What happens when children use peer encouragement in the classroom?

<u>Rationale</u>

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), Building the Curriculum 3 (2008) highlights the importance of involving the learners in "planning and reflecting on their own learning, through formative assessment, self and peer evaluation and personal learning planning" (Scottish Government, 2008; 27). Furthermore, Building the Curriculum 5 (2010) goes further to emphasise that peer assessment allows learners to support others and extend their own learning. It is clear from looking at these document that one of the priorities of CfE is developing skills within the learners to evaluate both their own learning and the learning of other.

However, evaluating learning is something which needs to be done with care and consideration. In order to evaluate learning there has to be a set of clear expectations to consider and this becomes even trickier when trying to evaluate effort. "Our pupils are so concerned with effort and they must believe that they are capable" (Woolfolk et al, 2008; 383). Another issue with measuring effort is that effort looks different for each child. Instead we should be "recognising learners for improving on their own personal best, for tackling difficult tasks, for persistence and for creativity. Not just performing better than others." (Woolfolk et al, 2008; 471).

In order to see what will happen when learners are given encouragement from their peers we must first consider the value of peer interactions. Maslow suggests that the enjoyment learners receive from interacting with their peers, meets their need for belonging and ultimately increases motivation (1943, cited in Woolfolk et al, 2008). With this in mind it will be interesting to investigate the impact peer encouragement will have on the effort and motivation of the learners in Primary 6.

<u>Aim</u>

The aim of this practitioner enquiry is to observe what happens to learner's engagement and motivation when peer encouragement is introduced.

<u>Methodology</u>

This enquiry took place in a Primary Six (P6) class with 28 learners, over 3 weeks.

The enquiry began with a whole class discussion surrounding effort, what it looks like and the methods we could use to measure effort. As the learners were more mature we were able to discuss the concept of effort looking different for every person. We realised that if we were going to measure effort we would have to take into account the individuality of each learner.

The learners identified the characteristics which they would associate with effort and we discussed how these characteristics would be evidenced in the learner's work. We also discussed some of these characteristics further and evaluated how reliable they could be. For example, one learner suggested that effort could be someone not talking to anyone in their group. However, another learner suggested that just because they aren't talking it doesn't necessarily mean they are working hard or putting in effort.

Therefore, as a class we identified the traits which would be evident in our peers if they were making an effort with their work. This would allow us measure and identify effort, which we could later reflect on in our findings. The learners noted that they would see:

- Concentration (the person is writing with their pencil and not 'carrying on' in their group).
- A significant amount of writing on the page (individual for each learner. For example, the learner with EAL would have less writing but may be making a huge effort).
- Work presented neatly.

We used an effort meter in order to evaluate the level of effort we were seeing in in the work. This meter also gave us the chance to evaluate whether we felt we were working hard enough to earn a peg.
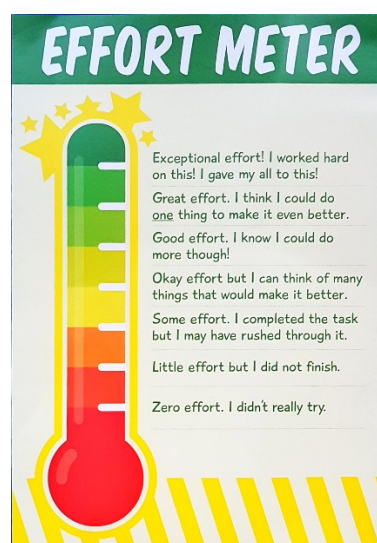

Figure 1: Effort Meter

We decided to give our pegs to someone who we could see was making a great effort or an exceptional effort.

Before beginning the enquiry the methods of data gathering were identified. Literature suggests that an enquiry is more manageable when data collection methods are identified at the beginning. It was important to gather both qualitative and quantitative evidence, in order to increase the reliability of my findings. Quantitive evidence was gathered using a survey which was administered through Microsoft Forms. The quantitive evidence allowed me to "get a sense of trends" (McNiff, 2013; 106). It also allowed the children to give feedback anonymously, regarding how beneficial they found the enquiry. Furthermore, Microsoft Forms is a program which the learners are confident using and therefore the gathering of data was not time consuming. This is supported by McNiff (2013) who notes that "the method of data collection must not be too demanding on the teachers time" (McNiff, 2013; 112). Moreover, I also collected notes and observations through learning conversations with the learners. This is another form of qualitative data.

Findings

Through classroom observation and discussion with the learners it became evident that they liked to give each other feedback and praise. However, when asked whether they felt as though their effort is being recognised by their peers, 63% said that they didn't feel acknowledged. This could be because some of the children admitted that they were choosing their friends. It could also have been that the same people were being recognised repeatedly. Through discussion it became clear that whilst the learners enjoyed assigning the pegs and were able to explain assigning their pegs and how they measured effort, it was also evident that there were a few learners who did not value being given feedback from their peers. Only 44% noted that they preferred peer feedback, whilst 56% stated that they felt more valued when the teacher gave them positive feedback regarding their effort and work.

Before beginning the investigation I predicted that some learners may automatically give their praise peg to their friend and not consider the work of others. When they were asked 22% admitted that they would not always consider the work of others and just assign the peg to their peers. This could also be a result of factors out with the investigations such as classroom relationships.

Conclusions

Overall I was able to see an improvement in the level of effort which the learners put into their work. Furthermore, the learners were able to engage in conversations regarding their effort and how they recognised the effort of their peers. In some way this may have worked towards building positive relationships amongst individuals in the class. However, there were some learners who were less engaged as there wasn't an extrinsic motivation. For example they didn't receive dojo points if they received the most pegs.

Although I was able to see an improvement in the work of some learners. This could be due to intrinsic motivation or a desire to be recognised positively by their peers. When I introduced the idea of a teacher peg this increased motivation. Overall I would say that the learners have become more knowledgeable in recognising effort. They are now able to describe what effort looks like and acknowledge that effort looks different for every child. This also promotes a culture of acceptance within the class.

Implications for future practice

Building upon the idea of assessing effort the learners were enthusiastic about bringing this into different curricular areas. They were looking to give each other praise in Literacy. This was an interesting concept as they mentioned that some of them perform better in Literacy and would like to have the opportunity to have this recognised by their peers. In addition to this the learners were able to give suggestions of how to improve this method of feedback. They suggested that we have a carousel activity at the end of the lesson where they have the opportunity to move around the class, and look at the work of their peers, before they provide feedback or assign a peg

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