

Abstract

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There is an abundance of research on teachers and teaching styles and many policy statements about the curriculum. Research on the effect of all this is relatively poor. This paper gives a voice to the experience of pupils towards the end of their schooling, including those who will be, in academic terms, successful, and those who will not. The semi-structured interviews give surprising, if complex results. There are multiple tensions between the ideas of individual achievement, which can be tested and collaborative work, which is deemed more useful. Whilst pupils realise that group work means distraction, they long for the chance to sound out ideas, which working with fellow pupils gives them the opportunity. At the heart of these consistent accounts lies the shadow, not only of an imposed curriculum but imposed and disenfranchising learning style. The waste of talent appears to be massive.

The Happiest Days of Their Lives? Pupils and their Learning Styles

The research on teacher's styles of teaching is abundant. The school effectiveness industry constantly attempts to discover and disseminate those precise actions, which will have the most immediate impact on pupils. At one level, this managerial approach to successful teaching can be quite crude, with methods defined as 'formal' contrasting with the 'informal' whole class teaching or group work juxtaposed against each other as if teachers were mechanics plying a trade. Whether in the imposition of the instructions on 'literacy hours' or in the formulation of the 'Three Wise Men' (Alexander, Woodhead and Rose, 1992) there are many assumptions made about teaching based on the belief that, essentially what is taught is what is learned.

Even in the rather less sophisticated attempts to isolate the principles of good teaching practice (Bennett 1976, Turner-Bissett 2001) it is clear that in such complex circumstances, to isolate, generalise and isolated action is difficult, if not impossible. So many things are happening in so many ways to so many people in one classroom that even a minute could be analysed in a thousand different ways (Doyle 1977 and Bourdrien 1990). At the same time, it is clear that some teachers are more successful than others and that recognising their prowess through observation is not a difficult task. If this is so then why cannot good practice be disseminated and emulated? We can see why the formulation of a set of actions, like rules, has become a Holy Grail of educational research.

The reason why such simple formulae cannot be so easily operationalised is obvious. The character of the individual teacher, the knowledge and personality, cannot be reduced to a series of labels. The past histories, the motivation and attitudes of each individual pupil cannot be disseminated as mere tabula rasa. Above all it is those who are most capable of having insight into what makes a 'good', successful teacher, who are less happy with single formulae. The irony is that the more the observer realises how complex is the phenomena of good teaching, the clearer he or she is about it when it is made manifest, and the less happy he or she is with simple competencies.

And yet, there have been some more sophisticated attempts to describe different teachers in operation, showing some of the parameters of behaviour that makes for success or failure. The work of Bennett et al (1990) and the Oracle Project (1980 - 1996) (see Galton et al. 1999), gave many interesting, if depressing insights into the relationships between teacher

behaviour and approaches and their pupils, typically at primary level where the research has been far more extensive than secondary. They were of course, concerned with actions rather than personalities, but what made their approach more sophisticated is that they had to take into account the behaviours of pupils as well as teachers. This was not just developed in terms of measurable outcomes but in the ways in which pupils interacted with each other, the 'time on task' they displayed and the ways in which they appeared to absorb knowledge. Certain styles of approach have definite impacts. Even if what occurs inside the minds of individuals is something else again, these approaches to understanding teaching show, if nothing else, the inappropriateness of crude distinctions like 'formal' and 'informal', as if fierce discipline, rows of pupils and lengthy lectures were one approach, and friendly, individual relationships and chaos were the other.

There are clear practices, which are successful, even if the individual personality varies. These are to do with a whole complex of cultural, ecological factors, from the purpose of the lesson to the amount of talk from the quality of the dialogue to matters of time and pace (Alexander 2000). Many of these observations, strengthened by international research and comparisons as in Alexander's work, are also being made constantly by the pupils themselves. If we really wanted to know about what makes some teachers more effective than others, we could not do better than listen to what the pupils say. The pupils, after all, are being made to respond in a variety of ways to different teachers with their varying demands. Pupils know when a teacher means what she says, however informal it sounds, and understand the expected norms of responsibility, whatever the layout of the classroom.

