Action Research

Children's and young people's perceptions of their local area and their setting.

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What are children's perceptions of their local area and their setting?

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Aim: This Action Research paper is aimed at identifying children's and young people's perceptions of their local area and their setting. I wanted to find out if the children and young people felt safe in their local area and at the school they attend, and their views of what they thought may possibly be put in place to make them feel safer.

I have chosen this action research topic because I wanted to find out what children and young people's views were about their local area. I also wanted to give children and young people the opportunity to use their agency, and to identify any changes which might improve their safety in their local area and in the standards of their school meeting their needs.

Previous research of good practice has looked at how best children are to be encouraged to participate and have a voice regarding decision making, which will affect them. All children have the right to have a voice, to participate and to receive feedback on decisions which affect them (Lansdowne, G. 2001). Rights can be categorised as Civil, political, economic and cultural and. Liberty (right to freedom of expression and thought).

History of Children's rights:

In 1989 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was established. The UNCRC is built upon the three hard P's; Provision, Protection and Participation, these should be utilised, not only in the policy, but in all communication and interaction between adults and children. For these reasons participation should be promoted in schools. Children and young people should also be protected from harm. By doing this Action Research, I hope to put in place strategies to allow the children and young people to feel safer within their community and to improve the standards of their school.

Background information:

The Secondary Technical College is set in a part of London which is currently popular with young professionals and artists due to its proximity to the centre of town and low property prices.

The academy has a strong ethos through their current understanding support and knowledge of student's circumstances; students are suported to be confident young people. They are also encouraged and supported to follow a healthy lifestyle. The school promotes equality and diversity and is committed to valuing individual's cultural and religious diversity (OFSTED).

Why Action Research?

Action research is the process in which to investigate any social situation; during the planning process it identifies any problems or an issue. Once a problem or issue has been identified, an action plan is implemented to try and find a solution. The next step would be to monitor the problem or issue identified during the planning process. Once I have finished monitoring the problem or issue I will analyse and reflect on the data collected.
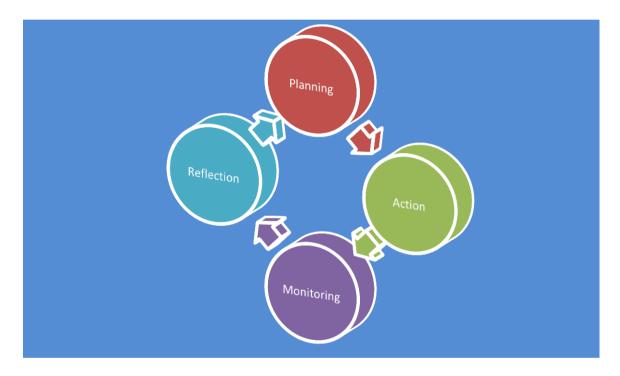
During the planning process I identified issues within the school, which happened to be regular topics of discussion. I felt that this Action Research was a good starting point, to hear the views and opinions on how the teachers felt they could help the children and young people feel safer in the community and their setting, as well as receiving feedbacks about the types of questions which would get a better detailed explanation from the children and young people.

Monitor: During the monitoring stage of the cycle, I held discussions with my work colleagues to finalise the questions that would be most appropriate to ask the children and young people. This gave me the opportunity to develop my research questions.

Action: This stage in the research cycle involved me holding focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with the children and young people as well as wider reading on previous research conducted, in the related area for example, participation of children and young people.

Reflection: I reflected on the planning, monitoring and action stage of the research cycle and drew a conclusion of recommendation of how to involve children and young people in participation and develop strategies to ensure that they felt safe in their school setting and local community.

The Research Cycle

Research methodologies

Quantitative data or Qualitative data:

Quantitative data collection looks at the amount of findings undertaken. Quantitative data can be analysed by using computer software packages, for example the software package will produce graphs and pie charts to display statistics or findings.

Qualitative research is data collated by using interviews, questionnaires and discussions to show in-depth detail of issues. This method of research is analysed using the data collected through recurring key words.

