

Why involve the child?

It is their right to be involved

The 1989 United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child states in Article 12 that children who are capable of forming their own views shall have the right 'to express those views freely in all matters' affecting them and that their views should be given 'due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'. It also states that all children should be provided with the opportunity to be heard in any proceedings affecting them. In Article 13 it states that children should have the right to express their views, 'receive and impart information and ideas ... regardless of frontiers, either orally or in writing ... or through any other media of the child's choice'. Clearly, there is a legislative context for involving children in setting their targets or other forms of interventions in school, getting them involved at a level that is appropriate for their age and maturity.

Maximizing progress and motivation

In 1998 Black and Wiliam published a review summarising the results from over 250 articles by researchers from several countries. This review showed that there was a strong body of evidence to support a claim that formative assessment practices could raise standards in education (Black and Wiliam, 1998). The results were published in a 20 page booklet entitled *Inside the Black Box*. In order to research more deeply the practices that would help teachers put formative assessment into practice, and the results of doing so, Black and Wiliam set up a variety of research projects with secondary teachers in the UK. The results were published as a short booklet entitled *Working Inside the Black Box* (Black et al., 2002) and as a book for teachers (Black et al., 2003). For the 19 teachers for whom they had reliable data they found that using Assessment for Learning practices resulted in an average effect size of 0.3. This is equivalent to just under half a level at Key Stage 2, just over half a level at Key Stage 3 and just over half a grade at GCSE. Such improvements produced across a school would take that school from the lower quartile of the national performance tables to well above average. Some of the results of their work have been incorporated into the Key Stage 3 initiative and into the Primary Strategy. One of the key principles of Assessment for Learning is actively engaging the pupil in the process of learning by making it clear to him/her where they are now and what they need to do next to move forward. Using the pupil friendly target sheets and IEPs in this book can help teachers to put this principle into practice.

A study carried out with pupils in year seven (Lee and Gavine 2003) showed that involving pupils in the goal setting process, giving them appropriate feedback and helping them become more aware of the strategies they were using to learn, helped to significantly raise their attainment levels in spelling and punctuation. Through using a solution focused framework pupils talked about their goals and recorded their progress on a regular basis.

Fernandez and Fontana (1996) carried out a study where teachers were trained to use self assessment techniques with pupils. The self assessment techniques involved teaching pupils (8–10 years and 10–14 years) to understand the learning objectives and the assessment criteria of the task. Pupils who had had this type of self assessment input were compared with those who had not. Pre- and post-tests of mathematical achievement found significant gains on the experimental group. This study provides further concrete evidence that if pupils are clear about learning objectives their levels of achievement increase.

As well as having a positive impact on achievement, involving pupils in goal setting and self assessment can also have a desirable impact on pupils' levels of motivation. A study carried out by Gersch et al. (1993) found that the teacher discussing the criteria for success with pupils increased their levels of motivation and the amount of effort they put in. Research evidence shows that children themselves state a preference for being involved. Brennan (1988) investigated pupils' attitudes towards Records of Achievement (ROA – an interactive model of record keeping involving pupils and teachers). Pupils liked the system and reported the following benefits:

- a greater feeling of involvement and motivation to work
- a greater feeling of responsibility for their own progress
- A greater pride in their achievements.

All of these are intrinsically linked with pupil motivation, perception of control, confidence and empowerment.

A number of studies have shown that self evaluation is one of a variety of factors involved in the development of motivation.

An individual is motivated to behave in a certain manner as a result of the learned beliefs about his/her worth, abilities, goals and expectations for success or failure; and the positive or negative feelings that result from self evaluative processes. (McCombs and Pope, 1994: p. 12).

If pupils receive regular feedback about their learning and are encouraged to think about their next steps it increases their motivation to learn.

Improved self esteem

Lee and Gavine (2003) carried out a study to evaluate a classroom based project for increasing pupils' involvement in their learning. A solution focused framework was used to support teachers' dialogue and to enable pupils to talk about and record their progress. As well as finding that involving pupils in their learning increased their attainment levels in reading and spelling, they also found that there was a positive change in how pupils thought about their learning and what they attributed their success to. By the end of the project they were much more likely to attribute their success to internal learning factors, i.e. the strategies that they were using and becoming more aware of in order to help them succeed, rather than external factors (e.g., the level of difficulty of the task). The approach of facilitating greater involvement in their learning and helping them to notice *how* they learn had helped them to see that they could take some of the credit for their success because of the strategies that they employed. This is incredibly empowering for pupils, to realize that they can have an impact on their learning and enhance their success, thus boosting their self esteem and self efficacy.

It is also helpful to think about the benefits of involving pupils in the light of our experiences of learning. Personally, I achieve more and feel better about myself when I feel involved and have some degree of control. It helps when I know what I'm trying to

achieve, by when and who/what is going to help me. I need to own the learning targets rather than them being something that I perceive someone is trying to force on me. I'm sure that if you reflect on positive learning experiences in your own life you will share similar thoughts. It is vital for many children, who may already feel pretty poor about themselves and how they are doing in school, to feel that they have some degree of control with regard to their learning or behaviour. If we help children to become involved in planning their targets, it will help them to feel better about themselves, showing them that their views really do count. Through regularly reviewing pupils' targets with them, they will be able to see that they can make progress, which will also help them to feel better about themselves.

Feedback

Involving children more fully presents them with an opportunity to reflect on their learning and encourages them to take more of an active role in planning and reviewing their progress. Subsequently, pupils will be in a position to offer feedback on teaching and learning styles and the curriculum on offer. Even reviewing what did not go quite so well, in terms of meeting targets, can be enlightening and can help everyone involved in making the necessary adjustments for next time. For example, Justin, a Year 4 pupil, had only managed to learn a quarter of the words specified on his IEP for spelling. In reviewing his IEP with him, he expressed some frustration. "I do learn my spellings every week," he outlined, "I mostly get them right each week, but when I learn the ones for the following week, I forget the other ones I've learnt!" With this information, his teacher was able to adjust his weekly spelling list to allow some over-learning and revision of spellings he had previously forgotten. He subsequently managed to learn and retain many more.

A word of caution

Although it is important to involve children as fully as possible we must be careful not to overburden them.

There is a fine balance between giving children a voice and overburdening them with decision making procedures where they have insufficient experience and knowledge to make an appropriate judgment without additional support. (The Children Act 1989, Guidance and regulations, DOH, 1991; Vol. 6, 6.6.)

In practice, this means using our professional judgment to give children as much help and guidance as they need in setting their targets and writing their IEPs. The amount we give will of course depend on the age and maturity of the child as well as their attention span.