

Pupils' views of the curriculum: are you 'in the know'?

For many pupils an enjoyable and relevant curriculum is one that they see as 'fun' and 'interesting'. But what might such a curriculum entail from the pupils' point of view? **Pippa Lord** draws on some findings from a review of the research on pupils' perspectives and experiences of the curriculum, commissioned by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). The article explores some of the findings in relation to pupils' views on relevance and enjoyment in the curriculum, across the key stages. The discussion highlights where greater emphasis might be needed in the curriculum, according to the views of learners.

A trend in recent years has been the use of pupil voice data in school improvement and effectiveness (Rudduck, Chaplain and Wallace, 1996). Schools are involving pupils in school life through arenas such as school councils, peer mentoring and consultation groups. The Government has also signalled greater attention to the pupil voice through the introduction of citizenship into the National Curriculum and the increasing consideration given to pupils' views in Ofsted reports.

Research, too, has increasingly focused on pupils' views and experiences. Here, I present some findings from a review of research on pupils' perspectives of the curriculum. The review considers what pupils say about the curriculum from over 250 published studies undertaken in the UK. First, the article outlines the review work; it then explores some findings from two of the most substantial themes in the review – relevance and enjoyment.

In *Topic* issue 31 an item looked at how teachers access research and engage with research findings (Wilson, 2004). This article helps teachers connect some of the findings from the literature to their thoughts and observations about their own pupils. The discussion provides pointers to help put teachers 'in the know' as to what their pupils might experience in terms of enjoyment and relevance. Some of these areas may resonate with many practitioners' insights into the curriculum, for example, the value of

practical work and making real-life connections. The importance of the research review is that the issues raised are what the pupils themselves feel make a difference to their curriculum experience.

About the research review

The research review on pupils' experiences and perspectives of the curriculum, carried out by NFER and commissioned by the QCA, began in 1999. There are five reports available: an original review entitled *Pupils' Experiences and Perspectives of the National Curriculum: Research Review* (Lord and Harland, 2000); and four subsequent annual updates to the work (see Lord, 2001, 2002 and 2003; Lord and Johnson, forthcoming). (These are available to download on the QCA website.)

The review considers research that:

- has been undertaken in the UK from 1989 (around the time of the introduction of the National Curriculum and the Education Reform Act) to date
- involves pupils' views and experiences, for example, collected through interviews, questionnaires and observations
- focuses on the curriculum, including the National Curriculum, individual subject areas, cross-curricular themes and assessment.

So far, the review contains 257 items of published research. The findings have been categorised into a

Across all ages 'practical' activity enthuses pupils

number of themes, including pupils' perceptions of enjoyment, relevance, manageability, coherence, progression, choice, and

breadth and balance in the curriculum. When considering pupils' views on the curriculum, we have found that other areas also surface in the research, such as pupils' perceptions of teaching and learning styles. Although not the focus of the review, some such research is included, for example, the work of Flutter *et al.* (1999).

What the body of research looks like

Themes

The two most substantial themes in the review are those of pupils' perspectives on enjoyment and relevance in the curriculum. The areas least commonly studied from the pupils' perspective include the manageability, breadth, balance and coherence of the curriculum.

Subjects

Science, maths, English, PE and personal, social and health education (PSHE) are the most frequently researched subject areas. The arts, humanities and foreign languages seem to be less frequently studied from the pupils' perspective. A number of studies consider a range of subject areas, for example, subject preference studies in secondary school (Colley, Comber and Hargreaves, 1994). Research into pupils' whole curriculum experience, across all the subject areas and within a range of themes, appears to be less common. Two of the most notable examples of this are: the primary school study by Pollard *et al.* (1994), known as the PACE project, and a longitudinal study of the experiences of pupils in Northern Ireland, by Harland *et al.* (2003).

Methods

The following points summarise the key patterns in the types of research undertaken, amongst the body of 257 reviewed publications:

- research is more common at secondary level than in primary school, with a notable amount undertaken with pupils in year 9

- the questionnaire and individual interview are the two most popular means of data collection
- much of the reviewed research employs samples of less than 250 pupils, although the review includes a number of studies with over 3000 pupils' views
- the majority of the research takes the form of studies with one-off periods of data collection. Some studies are longer term, tracking pupils over a number of years.

Who does the research?

Most of the published research included in the review has been carried out by research organisations and university researchers, although some has been conducted by teachers and other educational practitioners.

Having laid out a picture of the review work undertaken, the remainder of this article considers some findings from two of the most substantial themes in the review: pupils' enjoyment and their perceptions of relevance in the curriculum. Or, in their words, what might be 'fun' and 'interesting'.