The Oracle report (Galton et al. 1980) looked at the experiences of pupils in the classroom, the interactions between them and the ways, in which they were organised, working as individuals and as a group. The great challenge is to discover the distinction between these occasions when the pupils are ostensibly learning and when they actually are. It is easy to observe the different friendship patterns amongst groups of children but more difficult to uncover their meaning. It is relatively simple to note the extent to which pupils appear to be working - 'time on task' - but less simple to discover the extent to which they are actually thinking or understanding the work that they are undertaking. The mind is too complex, with so many layers of inattention that even when concentrating intently on one task for even a few minutes, there will be multiple cerebral connections being made, associations, images and self-consciousness. 'Day dreams' can be deliberate or inadvertent but these are a powerful layer of the mind, which seeks connections and places new understanding on the context of the old. 'On task' is therefore only the starting point for research.

The normal conditions of the classroom is supposed to be a quiet working atmosphere in which all pupils are strenuously working at their individual tasks. This condition is always one that can be challenged by 'messing about', sometimes in a spectacular, sometimes in a subtle way. The real challenge to work lies at a deeper level. Whilst pupils might look as if they are applying themselves to the task demanded of them. This does not mean that they are actually doing so. The demands that classrooms make in terms of long periods of concentration are difficult to meet. The desire to discuss, to share ideas is always there. It is at the individual level that some pupils turn away from the demands of the task, by simply not concentrating or by doing the minimum. Some know just how little they can get away with (Pye 1989). Others are estranged from any demand, are psychologically excluded (Cullingford 1999). All pupils understand the realities of working on a task, the ebb and flow of concentration, the distraction of acquiring the right pencil and paper, or the superimposed voice of the teacher, and the dialogues with others.

Pupils will talk to each other and the great question for teachers is the extent to which they can use this fact to their advantage. The study of classroom interactions is only partly that of

the interactions between the teachers and the rest, but the relationship between pupils (Galton and Williamson 1995).

The experience of schooling includes the ways in which large groups are herded around, and how small groups are made to act on work together. Many of the groups, like those dependent on friendship are private and personal, but many others are part of the repertoire of teaching, with pupils made to work with each other according to judgements made about their ability or the convenience of the teacher.

There is a great deal of work that has been carried out about group work, even if it is more concerned with the social rather than the cognitive aspects. The crucial point about group work is the distinction between the convenience of having a number of children working on the same task, individually, and co-operative learning. What is so often described as 'group work' is not really that but no more than collections of children who happen to be sitting together when doing their own work (Bennett and Dunne 1991). The question of whether they work individually or co-operatively is, like that of 'open' or 'closed' questions, at the heart of pupils' academic experience. These two types of work go together but the real dilemma for pupils is the extent to which they need to guess what is wanted, to fulfil the demands of the curriculum and the extent to which they can think for themselves, and, more realistically, find out for themselves..

Pupils are always aware of abilities, and whatever the teacher says, they know about ability groups (King 1989). They hold themselves back if they threaten to outpace their peers. They judge their pace carefully. They also know that they can learn a lot from each other, but this causes difficulties as well as pleasures. There can be distractions or competitions. There can be jealous or rivalries. The possibility of co-operation does, however, afford a glimpse into the pleasures of learning (Ghaye 1986). This is because the real secret of learning is its independence, not from everyone else, but from the demands of assessment. Independent learning is not the same as individual learning. Independence means the ownership of learning. It is not carried out only at the behest of the teacher or the demands of the curriculum. It is that sense of personal worth and achievement, which derives from learning something for themselves. If the definition of a teaching style as a competence which has an immediate and measurable effect on pupils' achievements is the 'holy grail' of official educational research, so the sense of personal learning - just the opposite - is the goal for pupils.

Studies of pupils' group work tend to conclude that the more onus that is placed on the pupils to learn from each other, and to find alternative sources of information, the more successful they are (Bennett 1991). The problem with this is the fact that it goes against the prevailing notion of the all-powerful class teachers delivering the set tasks (Cullingford and Oliver 2001). As Bennett pointed out, making pupils learn by themselves has two effects: the pupils learns more but the teachers feel guilty. It is not an easy task to say to a pupil 'go away and find out for yourself' - the sense of discomfort is symbolised by the fact that such a technique is described in vulgar terms (B.O.F.O). The sense of unease that pupils learn despite the teacher is deep.

