency for learning (Boylan, Bartlett & Knaus, 2018) and learning, as I have already explored, is deepened by 'flow', which in turn encourages a long-term interest in a subject (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

The disconnect here being, without any analysis of purpose per curriculum subject being shared, children simply accept what is given and then try to ascertain a purpose for it (Robinson & Fielding, 2007). For example, as Attard (2011) indicates, many students fail to enjoy or recognise the personal relevance of Mathematics, and few voluntarily continue to study it. Which posits the question of whether pupils are motivated enough, without an intrinsic understanding of a subject, in order to achieve, enjoy and engage with it in the long term?

Given the intended research area, researchers must, as Maehr and Meyer (1997) recommend, view motivation as an important area for educational research because it is at the heart of what schools are all about. Particularly in light of theory that supports the idea that children's self-regulation and motivation are affected by perceived goal and achievement values (Reis & McCoach, 2000). When it comes to selecting the participants for this proposed small-scale research project, perhaps an underlying implication is whether they are goal aware and oriented when thinking about their favourite subject.

Socioeconomic background and parental influence

Recent research shows that school enjoyment measured at age 6, does not associate with family socioeconomic background but with ability and gender (Miller, 2019). Research in the same year, however, suggests that family background is an important predictor of academic success, and a large body of evidence indicates that poverty has a direct and negative effect on children's education (Naven, Egan, Sosu & Spencer, 2019). Interestingly, because Miller's research has focused on 'enjoyment' whereas Naven et al.'s on 'academic success', one can infer that in order to enjoy school, the barriers are lower than if you want to attain high grades. This is a helpful starting point regarding the research design, specifically around the second question: 'Is there a connection between a favourite subject and being the best at that subject?'

Naven et al.'s (2019) point about poverty having a direct and negative effect on children's education however, is a pertinent one. If, as the National Education Union (2023) reports, that 78% of school age children had demonstrated fatigue and (75%) poor concentration in class, as a result of poverty, this undeniably impacts their ability to attain and negatively impacts their overall educational experience. Consequently, their mindset when tasked with choosing a favourite subject and sharing their reasons for doing so, is likely compromised. Given that the intended children for this small-scale research project are based in a central Cambridge school, a city which at the time of

writing this paper has 23.1% (National Education Union, 2023), of children living in poverty (i.e., 8 children in a class of 30), there is a need to move forward mindfully, representatively and inclusively when it comes to the participant population and sample.

The ways in which children may be subconsciously influenced by their parents, thus impacting the school experience and perspectives of all children in the class, needs addressing. Whilst recent evidence shows that children with parents in more skilled occupations were as likely to report not enjoying school as those with parents in less skilled and routine occupations (Morris, 2019), there is a plausible need to look beyond 'skilled' parents versus 'less skilled' parental occupations as a starting point and instead towards the imbalance of equality and equity children experience, an un-levelling component within all classrooms witnessed to date.

How parents engage in cultural-related activities with children is relevant in identifying the mechanisms behind the reproduction of social inequality (Gracia, 2015), that is often witnessed in the classroom. For example, there is the need to consider how a child who may engage with 'out-of-home cultural activities' (as Gracia calls them), such as concerts, theatre and museums, may choose a favourite subject, compared to children, who share their leisure time with parents watching television, which has a potential negative impact on their cognitive development (Gracia, 2015).

Whilst these children have equality, in that they are both at school and learning the same input, their equity is potentially polarised because of their socioeconomic backgrounds and disparity in access to cultural capital. It is vital to consider that there are barriers to accessing learning outside of the classroom, such as the above, which offer contextual benefits to children's learning and indeed perspectives. The need to address these barriers, such as transport costs, assumptions around families having internet access, or sufficient income to allow children to participate in after-school clubs and residential school trips (Naven et al., 2019), should always be considered in any pupil perspective research project, especially one which may require children to share drawings of themselves outside of the classroom, for example.