The balance between challenge and sense of 'ease' seems important for pupils

Pupils' experiences of enjoyment and relevance in the curriculum

About 25 per cent of the research reviewed has findings about pupils' enjoyment, and almost 40 per cent relates to their perceptions of relevance. It is not possible to cover all the studies and their main findings here. Below, three key points on enjoyment and relevance from the pupils' point of view are highlighted. These are illustrated further, with examples from the research review, in Case boxes 1 to 7.

- One of the most striking findings in the research review is that **pupils enjoy the curriculum less as they get older**. This pattern is shown in many studies that compare findings across year groups or track the same pupils' views year-on-year. However, this decline might be associated with the general maturation and motivation of young people during this period in their lives (Case box 1).
- The research reveals a **'year 8 dip'** in pupils' motivation and engagement with the curriculum. Pupils' attitudes in terms of enjoyment and relevance depict an 'educational limbo' and the year appears to have no focus for pupils (Case box 2).
- Pupils also become **increasingly utilitarian** in their perceptions of the relevance of the curriculum as they get older. By years 10 and 11, pupils feel the curriculum is chiefly geared towards assessments and 'getting grades' (Case box 3).

Case box 1 Decreasing enjoyment as pupils get older

The Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study traced the views and experiences of 3000 pupils throughout the whole of their secondary school careers. Pupils' experience of the curriculum showed declining levels of enjoyment and engagement over the years. Low-attaining pupils and those already low-engaged with school from an early age, showed some of the most marked declines in enjoyment. However, there was some pick-up in enjoyment associated with optional subjects in key stage 4.

See Harland *et al.* (2003)

Case box 2 A 'year 8 dip'

The year 8 dip is depicted in a number of studies. However, research shows that there is some slight recovery of motivational attitudes in year 9. This might be influenced by national assessment and making choices for key stage 4.

See Demetriou, Goalen and Rudduck (2000), Harland *et al.* (2003) and Sharp (1998)

In a climate that emphasises accreditation and qualifications, it is perhaps inevitable that pupils' views become instrumental in this way. But is there anything that might alleviate what seems to be a downturn in pupils' sense of 'fun' and 'interest' in the curriculum? The next section considers this question.

Case box 3 It's useful for 'getting grades'

In primary and early secondary school, pupils recognise the relevance in what they are covering in the curriculum to a wide spectrum of life and learning opportunities. However, pupils often link the usefulness or relevance of subjects to their status in the timetable or assessment system. By key stage 4, their main sense of relevance is of a curriculum geared towards gaining qualifications. Pupils' sense of usefulness for the future is also chiefly utilitarian and literal. Geography will be useful 'for reading maps' and 'there's no point in studying art unless you are going to be an artist'.

See Adey and Biddulph (2001), Harland *et al.* (2003) and Stables and Wikeley (1997)

What is fun and interesting for pupils?

The following key areas of 'fun' and 'interest' are consistently raised by pupils across the reviewed research.

- Across all ages **'practical' activity** enthruses pupils. There is particular evidence for this in the research into science and maths, although similar findings transpire elsewhere. At primary school the research focuses on types of activity within subject areas (Case box 4). At secondary school the research reveals pupils' preferred subjects. Those with higher levels of activity or practical application are enjoyed the most, including PE, IT, art and technology.
- Pupils' sense of enjoyment is associated with their perceptions of their **ability** and the **level of difficulty** of the curriculum. However, it is also linked with the degree of **challenge** involved. The balance between challenge and sense of 'ease' seems important for pupils (Case box 5).

Case box 4 Practical activity

The PACE project was a longitudinal study of children in primary school. Findings included pupils' enjoyment of practical activities such as play and painting (favoured by girls in key stage 1), and sand and construction (especially liked by boys in key stage 1).

The reviewed research suggests that pupils can see 'writing' as counter to practical activity; and 'too much writing' is often associated with lack of enjoyment for pupils. Can 'writing' be made more practical and enjoyable for pupils? In the PACE project, very young pupils disliked writing, an activity ranked in the last two places out of 12 possible activities in years 1 and 2. However, in years 4–6, pupils enjoyed putting their own creative ideas into their writing.

Using the computer was found to be amongst pupils' most favourite activities at primary school. It has also been found that year 2 pupils like to use computers for drawing, games and number-work, while year 6 pupils like using computers for writing and the internet. Is 'writing' more appealing in this way?

See Pollard *et al.* (1994), Selwyn and Bullon (2000) and West, Hailes and Sammons (1997)

- In terms of **teacher intervention and support**, pupils consistently value teachers who explain clearly, who listen, who are fair and are interesting. Pupils' likes and dislikes are often related to the way subjects are taught. A sense of responsibility and autonomy in their work is also valued (Case box 6).
- Regarding 'interest' and 'relevance', pupils value connections between their curriculum and **real life**. Pupils also value real-life relevance from those '**in the know**', such as teachers with wide subject-based knowledge and professionals from within the field (Case box 7).

