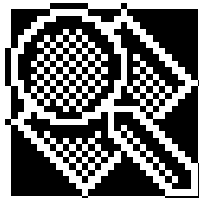


Action on Ethos

This case study outlines how The Mary Erskine & Stewart's Melville Junior School initiated a structured programme of listening to children in order to find out more about what young boys and girls value in themselves, their school and their friends. The work took the form of a 3 year research programme which involved the construction, trialling and full implementation of a detailed questionnaire issued to all children in Primary 4 and Primary 6, followed by statistical analysis and interpretation of the results. All members of the Junior School staff are convinced that it is only by listening to children that we can truly understand what they think about the environment in which they spend so much of their lives. It is the aim of the school to use this information to ensure that children derive the maximum benefit from their time in our school, both academically and socially.



For any information, please contact:
Gina Reddie, Administrator
Scottish Schools Ethos Network
Moray House Institute of Education
The University of Edinburgh
Cramond Road North
Edinburgh
EH4 6JD
Tel: 0131 312 8771



The Mary Erskine & Stewart's Melville Junior School

Queensferry Road
Edinburgh EH4 3EZ
Tel: 0131 332 0888
Contact: Mr Bryan Lewis, Headmaster

1 Background

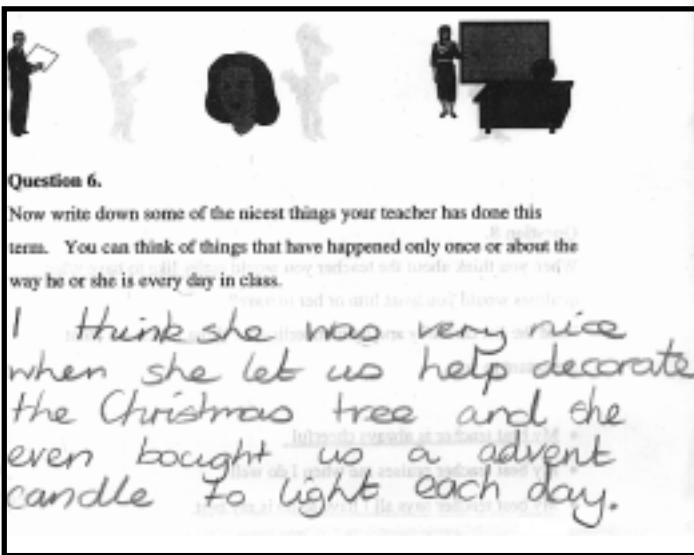
The Mary Erskine & Stewart's Melville Junior School is a very large independent Junior School in Edinburgh. It is part of a unique system of education in Scotland whereby a fully co-educational Junior School leads on to two single-sex but closely-twinning Senior Schools, a system which provides in our view the best of all possible worlds. Much work has taken place in recent years to ensure that all members of our staff follow the same consistent policy in their relationships with children. We believe that our girls and boys deserve and want to spend their days in a structured and orderly environment in which they can feel valued as individuals. We also want to help them to understand that they live in a community in which rights are very clearly balanced by responsibilities. The atmosphere in the Junior School is positive and supportive at all times. We accept that it is important to have high but realistic expectations of each of our children. We know that children respond positively to high expectations and as a result are more likely to become confident boys and girls who will be able to exceed the expectations which they set for themselves and which we have for them.

Our school's Prospectus, which is reflected on walls throughout the school, makes it clear that every child has a right to be happy but also states explicitly that the right to be happy is balanced by duty to ensure that every other child has the same right. This philosophy is one that has been actively and positively developed over a number of years. It arises from the fact that the Headmaster and his colleagues believe that happy and confident children who relate positively to their friends and to the adults with whom they spend their day are much more likely to benefit from all the opportunities and challenges which are provided for them. We wanted to see whether our beliefs were borne out by a detailed analysis of children's responses.