The possibilities of using pupils as a source of knowledge and a means of enquiry are infinite, but very rarely used, especially in the current educational climate. To use groups successfully takes some psychological courage. It is more subtle to arrange since it is a matter of enabling pupils to become each other's teachers as well as learners (Slavin 1983). There are small distinctions between successful and unsuccessful groups; one 'brighter' pupil with two 'slower' pupils works better than the alternative balance (Bennett & Cass 1989). The faster learners will always do well, unless they are undermined by competing with each other. One of the additional attractions for group work for pupils is that it allows

greater possibilities of practical work, of actually carrying out a task as well as collaboration (Galton and Williamson 1992).

The social ambience of the school in all its volatility spills over into the classroom. In the classroom it appears to be more subdued, but the personal tensions, the interactions, comparisons and rivalries continue. After all, each pupil, like each school in a league table, is in competition. This gives the idea of collaboration a particular edge. As we will see many pupils know that their preferred style of learning runs counter to the ethos and the expectations of school. However they are organised, into groups and classes, they are there to work for themselves; the message "you are on your own" reverberates in their minds. In this complexity of demands, what do the pupils themselves think?

The Research: Methodology

The essential technique of the research can be briefly described but it is important to acknowledge the context in which the interviews took place. The original theme of the research was to explore the transition between school and employability, between the experience of school and subsequent careers. The tone was positive to the extent of finding out who had influenced them, what they had most usefully learned and what were those skills that they most valued. It is important in semi-structured interviews to have some kind of placebo - or at least no clear indications in the opening questions of what would be of particular interest to the researcher. Once the interviewee guesses what gains the greatest response he or she will try to fit into that, will try to please. It is equally important during the interviews not to give leading questions, and not to provide clues or definitions.

The literature on semi-structured interviews is extensive, and the ground rule simple to describe if far the more sophisticated to put into practice. The importance of the interviewees not being aware of what information is being sought and why cannot be over-emphasised, but raises the question of informed consent which is an issue which is often misunderstood. All we need stress here is the importance of confidentiality, anonymity and the respect for the views of the informants. Pupils need to want to talk, are even relieved at last to have a chance to do so. They need to have an appreciative if neutral interviewer who respects what they say. It is the duty of the researcher to make sure that all pupils have a chance to cover the same topics - for the sake of validity and reliability - and to make sure that all answers are appropriately probed for reasons or extensions, and to ascertain that there are no contradictions.

Given the right conditions there are no reasons to doubt the honesty of what the pupils were saying. It would be a far-fetched conspiracy to suppose that they could create such consistency. There were 195 lengthy interviews in all from pupils equally divided in terms of Years 10 and 11 (15 and 16 year olds for the most part) and in terms of gender. The pupils represented five different socio-economic areas according to the standard DfEE definitions, from the privileged to the deprived, and include a higher than representative number of minority ethnic groups. There were no significant differences according to any of these variables.

The fact that the same negative views were presented by those whose expectations were of a university career (one who even aspired to be a professor) and those who felt they had no particular prospects, is significant, and was surprising. The analysis of the transcripts is a very important and lengthy process, and as delicate as the conduct of the interviews themselves. It is important, as in good anthropological research, not to impose a pre-set theory, but let the insights emerge from the empirical evidence. The transcripts were analysed several times as the true nature of the findings emerged. Looking at first for attitudes to industry or employment, the actual experience of school, in its profound effect on

the thinking of pupils, were slowly and painfully made apparent. The neutral analyst should allow himself to be surprised, and to keep challenging his own assumptions. Every transcript was meticulously recorded for consistencies, or for variations, so that any conclusion that was general could be trustworthy.