I have chosen the qualitative data collection method, as I felt that it was the most suitable method for collecting this type of data, I wanted to have the children and young people's views about their local area and their setting. I felt that it was important that the young people felt able to put forward their views, ideas, and recommendations regarding any changes which might affect them, directly or indirectly, and if or how the school as a community, would benefit from the proposed changes .

For this research paper, I will be using the qualitative research method; semi structured interviews with children from the school, as this will allow the children to speak more freely and openly when sharing their views and ideas. Using the qualitative data collection would allow me to have detailed explanation of children's views to analyse.

Advantages and disadvantages:

Qualitative data: Advantages of this type of data collection is that it gives researcher an in-depth opinion from participants. The disadvantages of this type of data collection is that participants attitudes, behaviour and experiences may take you away from your focus research aim and objectives; few people take part in this type of action research.

The Quantitative data collection method generates statistics through large scale research surveys, for example through questioning, structured or unstructured

format, which enables the data to be easily summarised, analysed and recorded generally via the use of tick charts and questionnaires.
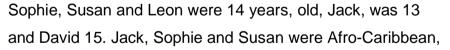
Ethical considerations:

Before beginning the interview, permission was obtained from the class teacher. I explained that the interview was part of my Action Research paper, and that all names would be omitted. My research was in line with Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002).

Children who took part:

I decided to ask the views of children in the setting for this action research. The reason I have sought their comments is because they are active participants who are on the school council, so I felt that they would be informative about how children felt about their school community and where they live (promoting health and well-being).

The discussion took place in the outside eating area of the canteen. There were three boys and two girls took part in the discussion, they were of similar ages. For ethical reasons I have changed all names.

Sophie, Susan and Leon were 14 years, old, Jack, was 13 and David 15. Jack, Sophie and Susan were Afro-Caribbean, David, Spanish and Leon mixed race: English mother and Chinese father.

Children's and young people's perceptions of their local area and their setting

Discussion summary sheets of questions asked:

Q1: What do you think and feel about your local area in which you live?

1. Convicted felon on the loose in the area, so I do not feel safe.
2. Sometimes I feel safe, sometimes I do not feel safe.
3. The teachers were supportive when I had a family crisis.

Q2: What do you think and feel about your local area?

1. There are a lot of things always happening with teachers to support us:
   - Centres with trained staff where we can go if we have a problems
   - Parenting classes for parents and their children and teenagers
2. Points system which acknowledges their achievements by giving monetary vouchers.

Q3: What makes you be well, stay well and feel well while at the setting?

1. Being with people who you know and that you can trust
2. Many clubs to join and a lot of sport activities for example football, trampoline, netball, badminton and physical exercise is include in the curriculum in years 10 and 11
3. Children who bring pack lunch to school can eat in the canteen with the children who have school meals.
4. Cashless paying system operates in the canteen which operates using an Oyster card (for free school meals), thumb print or student code which can be toped up daily.

Q4: Are there any changes you would suggest that could be made to your school to make it a better place?

1. To put more CCTV cameras around the school
2. Not to stereotype the area as it gives the area a bad name and makes people feel uncomfortable to visit as well as encouraging bad behaviour.
3. Stricter discipline because some children think they can do things and get away with it.

4. Snack and lunch time menu should be revised because there is not enough provision for vegetarians.

Summary of key points made by children (participants)

The focus group discussion allowed me to focus on a particular issue, and the respondents to talk about what was significant to them, for this reason some respondents chose not to talk about matters that they felt was not of a concern to them; just as the focus group discussion allowed them to talk about other matters closely linked to the research topic. The semi-structured interview approach allowed me to easily record my results, and analyse my findings sufficiently and effectively.

Positives:

Sophie and Susan both agreed that they felt safe at school. They liked the fact that they had the opportunity to talk to their head of year if they had a problem and that the school has a counsellor who they could talk to in confidence if they did not want to talk to a member of their school staff. Sophie said that the transition from primary to secondary school was positive. They attended secondary school for a day before starting in September so they had a chance to meet friends and also make new friends when the autumn term began.