We believed that all members of staff shared the same ethos and accepted the importance of having a shared sense of values across the school which would help to ensure that children felt safe and confident, but we wanted to be certain that this was in fact the case before embarking on our research. We had already devised a questionnaire, completed by all members of staff, which was designed to allow us to collect information about the extent to which work on school ethos had impacted on the school environment.

2 General Aims

The general aim of our research was to obtain specific answers from children to a series of questions about themselves as individual children, as members of the school community and as learners. We wanted to know what they liked and disliked about



understanding from experience of what they mean by respect, tolerance, responsibility and self-esteem. They and their teachers live in the real world and spend their days in real classrooms. This is not to say that our belief in the importance of taking children's views seriously denies the vital role played by adults. Children's views are not always correct and teachers have an absolute duty to pass on knowledge and experience to the boys and girls with whom they are in daily contact. Teachers need to use their experience to balance open discussion on values in the classroom with an insistence on the positive value of hard work. Our research does, however, certainly suggest various issues which we would like to investigate further. For instance children in both Primary 4 and Primary 6 believe their teachers like them for their academic ability more than their personal qualities and attributes. Our teachers all believe in the importance of the 'whole child' but children appear not to recognise this as much as we might have expected.

It is clear from the responses that children place the highest value on social attributes. Boys and girls do not, however, value the same attributes, boys frequently talking about the importance of sporting ability as a central feature of self-esteem in a way that girls seldom did. Primary 4 children appear to acquire self-esteem through activities and hobbies much more often than children in Primary 6 who referred more often to personal attributes. We had been concerned that children's responses might indicate that they believed getting their work right was the most important consideration for a teacher but we were reassured to find that in fact children are happier in themselves, and believe their teacher to be happier, when they work as hard as they can. Our school's philosophy is that we are content as long as each child has appropriately high expectations and works hard to fulfil them.

It was very interesting to gather evidence about children's views in the classroom as many made telling comments about the environment in which they are most likely to fulfil their academic and personal potential. These responses included comments about how tables were arranged, the wall displays and the relative importance given to displaying their own work.

The evidence from our questionnaire reflects closely the views of many researchers that children enjoy working in an environment in which they feel valued, are encouraged to work hard and set themselves high standards. Our results show that children who feel valued by their teachers are much more likely to enjoy their work and it is this link which we would like to explore further to see if the extra academic progress made can be measured.

6 Follow Up Action

As a result of the responses to the initial questionnaire we are now looking carefully at the wording of all our school policies with regard to children's values. Our expectations have become much more explicit - for example we no longer simply say that children should be polite but rather specify ways in which children can act politely e.g. by saying 'please' or 'thank you', by holding doors open for adults and children and so on. We now intend to begin a series of Inset presentations which will reflect the children's responses so that teachers can all be aware of the views of the boys and girls for whom they are responsible.

7 Evaluation

The results of the questionnaire proved to be very interesting. In many ways the answers confirmed what we knew already but they did so in a way which made it more obvious than ever to us that children as young as seven have very clear views about the school, their teachers and their friends. They understand the importance of hard work, they realise that their teachers work very hard to create an ideal environment for them and they clearly respect all the effort that goes in to their education. This clarity of thought and the greater understanding which their responses have given us will undoubtedly influence the school's development in the years ahead.

Ref: Newspaperart'ssen

Question 3
We hope that you look forward to coming to school each day and we would like to know which of the following statements are most likely to make you feel happy when you are in school. Read the list carefully and then underline the 3, 4 or 5 statements which matter most to you.

- I get my work right
- I help someone else
- I go to a club after school
- My teacher spends time with me
- I get a chance to play sport
- My teacher praises me
- I write a good story
- I play with my friends
- I work on a computer
- I am given responsibility by my teacher
- I am asked to take part in a game
- I work as hard as I can
- I do art and craft
- I make a new friend
- Somebody else helps me
- I answer a question in class

Now look at the statements you have underlined and draw a circle round the one which is the most important of all.