The Findings and Discussion

The pupils were asked about their favourite, or their most preferred style of learning. They were not asked to define their least liked ways of learning, since that is well documented and comes across clearly; the whole class lecture, the demands of the teacher, the imposition of tests and the constant stream of closed questions followed by lengthy writing. The boredom of school comes across very clearly, the sense of carrying out meaningless tasks for the sake of keeping them busy. The positive nature of this question is emphasised because the pupils' answers show a subtlety of understanding that reveals their insight into the nature of schools. In the tensions they reveal between individual and group learning they delineate that the question is really about the purpose of learning; what - learning is for "it all depends". They might prefer to do certain things but they know that they are expected to do whatever the teacher makes them do, whether they like it or not. They realise that the demands of school and the concomitant exams is not so much to fit them for the future as to fit them to the system. They are in competition, and they need to 'get through' the tasks. They must learn certain subjects and they will acquire particular skills. To this extent they have little choice. They might long for closer personal relationships with teachers out of 'role' but the functioning of school makes that very difficult if not impossible. On the one hand they like co-operative learning. On the other they realise that they are being judged in competition. Whatever might be useful in their futures, the school system demands something different.

Group work can be enjoyable. At one level, it is pupils' preferred learning style. It does, however, carry with it certain temptations that they point out. Any escape from the anonymous monotony of the whole class can be welcomed, but as they point out, this can be for a variety of reasons.

"I like doing equipment and I like working in a group as well...you feel as though you're doing more...all the work or maybe copying off a friend, something like that...sometimes I prefer playing around" (F.10)

'Doing equipment', carrying out a task without the close attention of the teacher, is always popular. It is practical and carries with it a sense of independence. Group work can be very productive, but it can also entail taking short cuts, and this extreme of escape is to 'play around'.

'It all depends'. Pupils are aware of their limitations and the need to adapt to the circumstances.

"Well, it depends. If I were in a group with friends, that's OK, but if it's like some other people that are not right then I don't like it but its OK in a group. I do, but by myself I will but I'll only have my own ideas but I want someone else to give me ideas. I can work hard but I can't. Well, I can concentrate but when I feel I like to work then I work...it depends on the subject 'though. Like in games and all that stuff you have to be challenged and like with mostly like in my group they all get good marks, results and I'm quite in the middle but I'm not happy with the teacher" (F.10)

Group work means either working with friends, or working with fellow pupils in the sense of comparative abilities. Being 'in the middle' can be a judgement on academic prowess but it is also applicable to friendships. The question is the extent to which she feels 'challenged' and the extent to which she can 'concentrate'. As in the distinction between the arrangements of pupils into small collective round tables and the prerogative of getting them to work together properly the real question is the extent to which pupils feel they are being aided in bringing out their best. They long for challenges and concentration and know that some group work aids that, and other experiences actually undermine it.

"I enjoy it when we do like experiments in science and things like that. I like working in groups but like for different subjects because sometimes I think it can pull you back a bit working in groups. In English I think its quite a good thing but in maths like we've done it once or twice where we worked in groups, for that it didn't work at all" (M.10)

It all depends on the nature of the task and the demands being made. Experiments are always appreciated, but some groups work can 'pull you back a bit'.

Working together brings temptations to talk, undermining the purpose of school. Nevertheless, group work is appreciated for all the other learning that it brings with it. It is only when working with other pupils that there appears to be a sense of open questions and answers and of being allowed to express personal opinions.

"In a group, because you can discuss it and because you get different opinions of what you've doing don't you and stuff about when you doing and you learn then, don't you? (M.10)

Discussions and opinions are associated with real learning, with personal engagement. Collaboration is seen to have immediate benefits.

"I like working in a group. You can help others and they can help you and you get more work done and faster" (F.10)

Working with others symbolises the concentration of learning rather than of being taught. It means more creative and open experiences, of discussion and of practical activities.

"I like working in groups and using my hands a lot. Its more interesting when you're working with friends and that" (F.10).

"We usually work in a group, yes, in discussion, because you can hear what everybody else says and that you take that in and you can give your own opinions and thing like that" (M.10).

The forming of opinions and giving consideration to what other people say make for interesting discussions. In a sense that is the real purpose of schooling, of learning to collaborate and to accept differences of opinion, of recognising that there are many different sources of knowledge and that so much depends on a point of view. The myth of a vast monolith of knowledge, which is rigid and immutable, is mitigated by the experience of discussion. Group work is therefore associated with the forming of opinions. It is recognised that the ways in which personal understandings are formed are an individual and a private matter. They are not necessarily the same as all that is tested.