Case box 5 Sense of challenge

Progressive accomplishment of tasks and skills, and recognition of being routinely successful, contributes to pupil enjoyment at primary school.

However, too much familiarity with the task can lead to boredom. But newness can engender enthusiasm. This seems to be the case even where activities might be difficult. Thus, a sense of challenge is appreciated by pupils. However, the research indicates that pupils' levels of enthusiasm start to wane during key stage 2. So, more intellectual rigour and challenge might be needed in the curriculum in order to enthuse pupils.

At secondary school, a sense of challenge might also enhance pupils' interest and enjoyment. In the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study, while choice was a key feature in pupils' enjoyment of subjects in the first year of key stage 4, by the final year of compulsory education, 'mastering subjects' was strongly linked to pupils' enjoyment.

See Davies and Brember (1994), Harland *et al.* (2003) and Pell and Jarvis (2001)

Case box 6 Responsibility and support

Choice and independence are found to be important, particularly to older primary pupils and throughout secondary school. Pupils appreciate being allowed to work in their preferred way in order to put a stamp of identity on their work. However, pupils also like to feel supported in their learning. Young primary children, in particular, appreciate teacher support and one-to-one interaction. They are least likely to be on task when working independently.

Individual feedback and attention appears to be important at all stages in pupils' school careers. The nature of feedback might need consideration. For example, research shows that, compared with their younger peers, year 6 pupils feel self-conscious about asking for help and feedback. And at key stage 4, research shows that pupils can be unsure of their progress. The pupils themselves recommend greater individual feedback is needed at this time.

See Flutter *et al.* (1999), Harland *et al.* (2003), McPake *et al.* (1999) and McCallum, Hargreaves and Gipps (2000)

Case box 7 Real-life application and relevance

Research shows real-life application is important to enhancing pupils' understanding of subjects. However, real-life connections must often be made overt by teachers, for pupils to recognise them.

Teachers with wide subject-based knowledge, and who are able to teach wider than the syllabus, are valued by pupils, especially during key stage 4. This notion of 'knowledgeable' teachers resonates in subject areas such as PSHE and careers education. Pupils' views raise the question, who teaches the curriculum? In research into PSHE, health professionals and other outside presenters are valued. Studies on careers education indicate that gaining information from people 'in the know' is helpful.

See Harland *et al.* (2003), Jamison (2001), Keys *et al.* (1998) and Reiss (2001)

Conclusion

The discussion has outlined some of the key areas that pupils have raised in relation to their curriculum experiences, according to the body of reviewed research that has been undertaken from 1989 to 2003 in the UK. The findings presented here have focused on pupils' enjoyment and their views on the relevance of the curriculum. The pupil voice has been fairly consistent in terms of what makes a 'fun' and 'interesting' curriculum, and where things might be enhanced or improved. From the pupils' point of view, these include the following.

- **Keep it practical**

There is strong evidence in the research that 'practical' activity engages pupils. Interactive sessions, group-work, 'fun' presentation with slide shows and videos, conducting experiments, investigations and construction of creative ideas are all valued by pupils.

- **Make it challenging**

While accomplishment of tasks and skills may contribute to pupils' enjoyment, familiarity can breed boredom. Maintaining pupils' enthusiasm for subjects and activities may require more challenge as pupils progress through the curriculum, and particularly towards the top end of primary school.

- **Give responsibility**

The opportunity for pupils to take responsibility for their work, and the chance to work independently, such as on assignments for assessment, may help engender a sense of feeling valued. This has been found particularly for those in upper key stage 2, and key stages 3 and 4. However, a balance between independent enquiry-based work, and more structured and directed approaches, may be required. The different learning styles of pupils are highlighted in the research. Finding ways of setting tasks that allow pupils to choose their own approach might be beneficial.

- **Root it in real life**

Pupils recommend greater connection of the curriculum to real-life. Teachers' contextualising the content of the curriculum to the world of work, the environment, health, citizenship and business may provide a motivational boost for pupils, as well as greater understanding. Further real-life relevance might be provided through sessions with professionals in the field and others seen by pupils as 'in the know'.

A key message from pupils for maintaining enjoyment and interest is that they appreciate a curriculum that is practical and relevant, that affords some responsibility and is delivered by those with experience in the field. Given the overall downturn in pupils' enjoyment and engagement with the curriculum from key stage 2 and throughout key stages 3 and 4, it is important to consider their views and recommendations for the curriculum.

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