Teacher impact

If young people who feel connected to school, like they belong and that teachers are supportive and treat them fairly, do better (Libbey, 2004), then surely the likelihood of these pupils selecting a favourite subject is greatly influenced by their school environment more than anything else? This

certainly supports Maehr and Meyer's (1997) notion that where this ideal situation is not in place to drive motivation, then factors in the situation (e.g., the learning activity or the structure of the classroom) must be changed. Whilst Robinson and Fielding (2011) argue that the organisation of primary schools paint a largely bleak picture of pressured regimes that emphasise often personally unsatisfactory outputs and partial understanding from the children. There is also a more positive school of thought which suggests that when a teacher believes in the innate sense of curiosity of all children, they will identify and pursue an educational practice in a different way from those who do not (Pring, 2010).

Perhaps it is only when this positive belief is present, that teachers understand they play a pivotal and powerful role in creating environments in which deep learning and engagement can take place (Fredericks, 2014).

A further body of research from 2011 showed that enjoyment had become a major declared aim for practitioners (teachers). Although the focus was on Year 7 pupils, the research suggested that only 38% of these pupils said that 'most' of their lessons were interesting (Gorard & See, 2011). When considered next to Robinson and Fielding's research (also from 2011), cited above, it paints an uncomfortable reality of the stepping stone from primary (Year 6) to secondary (Year 7) and the questionable absence of 'moments that matter' when it comes to children's learning and how they evaluate it. How will those Year 7 children make choices about subjects and even careers, if less than half of the year group is already finding only 'some' lessons interesting?

It absolutely reinforces the need for teachers to be aware of how students perceive their subjects (Taber, 2013), ensuring that children are making informed choices when it comes to learning at primary and beyond. This is further problematised by Miller and Nigh (2017) who profess that, because the curriculum is broken into subjects, units, and lessons, we teachers lack an encompassing vision that inspires us. This presents the wider question about how learning is delivered in primary schools and alludes to the lack of cross-curricular teaching. If teachers are lacking an encompassing vision in delivery, perhaps this research project should also capture pupil perspectives on relatedness of subjects too and if this bears influence how favourite subjects are chosen?

Peer influence

Where evidence suggests that attitudes to school are impacted by two main things; work in school and friends (Blatchford, 1996), it is important to ascertain to what degree a pupil's perspective is guided by others, when choosing a favourite subject.

Recent research of 11-year-old children in an American elementary school, showed that class-based friendships are influential on early adolescents' motivation, engagement, and achievement in the classroom (Shin & Ryan, 2014). This could indicate that 'individual thought' may be a challenge to generate, if the intended children for this study are indeed classroom friends. Thought needs to be given as to where the research takes place and which elements are conducted in a group setting or one on one.

The gender divide

Taber (2013) refers to a thought-provoking piece of research from 2006, involving boys and girls aged 11 - 14 and their perceptions of music, as a school subject. The research showed that girls had more positive attitudes to the subject and boys were more anxious about taking part in musical activities and performing. What emerges however, is that these results are not conclusively down to gender. Taber's report goes on to specify that whilst three-quarters of the girls had access to a musical instrument at home, only one-half of the boys could access an instrument at home. An interesting dataset and perhaps this can be linked back to the notion of equality and equity, rather than gender.

Twenty years ago, Colley and Comber's (2003) study on school subject preferences looked at how gender and age impact preference. It is noteworthy that practical subjects appeared highly ranked by both boys and girls aged 11-12. Girls preferred Art and Drama and boys preferred PE and ICT. There is little subsequent data which details primary-age children's subject preferences and whether gender has an impact on these. However, YouGov's Children's Omnibus research report (2018), which questioned 4000, 6–14-year-olds, is of interest (and a beacon in this empty space). The report shows the continued proliferation of Art being more loved by girls (62%) than boys (38%) and ICT being more loved by boys (64% vs 46% of girls) - an area of interest given that the ICT scheme (Purple Mash) used at one of my placement settings is very much Art focused week on week.