For many pupils, group work is also efficient. If there is something to be done it is much easier to do in collaboration with others. Whilst this goes against the norms of a competitive

examination system, it makes sense to pupils who are, for the rest of their lives, going to work collaboratively. Other people can help. By spreading the information base and distributing tasks, much more can be achieved. There is also a sense of control in this.

"I work good in groups. Sometimes I don't work good on my own. It depends what lesson it is really. There are times when I just think to myself I'm going to work hard for this lesson and I work had but it can't be done all the time"
(M.10).

"I like working in a group, because when you work in a group you don't have to do it all by yourself. If you're working in threes a person can do the other thing and you can get it done quicker" (F.10).

Some pupils depend upon learning from each other, which can be a limitation as well as a strength. They can rely too heavily on others to do the work for them, rather than think it through for themselves. At the same time others can help them overcome the mental block of retreating from the demands put upon them rather than engage with them. Group work can also be pragmatic. Tasks are shared, and the results communicated to each other as well as to the teacher.

"I like working in a group. I can work on my own but if I'm working in a group I feel better, more comfortable. If I'm on my own I'm rushing and trying to get it done by myself but if I'm in a group we can share the work out". (F.10)

Groups are supportive as well as challenging. The comfort zone of discussion and opinion mitigates the relentless concentration on fact. The personal pressure of having to learn something, to respond to the forced delivery of the answers demanded is lightened by sharing the load with fellow pupils.

"When you're by yourself you just trying to work it all out in one go, but if there's loads of you then different people can make different things out".
(M.10)

The comfort factor is also practical. Useful tasks are not just the remembrance of facts but 'working things out'. They can be a matter of opinion (as in English) rather than finding the right answer (as in Maths), but having a sense of collective wisdom and shared endeavour takes some of the pressure off having to 'work things out' individually.

"If I'm working in a group I like to do a little practical work just to get an idea of what we're doing and like everybody gets the feel of it. I also like sitting down and working when there is revision to do or if we've got a test, just to get the things I need to know in mind. And group work I like because it lets other people show their views to you so you can change things for the better".
(M.11)

The contrast between the advantages of group work and the need to work individually is clear. Tests, revision and internalising answers 'in the mind' can only be done by oneself. A stage towards that is sharing views and doing practical activities. It is emblematic that it is through discussing different views, rather than tests, that one can 'change things for the better'.

The pleasure of group work is clear, as are the temptations that go with it.

"No, I'm not the practical type. I like working in a group. I prefer it in a group. In some cases people just use it as a line to talk but whereas me and my friends like, alright got to be true, right, we do talk a little but we always produce the results at the end of it as well" (M.10)

Working in groups can be creative and can also be a distraction from the set tasks. It is a question of the best means of 'producing the results'. If the self-indulgence of talking undermines the application to a particular task then other people, particularly those who 'mess about' can be a fatal distraction. For this reason, and because school is so competitive, the greater academic emphasis is upon the demands of working individually.

Working by oneself is the standard expectation of school, whether organised in classes or groups, the library or at the computer. The collective results, like a play or game, are seen to depend on the prowess of the individual. The ethos of school amongst pupils, if not necessarily amongst teachers, is an individuality at least in most 'western' countries (Bronfenbrenner 1978). This is part of the cult of the individual as the prerogative of success. It might not be taken altogether seriously by children, given their sense of the relative and their ontological modesty and realism, but it is inculcated by the social system of competition and differentiated outcomes.

At one point or another the onus is on the individual.

"By myself. I get a lot more done. If the work's like normal, but if the work is too easy then I'm just not interested and if it's too hard. I'm interested" (M.10).

The personal challenge is important. Self-motivation is difficult to impose, but it is really what school should be fostering that pleasure of satisfying curiosity and the seeking out of knowledge. Working individually can be a reward as well as a means of attaining the highest levels of success.

"She lets us go off by ourselves into the library. There's like a final group of us who are a bit better at Maths and can understand is more so we go to the library and do our own research and stuff like that.