Jack said he liked the community spirit as it includes everyone. The borough regularly puts on events for children and their families in the local park. He felt this was a great opportunity for those families who are not able to go away on holidays during the summer term, and it also gives him a chance to meet up with his friends from his former school.

Negatives:

Jack felt they would benefit from more physical activities during school time. He said they had one hour of P.E per week, which was split over two days; the majority of the time was taken up with changing into and out of their P.E. kit

David had concerns regarding going home after extra-curricular activities. Recently there have been reports of a lady approaching the children on their way home from school. One girl had her arms gripped and squeezed when she did not hand over her mobile phone. Another incident mentioned by Leon, involved boys who hung around the local estate in hoodies, which makes him feel intimidated.

Leon said he did not like having school lunch. He said that they did not have many choices of salads for vegetarian children who did not have school lunch and that he often had to spend his own money to supplement his lunch on his way to school. David agreed with him about the lunchtime menu and also suggested that the teachers who supervised should monitor the amount of food the children ate. Sophie, a vegetarian said she had been forced to have only bread and butter for her lunch, on three occasions, so she asked her parents for extra money. David said that the girls are worse than the boys because most of them only had a snack bar and a bottle of water and that they looked 'wasted'. Sophie, made a face at this remark but did not comment, however, she then said that in primary school the lunch time supervisors ensured that all children had a proper lunch and if they felt that a child was not eating properly they would let the parents know.

After conducting this initial research, I felt that I needed to look in to good practice models, which could be implemented to make the school and local community a positive place for children and young people. UNICEF's Rights Respecting Schools is one such model.

UNICEF's Rights respecting School in England:

UNICEF is the only organisation working specifically for children and their rights, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF UK, 2008). In Article 42, of the Convention on the rights of the child, states that all, adults have a duty to promote the rights of the CRC, and that the Rights of the child is of little use if the children are not aware of them, (UNICEF UK, 2008) and that the CRC should be embedded into every school's ethos and in the school's curriculum (UNICEF UK, 2008). The CRC has categorised children's needs into four main groups. These are; to survive as a fit and healthy person, to be protected from harm and abuse, to develop physically, mentally and socially and to participate as an active citizen (UNICEF UK, 2008). The four aspects are set out in UNICEF's School

Action plan. The schools uses this Action plan as a guide to achieving the Rights Respecting School Award (RRSA) (UNICEF UK, 2008). Within schools who aim to achieve a RRSA, children learn the differences between their rights and their wants and that with these rights carries is the responsibility. UNICEF encourages schools who are aiming for the award to work collaboratively, sharing good practices as they progress towards the RRSA (UNICEF UK, 2008) they must also respect the rights of others.

In the constitutional sense, children do not have the right to vote, and are more often than not discriminated against. Children are often seen as being invisible and have no agency, in an adult society.

Research has shown that the RSSA has had a big impact on schools and their communities; with a shared vision of inclusive learning relevant to the RRSA for pupils regardless of their age and abilities, this includes every needs child's individual needs (UNICEF UK, 2008). There have been noticeable changes in the values and principles of the Rights of the Child within these schools, with positive impacts on both teachers and pupils experiences in schools; a positive impact on school leadership teams with the ability to create and share a vision with the whole school community providing focus and a coherent rationale to the many strands of their work (UNICEF UK, 2008). The Ofsted reports of these schools recognised the impact that the RRSA is having on the children's well-being and behaviour (UNICEF UK, 2008). However, there were challenges identified with continuing the rights respecting ways such as educating parents and the wider community on the UNICEF's rights respecting ethos. Moreover, outside of school, children found that when they went home they did not continue the respecting rights as they found it stressful and just wanted to relax. Some children found it difficult to understand the Rights Respecting Schools Award concept at first.

As cited in the UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools in England Briefing Paper 2008:

'It is more difficult to reach children from homes that are less supportive; the ones where the values out of school are not always consistent with the values we have in school.' Assistant Head Teacher.

However, challenging the RRSA, were at first to implement, the end result are worth the challenges.

Practice Standards in Children's Participation: Save the Children (2005).