Methodology

Research design approach

Most young children can display aspects of love (how they feel) and hope (what they wish for). I therefore believe there is immense potential in being able to establish from the participants of this research project what it is that makes them choose a favourite subject - what makes them 'love' it and indeed what makes them 'hope' that this subject is on their timetable. With this logic in mind, this project lends itself to using case study methodology, whereby the researcher can be versatile in approaches used, which in turn can offer in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives (Wilson, 2015).

Given that diverse methods in gathering data have opened researchers' eyes to the possibility of seeking children's perspectives (Einarsdóttir, 2007), this research project will utilise mixed methods in order to capture quantitative as well as qualitative data. As Mason (2006) posits, when talking about triangulation of research results, researchers need to consider each method and form of data as a way of telling us about a specific part of the picture, or to provide views of the picture from specified angles. Mason's positioning has very much informed the specifics of the research design.

The questionnaire and quantitative analysis

Where children are concerned, questionnaires need to be relatable, argues Wilson (2015), utilising notions such as 'smiley faces'. Handily, during one my placements, I taught children a range of emotions, using smiley faces for an English unit about quest stories and how quest stories can make us feel as the narrative plays out. The class in question is therefore familiar with using 'smiley faces' to talk about how things make them feel (in both a positive and negative sense). I propose to build upon this existing learning for the questionnaire design, which will ask children how each subject they access in school makes them feel, essentially aligning with the Children's Act (1989) which stipulates that adults are required to take into account the feelings and wishes of children.

The questionnaire will consist of 12 questions, each one asking the children to express how the 12 subjects they partake in at the school, make them feel. The feelings that the children can select will be as per Figure 1 and will utilise a 5 option Likert scale, to measure attitudes. The familiar emoji

faces, as used in the aforementioned English lesson, will be repurposed and used for the questionnaire:

Question 1: How does maths make you feel?


I hate how it makes me feel.


I dislike how it makes me feel.


I don't know how it makes me feel.


I like how it makes me feel.


I love how it makes me feel.

Figure 1: Example Likert questionnaire questions

The tone for the questionnaire is comparable to the informal approach used by Blatchford (1992), where he asked pupils aged 7 whether they found being at school 'mostly interesting', 'mostly boring' or 'somewhere in the middle'. This proposed questionnaire, however, offers more scale and arguably, more relatable written and visual language for the 7-year-old children to engage with. Importantly, and as with their classroom ethos, it will be explained that it is OK to not know, in which case if they need to, they can simply select the neutral, 'I don't know' option. The children will also be explicitly informed that this questionnaire is of course a way to simply understand their perspectives a little more and that it will not be 'marked' or shared.

Because the questionnaire for this research project provides quantitative data, meaning the data can be presented numerically, the data from the questionnaires is arguably best displayed via a bar chart. A bar chart plots the number of times a particular value or category occurs in a data set (Wilson, 2015) and can also break out the data for male and female participants too, side by side, for easy quantitative comparison.

Semi-structured interviews and qualitative thematic analysis

Having reviewed numerous approaches to creating a population sample, coupled with the diversity of the class in question, purposive sampling is arguably the most meaningful approach with regards to selecting 6 children to partake in the semi-structured interviews (and pupil drawings), which will provide us with qualitative, non-numerical data.

This approach ensures the individuals chosen are representative of the population (the class). That said, Wilson (2015) reminds us that this limits any conclusions to being just about the 'sample', rather than anything more general. Given that this project is designed to research the perspectives of only 6 children, this sampling approach and lack of being able to draw wider, 'general' conclusions about children per se, is therefore not problematic.

Whilst group interviews may be useful with multiple children involved, it is also important that individual child interviews are also considered. This approach celebrates the fact that children have their own unique patterns of aptitudes, interests, and dispositions (Robinson, 2015) and researchers must, as Naven et al. (2019) insist, privilege children's unique voices.