I like working by myself and using my hands. I prefer working by myself because you don't have to think about everyone else and make sure everyone else is doing and coming up to scratch and doing the same amount as you can also so I don't lag behind and slope off everyone else" (F.10).

Collaboration entails doing good, helping others and being responsible for their success. Conversely being able to go off to do 'research' is at once a joint activity, contributing to 'collective knowledge' but also one in which the individual is only concerned with her own needs. This is the condition in which demands for standards can best be met.

What is most prized in terms of learning style is variety. There are bound to be equivocal reactions to an incessant stream of group work or an unalleviated amount of working solidly without interaction with others. Real work, after all, combines all kinds of strategies and is flexible and complex. Working with others can be distracting as easily as it can be supportive.

"Well, um, if I work in a group I used to get distracted and don't used to do any work but if I work on my own I do get work done but I can't concentrate on it and I always have to break off which I think that's going to be a problem when I leave.

I can't really work hard for a long time, like say I have to take breaks every...often I can't get started as well" (M.11).

It could be argued that there are some pupils who will always find it hard to concentrate and to finish work. For those pupils, working with others can be a creative solution. Being able to work steadily on one thing, without distraction, is a rare commodity. Even writers can do it only for so long. The usual condition of work is to lapse into other matters, actions of thoughts, as part of the pattern of work. It is well known that the 'attention span' of those who listen to a lecture is limited, but even that is a somewhat naïve interpretation of 'attention', as if it were a single matter of steady, impervious concentration. The lapses of attention are as much to do with a sense of failure, of disbelief in ones own abilities, and in the association of hard work with humiliation, as with the desire to be distracted. The condition of schooling, including the constant strain of accountability, and of 'naming and shaming', makes the demands of work the more complicated.

Academic work is always a mixture of personal endeavour and collaboration.

"I prefer to work on my own because I find I can make my own decisions and things like that and where I'm not arguing with other people and that, but I do like working in groups in other things like in sport and English and subjects where I'm not too strong. I work in groups and it helps me get along with the subjects better. But another thing like graphics where you have to use tools and things like that I prefer to work on my own because I know what I'm doing best myself" (M.11)

All the equivocation of the tension between individual and group learning is pointed up by the tension between making 'one own decisions' and the support for those subjects where there is a lack of such confidence. Pupils want to be able to work by themselves, to be masters of what they do. When they know what they are doing they prefer to do what they are 'doing best themselves'. It is their uncertainties in some subjects that make them appreciate the advantages of collaboration, as well as the pleasure is exchanging opinion. They learn from each other as well as the teacher.

The styles of working, and the levels of application, depend upon the kinds of demands that are being made. This is not only a matter of response to a teacher or to different subjects but also a sign of the difficulty in keeping up the intensity of close cerebral energy all the time. Learning styles will vary not just between pupils but within them. They adapt to the particular needs of the moment.

"I work good in groups. Sometimes I don't work good on my own, it depends what lesson it is really. There are times when I just think to myself I'm going to work hard for this lesson and I work hard, but it can't be done all the time" (M.10)

Hard work is associated with working alone. This cannot be 'done all the time' and yet so many assumptions about schooling rests on the imposition of a syllabus, we based on the steady accumulation of material, approached steadily, always in the same way. Pupils find this demand both depressing and unsuccessful. They want variety. They understand the differences between aspects of school. 'It depends' on the lesson as well as the subject, the mood as well as the context. From pure concentration pupils seek some relief.

"I like groups, and equipment. That type of thing. 'Cos it's like...I don't know...it doesn't seem as challenging in groups. I think it takes a load off in groups. If

you're in the top group and things like that, you get, you know, not pushed but you've got to do stuff to keep in that group" (F.10).

Groups are supportive, and less of a challenge than the exposure of personal achievement. At the same time groups are academic havens, and used as a means to avoid personal challenge. In academic streaming groups are often chosen carefully by placing pupils with those of similar ability or similar weakness. Groups are a comfort in a different sense, avoiding too high a level of expectation or avoiding any scrutiny at all. Pupils are very quick to adapt and to hide. A group, even imposed upon them, can be used as camouflage.