The Practice Standard in children's Participation Model clearly states the 'what', 'why', and 'how', to meet the standards of good participation with children.

During my research, I also came across The Save the children charity supports children's participation, giving children the opportunity to express their views, be involved in decision making or take action and states that the practice standards should be interpreted within the context of the principles derived from the UN conventions on the Rights of the Child. For example, measures should be in place to facilitate and encourage children and young people to participate according to their age and maturity; and that all children should have equal rights to participation.

These practice standards are a great way to ensure that every child is able to participate in decisions which affect them.

I had chosen this topic of Action Research to find out what children and young people's views were about their local area and their setting. I had chosen a small cohort of 5 children to participate because I wanted to be able to manage my focus group and hear everyone's opinions; my time scale of only having a 6 month period to conduct my research was also a contributing factor. As I had to arrange time and dates to hold discussions that were convenient for participants to take part and to evaluate my findings.

The settings where I work are continually updating the safeguarding policy, which is not an issue or a point of concern; however children and young people must be given more opportunities to mix and to socialise and be able to have their opinions heard so that they will be able to learn from each other. It is important that as a professional I appreciate the differences which exist amongst individual children and listen to their opinions.

Conclusions and recommendations:

In conclusion I think that further consideration should be given to address issues properly concerning children and young people policies need to be correctly

redefined and more accountability from staff is needed. This would ensure that we all listen to children and young people's views. Resources need to be put in place to provide a better platform for the views of children and young people to be heard.

I believe that the school has a duty to put in place strategic measures which is reviewed on a regular basis, as well as promoting children's agency in line with any decisions which are to take place concerning them. I also believe that all teaching staff members should work together to keep the children safe within their local community. For this reason, I will be making the following suggestions based on my findings:

By reviewing the schools safeguarding policy and working with external agencies for example, the police to patrol the perimeters further than the local bus stop. This will give better support to those students who are likely to be more vulnerable to strangers approaching them. Due to the immediate potential dangers to the children, I hope to achieve this in less than a four week period.

The teachers could encourage the children to walk home in pairs especially if they attend extra-curricular activities after school (NHSP). This plan is to be implemented over a six week period to ensure that the all children are aware of safeguarding issues.

A lot of the children take a short cut through the local park, during the winter months. The community warden should therefore petrol the park for longer periods at this time. This plan is to be implemented by Autumn, 2013.

The teachers need to note down any changes in a child's behaviour, self-confidence or any reluctance to do after school activities (Mooney, et. al. 2007). To promote health and well-being it is important that teachers take into account each child's needs (DfES, 2007) with a designated person who is responsible for the safeguarding of all the children, it should ensure that all staff have an up to date understanding of how best to safeguard and protect the children in their care. The teachers will need to monitor children's behaviour and self-confidence and ensure all staff are up to date with their safeguarding training over a twelve week period.

The children I interviewed felt strongly about the lunch time menu. During the lunch time period staff can use this as an opportunity to promote healthy eating, to learn

about a balanced diet and how to make healthy food choices (DfES, 2005), by joining the children at mealtimes. For example, eating and drinking with the children during the snack and lunch time (Mooney et al, 2007). The teachers on snack and lunchtime duties can also note down any changes in a child's behaviour, self-confidence or a reluctance to eat school meals (Mooney et al, 2007). Monitoring of children's attitude during lunchtime over a twelve week period will allow adjustment to be made for the following term.

By doing this action research, I have learnt a lot about the different terminologies used and the different types of research methods. When I research a topic in the future, I feel I am much better equipped to do so after studying with MKLC. As a practitioner it is imperative that I continually reflect on my professional practices in order to best develop my own learning. By reflecting on my practices as Schon (1983) suggests, I am able to critically reflect on my professional development, and have an awareness of the impact of my performances, as well as identifying opportunities for professional development. Schon (1983) describes the process of reflection as the knowledge in the principle of professional experiences I would use action research to help me develop and improve my practices.

I would like to further develop my research skills and will undertake CPD training to keep me up to date with current methods and skills.

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