



Investigating the Views of Children with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties about their Experience of Learning French

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Abstract: This article reports on a research project carried out at a small residential school for children (Primary 4-Secondary 2) with severe social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in Scotland. Research was undertaken in order to investigate the children's feelings about learning French. Semi-structured interviews and other qualitative methods were used. Just over 55% of the total pupil cohort (36) participated. The findings suggest that children with severe social, emotional and behavioural difficulties can benefit from language learning in various ways, including raised self-esteem. A number of recommendations are put forward for consideration.

Keywords: inclusion, modern language learning, primary school, pupil perspectives

Setting the Context

Between August 2009 and December 2012, I worked at a grant-aided residential school in Scotland (total cohort of 36 pupils) for children with severe Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) which introduced French into its curriculum. The school caters for children from local authorities from all over Scotland aged between eight and thirteen. The school is divided into six classes and each group has its own class teacher and learning assistant. Children are allocated to classes based both on age and educational progress. All classes are taught separately. I worked at the school for the duration of the programme, having been hired specifically to teach French to all groups.

There appears to be no real agreement as to what counts as a social, emotional or behavioural difficulty (Marsh, 2005; Cooper, 2006; McColl et al., 2002; McLeod, 2006) and there are many different ways in which children can manifest SEBD. At the school where the research was carried out many of the children have experienced neglect and physical or sexual abuse and some bite, scratch, kick and spit when upset or angry. However, most of those same children are also generous, caring and engaging.

When I had gone for the interview and spent an hour with one of the classes I realised how very much I wanted to teach these children. I had been warned that the children's behaviour could be extremely violent and disruptive. So it was interesting to find that, although this violent and disruptive behaviour did occur, there were many instances of a real sense of enjoyment and excitement at learning a new modern language. I found the dichotomy between the potentially violent and disruptive behaviour and the pleasure the majority of the children showed in language learning intriguing.

In carrying out this investigation, I sought to discover in what ways learning another modern language adds value to the education of children with SEBD.

Methodology

As the children at my school have little experience of being invited to contribute their views or participating in research, it was a priority to make it as clear as possible to all of them what the research would involve and that it was entirely their decision whether to take part or not. In total 20 children (17 boys and 3 girls) out of 36 (33 boys and 3 girls) aged 8-13 at the school agreed to participate. Some children had just started learning French and others had been learning French for over a year. The research was carried out in the first two weeks of July 2012.

I decided to use the semi-structured interview format as it has the advantage of flexibility. The semi-structured interview also makes it easier to discover patterns and facilitates comparing and contrasting the data obtained. I combined the semi-structured interview with the use of a drawing (one of a boy with a blank face to be drawn in and one of a girl: see Appendix A for picture of the boy) in order to initiate the conversation and put the children at ease. I also felt that this method was an effective way to empower the children by validating their feelings. Although many studies have been carried out involving children in mainstream schools giving them a voice, there have been very few projects specifically involving pupils with SEBD either as subjects of research or participants (Clough *et al*, 2005). Hunter-Carsch *et al* (2006) point to a number of challenges in listening to young people which include, being prepared to be surprised and being prepared to take action on the basis of what we hear.

I used a combination of observations and notes from the interviews, the expressions drawn on the faces and the writing in the thought clouds to form my data.

Observations and Notes

Immediately after the interviews I made notes on what I had observed in terms of the child's reactions and behaviour. I had decided not to record the interviews as I felt it would be intrusive and potentially intimidating. The majority of the children displayed a sense of responsibility and pleasure at being asked to give their opinions.

Drawing in of Expressions

Asking the children to draw an expression on the blank face reflecting how they felt about learning French, provided a focus for the interview. It gave the children an opportunity to connect with their emotions first and then to provide a more intellectual response in the thought clouds.

Writing in the Thought Clouds

This data was collected in order to discover what the pupils felt about learning French. I also wanted to find out whether the pupils were gaining something from the French classes which was intrinsic to learning a modern language as opposed to related activities which took place in the lessons.