Working hard is always difficult to sustain if there is no pleasure in it and there are many means of avoiding it.

"I don't particularly like being stuck in a classroom behind a desk. I like to like to do things, get out. But I mean I don't mind working on me own or in a group, it doesn't matter. Depends what it is. If I'm enjoying it then I'll work hard at it, but if I don't enjoy it then may be don't work as hard as I need to work harder at it so..." (M.11)

Collaborating learning takes away some of the pressure of being forced to work, or being 'stuck' with the demands of the syllabus. It can give a different, more subtle pleasure to the state of learning. It is, of course, always a surprise to re-discover the fact that learning can be a chore. For adults, learning is an essential definition of life, a celebration. Yet it is often turned into oppression at school. For this reason alone, the need for variety for the change to manifest different styles of learning is considered very important. Pupils do not mind working alone or with others, as long as they have some freedom of choice.

"I like working in a group, mostly, but it doesn't bother me about working on my own. Because there's a lot more people there and you can find out other things from what they're doing and things like that" (F.10)

"I like working in groups sometimes and I like working on computer as well. You get more ideas, tell other people what you feel and they can tell you what they feel. Sometimes when you are by yourself you can get on with your own work. Sometimes when you are in groups you start thinking and yet get held back" (M.10)

Working with others means discovering ideas for oneself and sharing them with others in discussion. It is associated with finding out, both facts and what other people think about them. It is centred on learning about the nature of relationships, the nature of collaboration and brings out mutual interests. It is ironic that this creative endeavour is contrasted in the minds of pupils with the necessity of being 'on task', with getting on with their own individual work. 'More ideas' come from other people, but the demand of the system is for them to make all ideas appear to be their own. The irony in that this forced originality actually stifles real creativity.

There is one central territory in the emplacements of work where pupils are supposed to collaborate, to work together and yet remain individual. 'Experiments', working with equipment, doing things and talking about the actions, are very much appreciated. It seems to pupils to be a wholly different dimension of learning, a collaborative and creative act.

"I like sometimes if we've got a lot on with work. I like just get on with it by myself and get it out of the way, but I really enjoy like in English when we work in groups and things like that and with equipment like experiments in

Chemistry, Biology and Physics...I don't think anybody enjoys working really hard but I don't mind it if it has to be done...so I make the best of it" (F.10)

Between the submission to what had to be done, putting up with things, getting on with it, and all the other phrases of necessary imposition, there is real pleasure in working with others, on 'equipment'. It is easy to understand how different a style of learning is afforded by experiments, where all minds are individually concentrating on one observation, where a personal opinion can be trustingly shared. That mutual concern with one task transforms the group into genuine collaboration and there is development of personal curiosity.

"I prefer it in a group with lots of equipment. So we can co-operate together instead of...if you're on your own you might get stuck if you're got no one to turn to. If you're in a group and everyone's together you can help each other.

In science we've got some really good equipment. We'll always be doing an experiment like, after every two lessons there might be a lesson of Chemistry and whatever, with chemicals involved and stuff like that" (M.10).

The demands on the individual are balanced by the experience of co-operation, of people 'helping each other'. The place where learning is most associated with the more creative of circumstances appears to be on those lessons where some kind of practical activity, and mutual curiosity can best be displayed, be it in science, in particular or in CDT or Art. One of the defining significance of such learning is that all, including the teacher, are sharing the same curiosity. They are all involved, on the same side, rather than confronting each other. As with all real relationships, it is the sharing of points of view about something outside both people that most matters. At these moments of the scientific experiment, the observers are all learners; they show the same curiosity. It might be fairly rare and fleeting but it is symbolic of what learning could be. It also relates to that often neglected need of young children, to share in an intellectually creative relationship.

The learning style which pupils prefer are those which include flexibility, variety and attention to individual needs. They are also rooted in the desire to share experiences and ideas rather than be confronted by them. This implies a strong rapport with the teacher, as if both are learning together, rather than the imposition of a series of learned competencies, however well delivered. Whatever the surfaces of the lessons pupils have their private thoughts, their moods and their boredom. They might not want to be distracted but they do appreciate excitements. If these are not provided during the lesson, they can always be superimposed by the pupils themselves.