Cameron (2005) provides a useful framework for enabling children to expand on their thoughts via a simple 'tell me more about that,' prompt statement. This is widely used in school already and therefore a familiar technique for both myself and the participants selected for this project. This will be an excellent means of asking children to expand on questionnaire data. For example, if all the children rated History as 'don't like it,' the question could be framed as: '[Name], I've been looking at your questionnaire from last week, I'm curious. You gave History a 'don't like it' emoji, tell me more about that…'

The benefits of the semi-structured interview coming after the questionnaire is that there is more scope for the interview to be flexible based on the known data (questionnaire) and the desired data (impending interview direction). Essentially, thinking about a semi-structured interview as an implicit ongoing analysis (Wilson, 2015), whereby there is scope to tweak the direction, based on the content in discussion, is imperative for collecting relevant qualitative data.

The semi-structured interview helps us to answer all three of the research questions, to a certain degree. The questions intended for this, audio recorded, semi-structured interview would be crafted to ensure that each research question is probed, for example, see Figure 2

Questions related to research question 1 (4 minutes)

Think about a subject you love, what are the things that make you love it?

Think about your least favourite subject, what are the things that make you dislike it?

Questions related to research question 2 (4 minutes)

Which subject are you best at? Why do you think that is?

Which subject do you find the most tricky? Why do you think that is?

Questions related to research question 3 (3 minutes)

Which subject do you wish you could do all day, every day?

Which subject would you like to put in the bin forever?

4 x example questions based on any similar questionnaire data (5 minutes):

I'm curious. You gave [subject] a 'hate it' emoji, tell me more about that…'

I'm curious. You gave [subject] a 'love it' emoji, tell me more about that…'

I'm curious. You gave [subject] a 'like it' emoji, what would need to change for you to give it a 'love it' emoji?

I'm curious. You gave [subject] a 'don't like it' emoji, what would need to change for you to give it a 'like it' emoji?

I'm curious. You gave [subject] a 'I don't know' emoji, tell me more about that…'

Concluding questions (2 minutes)

Which subject do you think you learn the most in?

Which subject do you think you learn the least in?

Cool down questions (2 minute)

If you could learn to do absolutely anything tomorrow, what would it be?

Do you do any learning outside the classroom that you enjoy?

(Tell me more about that…)

Figure 2: Example semi-structured interview questions

Because the semi-structured interview (and drawings) are qualitative in terms of their data, post research analysis must rely on coding in order to unpick and make sense of the acquired data. Coding is a way of indexing or categorising in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it (Gibbs, 2007). Wilson (2015) refers to this chosen approach to coding as 'thematic coding,' whereby researchers must identify and itemise the content of the data. Given that the research questions for this project are thematic in nature anyway, as is the literature review, there is scope for

this project's thematic coding to refer back to both the research questions and literature review in order to codify the data. Figure 3 below illustrates an example of such approach.

Coding the data in relation to the proposed research questions:

- expresses a view of preference
- expresses attitude to learning
- expresses thoughts on ability
- expresses a view of dislike
- expresses unexpected consideration

Coding the data in relation to the literature review:

- expresses a view on engagement
- expresses a view on motivation
- expresses a view on home and / or family
- expresses a view on the teacher
- expresses a view on peers and / or gender
- expresses unexpected consideration

Figure 3: Example set of thematic codes for use in analysing semi-structured interviews

In keeping our codes broad, or open, researchers are arguably more able to read and listen reflectively to the data and identify relevant categories (Gibbs, 2007), for it to fit into. However, recognising the interdependent relationship among data organisation, categorisation, theoretical development, and construction of meaning (Williams, 2019), will be significant in ensuring that data is not explored in silos and that relational and linked occurrences are also recorded and shared in the final report. The goal of the all-encompassing, final editorial and diagrammatic report being to identify, organise, and build theory (ibid.).