Two extreme cases

Most of the pupils came in, listened to what was expected of them, drew in an expression on the blank face, answered the question with great seriousness and careful consideration and left. I will refer to two interviews which represent a child who behaved in an exemplary manner and a child who reacted in a way that, I suspect, most people at the school would have expected most of the children to react to the experience of being interviewed.

The first interview I want to refer to was with a boy called Danny¹ (aged 9). It was one of the first interviews and it left me slightly perplexed. When I had explained what we were going to do, Danny drew a devil's face and horns on the blank face. I asked him whether that reflected how he felt about learning French and he said he really liked French but that he hated Simon (aged 8) with whom he had just had an argument. It was virtually impossible to get him to focus on the interview as he wandered around the room picking things up and examining them. Eventually he sat down and we returned to the thought clouds. It was clear that he was keen to contribute but deeply preoccupied with something that had just happened.

Based on my experiences in the school, I had expected that far more interviews would have followed a similar pattern but in fact, out of 20 interviews, only three were marked by distraction and a lack of focus. Two of the boys who became very distracted and had trouble focusing had both been upset by something which had happened prior to the interviews. I was surprised that the third boy had volunteered at all as he was generally disruptive and found it extremely difficult to stay focused on a task.

At the other end of the spectrum was the interview with Duncan (aged 10), who was still residential but accessing mainstream primary school full-time. I went and interviewed him in his cottage as he was already on holiday. Duncan was keen to help. He showed me into the playroom and set up the table and chairs. He had greatly enjoyed learning French at the special school and was proud of the fact that he had practised counting to 100 over the holidays. He told me that he had been ahead of his fellow pupils in French when he had started at the local mainstream primary school and that the teacher had been pleased and impressed with him. In one of the thought clouds on his drawing he wrote that learning French had made him more confident at school. (See also Lumsden, 2009: 19).

Data Analysis

The brief notes taken straight after the interviews correspond well with both the answers the children gave in their thought clouds and their demeanour in the interviews. Those children (17/20) who took their responsibility as participants very seriously and displayed a sense of pride and pleasure in being asked their opinion

¹ All pupil names in this article have changed to preserve individuals' anonymity.

tended to provide the most detailed drawings and well-considered answers in the thought clouds.

The faces drawn in by the children who had taken the task of expressing their emotions at learning French seriously, give a strong message of enjoyment and closely match the data obtained through the thought clouds. Out of 20 faces, 16 contained smiles which ranged from modest little smiles to enormous smiles. One child who enjoyed French had drawn a straight line for a mouth and a moustache to reflect what he would look like when he was grown-up. There was no smile but there were expressions of enjoyment in the thought clouds.

For the analysis of the thought clouds I divided the statements (119), into seven categories. My aim was to separate those elements of the French classes which added value because of experiences unrelated to learning a language from those elements which were specifically related to learning a modern language. Table 1 provides an overview of the categories and a sample of answers for each one.

Table 1: Overview of categories and sample answers

France and French Culture	It's my favourite country.	I like the Eiffel Tower.	I like the things you learn about France.	France is a good place.	I like the whole culture of it.
Practical considerations	It is good because you could go to another country and ask for things.	Useful for if you go to France.	A language you can speak in lots of places.	It made me more confident at mainstream school.	It is very good to have another language.
A challenge	It is fun but it is sometimes hard.	I like getting my tongue around the French words.	It can be hard learning a different language.	I like a hard challenge.	Learning the language because I've never done it before.
Aspirations	I would like to travel the world.	I would like to go to France.	I would like to learn more French.	I would like to learn more languages.	I would like to learn more numbers.
Liking the teacher / classroom ethos	I like the French teacher.	I like working as a class in French.	I liked getting the class certificate.	You don't get into trouble when you get it wrong.	It is easier because we talk about it. We don't just do it in the books.
Enjoyment of related activities	Fun with the activities we do	Games.	Playing French boules.	Art /Acting / Copying out French stories.	Toy animals.
Enjoyment of learning a different language	My favourite language.	I want to learn French words/writing/ Different words.	I like enjoying myself in French. Learning French makes me happy.	I like /enjoy French/learning French/being able to talk French.	I like learning a different language.

