



Helping children to think for themselves

BEECH HILL COUNTY PRIMARY SCHOOL, LANCASHIRE

One of our school's problems used to be the poor motivation of some pupils to make progress. We saw the promotion of critical thinking as an excellent starting point both for getting education for sustainable development (ESD) to permeate the whole curriculum and for tackling poor motivation in general. When we encourage children to ask questions like "Why?", we can begin to give them more ownership of their own learning. We think this is now starting to come through our school in a number of ways. We are also trying to promote critical thinking in subject lessons across several curriculum areas, and you will find a selection of suggestions for tackling this in the case study that follows. However, the main focus of the case study is the Listening Council, which has proved a stimulating mechanism for helping children to listen, question, express and justify an opinion and, finally, to suggest solutions and move to independent action.

What is the Listening Council?

The Listening Council is basically an 'assembly' or meeting – there is one for all the Year 5 and 6 children (9 – 11 year olds) and one for all the Year 3 and 4 children (7 – 9 year olds). There are about 130 pupils in each assembly. The Listening Councils last 15 minutes and take place at 9:10am, every Thursday for the upper juniors, and alternate Fridays for the lower juniors. We meet in the hall in a large circle, with the older year groups on benches and chairs at the back and the younger on the floor in the middle. This is to make it more comfortable than normal assembly.

How does it work?

Any child is free to speak on any subject – but only if they are holding the 'magic microphone'. Each speaker chooses who to pass the magic microphone on to. For their magic microphone, the lower juniors use a clear cube paperweight with a miniature globe inside it that a previous pupil brought back from holiday. The upper juniors use a long wooden staff found on a school visit to the Lake District. Of course, the magic is not really in the microphone – it's in the listening! The underlying principle of the listening council is that children don't just sit quietly – they listen actively to whichever individual is holding the 'magic microphone'. As well as children listening to each other, the teachers show that they are listening to pupils' concerns by attending or just reading the minutes they keep. Because everyone can speak, rather than just elected representatives, it's a bit like a mass-meeting version of 'circle-time.' Anyone in the whole Council can contribute.

What's it all about?

The Listening Council is part of the 'Values and Visions' of our school. By giving children the chance to be listened to, we are trying to promote space, time and quiet so that each person can have his/her moment. We try to encourage the other children not even to put their hands up while someone is speaking. This is to give the message that they are listening and not just thinking of what they want to say next. The Listening Council is central to our promotion of children's critical thinking, but there are a whole host of other benefits that spill over into the classroom.