Pupil drawings and qualitative thematic analysis

Making art is an expansive and accessible method for researching with children, according to Hickey-Moody, Horn, Willcox and Florence (2021) and certainly an approach which does not require sophisticated verbal language skills or indeed comprehension of the written word. As part of this small-scale research project, drawing is the final method to be employed and as already mentioned, will be done as a group activity because children gain much more from arts workshops

with their peers than a one-on-one interview (Hickey-Moody et al., 2021). My approach to this data-gathering method, being very much a workshop in ethos; facilitating a small group activity, which enables the children to be creative about the task, in a relaxed and familiar environment. By engaging all children in discreet conversation as they draw, ensures their narrative over their drawing process records the journey of their construction of meaning. It is this, as well as the drawing itself, that will provide insight into children's understandings and perspectives (Einarsdóttir, 2009).

As argued by Einarsdóttir, (2007) drawings are visual data that can give insight into how children view things. When we, as adults, think about children 'loving' maths at school, we may draw them sitting down, alone, pencil in hand, writing down numbers with a smile on their face. They may see themselves totally differently.

Influenced heavily by the work of Haney, Russell & Bebell (2004), who used children's drawings to research schooling and change in the USA at a both elementary and middle school, it is essential to develop a check-list to indicate whether children's drawings show particular features (Haney et al., 2004). This approach also ensures that the 'task' the children receive must be clear and understood before the drawing commences.

With this in mind, the question proposed for the sampled children's task is as presented in Figure 4:

Think about your learning at school. Draw a picture of you, your class and your teacher having the best learning time you can remember this term.

Figure 4: Proposed pupil drawings task

This proposed task will arguably ensure there are both codable traits and features for the drawings to be labelled with. This broad task can be better talked about, interrogated, and annotated by myself as the children work on their picture. It would also better enable the following checklist (see Figure 5 below) to be used during analysis and go further in helping to answer the intended research question.

- What is the child doing in this picture?
- What is the class doing in this picture?
- What is the teacher doing in this picture?
- Where is the picture set?
- Which subject is being taught?
- What negatives are shown in this picture?

Figure 5: Proposed pupil drawings checklist for analysis

It is also worth considering constant research in this area in order to extract the most meaningful data. For example, as Haney et al. (2004) point out, they experimented over the years with several prompts and various approaches to summarise the patterns apparent in sets of drawings, in order to validate their data. Likewise, whilst we can posit that children's drawings reflect their worlds and experiences - experiences and indeed emotions change daily. So, how certain can we be that their data is not impacted by whether they had breakfast that morning or if they are worried about something occurring later in their day, certainly an implication to consider.

School and participant considerations

Given that one of my placements has afforded me to build a relationship with all members of the class, I would undertake all aspects of the research in the group room that connects to the classroom and timetable it to work during the school day. I would also request the class Teaching Assistant (TA) to be present during the pupil drawing group session to assist with discreet questioning and translation where required, helping to create an 'ideal' environment where children feel comfortable and confident in expressing themselves.

Ethics

Einarsdóttir (2017), argues that, as researchers, we must constantly question why we are doing the research, what the limits of the methods are and the interpretations, so that we accurately present what children are doing and saying. Given this must all be done within an approved, ethically compliant framework, what should this framework look like? The Plowden report (1967) stated that at the heart of the educational process, lies the child. Let us for a moment posit that at the heart of

this research process, lies the child and a halo of necessity, which includes but is not limited to the following ethical considerations:

- Head Teacher, Class Teacher / Mentor Project Sponsorship and Approval
- School Policies & Consent Adherence
- Informed Consent, Parental or Guardian Consent / Right to Withdraw
- Safeguarding protocols
- Data Protection requirements
- British Education Research Association (BERA) 2018 guidance
- Faculty of Education approval
- Appropriate sharing of research outcomes with participants

Not all these vital ethical considerations are discussed in this section. Instead, the focus is specifically on the ethical aspects which are arguably the most child-centric and require bespoke consideration.