Discussion of Findings

In answer to my research question: 'In what ways does learning a modern language add value to the education of children with SEBD?' we see many of the children keen to rise to a challenge and expressing raised aspirations. The pupils show an awareness of the practical benefits of being able to speak a modern language and of the bridge it can

provide to mainstream schooling. The children express an awareness of a wider world where people live differently and think differently. It is widening their horizons to extend beyond a small residential school to a country where they have never been but which they can try to imagine. The above findings echo observations at SEBD schools in Sunderland (Marsh, 2005: 77) and Kent (Marsh, 2005: 21) where the teaching of French produced overwhelmingly positive effects including:

- Boost to Self-Esteem
- Raised Aspirations
- Enjoyment
- New Experiences
- Success spilling into other Curricular Areas
- Re-integration into Mainstream Schools

Portal House School in Kent also found a strong link between learning a modern language and a positive effect on pupils' social skills and sensitivity to others. These are all important elements which add value to the education of children with SEBD.

Arguably then, learning a modern language demonstrably provides children with SEBD with the same benefits as those experienced by children in mainstream education. These benefits are well-documented: linguistic skills, cognitive abilities, cultural awareness, political awareness and career opportunities as well as building self-confidence and self-esteem. (Marsh, 2005; McColl, 2002; Buckley, 1976)

There are, however, a number of ways in which learning a modern language appears to provide even greater benefits for children with SEBD than those in mainstream education. The children interviewed showed a real awareness that the vast majority of their peers in mainstream education are learning a modern language. Not providing children with SEBD with access to modern language learning appears to return them to a time when it was assumed that those with Additional Support Needs (ASN) could not do what 'normal' children did (Head, 2007). If, by teaching children with SEBD a modern language it is possible to assure them that they are not 'cut off' but receiving the same opportunities as their peers, it will enable them to develop a more positive self-image. The data from this small, limited study suggest that learning French has had a positive impact on the children's views of themselves as successful learners and confident individuals. (See also Lumsden, 2009).

Through the literature and through the data obtained in this study we also find that learning a modern language can play a role in facilitating integration or re-integration into mainstream education. Two of the boys interviewed (still residential but in mainstream education) found that learning French at their special school had made them more confident about fitting in at their mainstream school. If one of the government's aims is to educate as many children as possible in mainstream schools, this is an important consideration to bear in mind.

Concluding Remarks

If what children with SEBD need is a widening of horizons (Maxwell, 2010), a boost to their self-esteem (Marsh, 2005; McColl et al., 2002), a sense of enjoyment in learning (*ibid*) and an inclusive education (Riddell, 2009), giving them the opportunity to learn a modern language seems to be a positive way forward and a way of ensuring that this already marginalised group of learners does not become completely disconnected from the curriculum provided in mainstream schools and from society in general.

Based on the existing literature and the data collected, I feel confirmed in my belief that, although enjoyment of learning and an increase in self-esteem can significantly improve the educational experience of children with SEBD, the issues of social justice and inclusion are also at stake. I would also argue that the benefits of learning a modern language may well be even greater for children with SEBD than children in mainstream education.

Hunter-Carsch et al. (2006) point to a number of challenges in listening to young people, which include being prepared to be surprised and to undertake action on the basis of what we hear. The children at this school have said that they want to learn more French, go to France and travel the world. They have provided powerful reasons why they should learn French but they need people to listen and to act on their behalf. They should not be marginalised or ignored but be given the opportunities that all Scotland's young people deserve.

The school stopped the modern languages programme at the end of 2012 because of insufficient funding. With the positive reactions received from the children themselves it feels like a real loss that the school is no longer able to provide French classes for its pupils, especially in light of the Scottish Government's recent announcement of its 1+2 languages policy (Scottish Government, 2012).

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Appendix A: Thought Clouds