Informed consent, parent / guardian consent

Securing informed consent from all the class children is the core tenet of research ethics (Arnott, 2020). Ensuring that participants have had the research explained to them in person, in an appropriate way, so that informed choices about withdrawing can be made, needs to be inclusively executed in the first instance. This proposed small-scale research project will be described and explained to the children, in class, ideally during a PSHE lesson, using the class puppets, Bill (impulsive in nature) and Jerry (indecisive, asks lots of questions). A short play will be scripted which will allow for project scenarios to be played-out and communicated in a simple way. For example, Jerry might be worried about saying the 'wrong thing' (the semi-structured interview hook) and Bill might not want to be involved anymore but feels bad because he has started a drawing and does not want to upset the researcher (the right to withdraw hook).

Ideally, the same evening, a letter of consent, which seeks permission from the parents and carers of a wider group of children than might actually become sampled participants (Faculty of Education, 2023), will be sent out via the school's standard communication platform (SeeSaw). Having a wider consent approach will ensure that all class members can be involved in the questionnaire and that there will be no additional consent requirements for the purposive sample of participants. Should a class member be absent for the questionnaire, they can still fill it upon their return to school. This

letter will also give details of the research project intent, how the data will be used and the right to withdraw from the research for any or no reason, and at any time (BERA, 2018) not being problematic.

Both the informed consent scripted play and wider consent letter will be approved by the class teacher/mentor, the Headteacher (who is also the Designated Safeguarding Lead) and the Faculty of Education, prior to either being shared.

Presentation of the research, commensurate with the children's age

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1991) stipulates that the best interests of the child are the primary consideration in all matters affecting them, commensurate with their age and maturity. The research methodologies and researcher conduct have been considered in line with this statement, as has the need to consider what the most relevant and useful ways are of informing participants about the outcomes of the research in which they were or are involved (BERA, 2018).

With this in mind, this project's conclusion, i.e., all analysed data, will be anonymised, the editorial report, will also be anonymised and its diagrammatic evidence, also anonymised, will be shared with the consenting parent and guardians of the children. Audio recordings of the interview will be deleted in compliance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The class itself and wider school community will receive the diagrammatic elements and relatable insights as a poster, featuring simple, decodable infographics for the children to explore with their teacher and myself, as part of a post project review.

Implications

Where are primary pupils' perspectives?

Research on pupils' perspectives is limited and tends to rarely consider the perspectives of primary children. Where [the limited] research does include primary age pupils' perspectives, their reductive thinking regarding subjects is worryingly already apparent at age 6. Whilst teachers cannot expect all subjects to be loved equally, all subjects must at the very least imbue curiosity and create the desire to learn more. We should not be seeing any subject ranked as disliked or hated in

questionnaires. This is a measurable goal for my future practice. A practice where pupil curiosity about all subjects is maintained and fed.

The fixed and non-fixed impacts of subject favouritism

Whilst the literature review focuses on factors that may impact how children make subject preference choices, it is also important to understand why I included 'emergent motivational traits' and 'teacher impact' within this list.

These factors, I believe, are not fixed.

Motivation and teacher impact will be in my hands as a future practitioner, and I intend to make it exceedingly difficult for children to think reductively about their learning.

Perhaps as Maehr and Meyer (1997) reinforce, motivation really is the sine qua non for learning. If this is the case, motivation, and its influences on learning (Dierking, 1991) is something to be researched on a regular basis to ensure that as a teacher, I am developing a classroom of children who are willing to have their perspectives challenged when it comes to their learning and emerging subject preferences.

Finally, in 2004, only 5.5% of 16-year-old boys and 1.5% of 16-year-old girls wanted to enter a job in the realm of natural sciences (Hannover & Kessels, 2004). Fifteen years later, A-level uptake for physics was still only 8% female, IT, 3% female and only 36% of males think that maths is most likely to lead to a job in the future (Department for Education, 2019). How we challenge this concerning trajectory as future practitioners is really important and challenge it, we must.

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