Constant levels of concentration are impossible, so that what is sought is a variety that answers the need to learn in different ways and at different paces.

"It depends on my moods most. I can't...because sometimes of I'm active I want to get up and do things and sometimes if I just want to rest and just do my work quietly. I just tend to sit down and rest" (F.10).

One firm reaction to this might be that it is impossible to accommodate pupils like this when dealing with so many. The need from the teachers' point of view is to enforce discipline until it becomes second nature to the pupils. Such 'moods', adapting to variety by periods of stimulation and periods of less demanding 'rest' are a shared pattern that all pupils crave. They do not want to do the same thing in the same way all the time.

"Each lesson's different. But I don't, um, I prefer it if you don't have to be silent and you can talk but sometimes I don't always do my work if that is

that's what you're allowed to do. If I'm feeling tired I just don't do anything"
(M.11)

The demands of the constant mental activity of pupils are strong. Whether they are realistic or 'sustainable' is another matter.

Pupils learn a great deal from the discipline of having to work together, from collaboration and from the seeking one of information for themselves. Once the pressure on teachers to 'deliver' is less, and the expectation on pupils to learn in their own way, is greater, all kinds of things can be achieved. When this subtle change of emphasis takes place it is not easily detected. Indeed it is argued that such pupil-centredness is against all that Ofsted stands for, and would be rooted out if it did not remain hidden. Pupils are actually learning all kinds of matters in school, which have little to do with the curriculum. They learn about personal relationships and about collaboration. This preferred learning styles reflect this.

"Working as part of a team. Definitely. Also leadership skills and things. Like what qualities are requested. Learning to take the things that aren't that good along with the good. You've got to take the good with the bad or vice versa"
(F 18).

Conclusions

It could be argued that pupils are in school to learn how to submit to the discipline imposed, to accept the requirements of the curriculum and to learn whatever it is that the teachers wish them to. This could also sound like an oppressive regime with clear command structures that impose such requirements on the pupils that they are taught not to question, not to think and not to be independent. Alternatively, these two extremes point up the complexity of the reality of the everyday complex negotiations, which involve well meaning teachers attempting to ameliorate the system, and strongly motivated pupils intent on surviving it. All the time we are reminded that the inner reality of schooling, in all its complexity, is quite different from the models superimposed on it in a theoretical, or political way.

If pupils were really listened to, would there still be a debate about the skills that teachers need? If learners were allowed to say what they would find most helpful would be no such need to debate what teachers should do. Meeting pupils' requirements is a way that brings out the best in them is not, in fact, as difficult to put into practice as one might think. The central point is putting the onus to learn on the pupils and allowing them to learn in a variety of ways, including learning from each other. The most creative teachers actually employ those principles in their own way, despite the threat of inspection.

Classroom relationships are awkward in the context of the system of schooling that is generally promoted. Attention is diverted from what is really happening to what is supposed to happen so it is hard to conduct a debate about such matters at an academic level. It is important to try to recognise the actuality of the power relationships in the classroom, the tendency to confront rather than collaborate. This has become a cultural matter, resting on the assumption that pupils are essentially anti-intellectual and do not wish to learn. Only by targets and assistance, according to received wisdom, will standards be raised. The result of such imposition is a strong sense of conflict. All questions, in school, however became 'closed', as if there is only one answer on one side and 'empowerment' taken from the other

(Manke 2001). The ability to discuss real ideas is severely limited (Pounton and Kershaw 2001).

Nowhere is the issue of pupils' learning, and teachers attempting to help, more poignantly ambivalent than in the political issue of class size. Clearly the factor of class size compared to other variables is not the most important one (Jamieson 1998). The psychological impact on class size, on the teachers and pupils, for more subtle, is another matter. No wonder the research on class size is as variable as it is unclear (Mortimore & Blatchford 1993) since the other inventing factors, like people, are more important. The crucial matter with the classroom is clearly the morale, stress and enthusiasm of those involved within it (Blatchford & Martin 1998). Normally one would link such a statement with the personal and professional lives of teachers. Should it not include the pupils? Pupils long for individual attention, and they desire the opportunities to collaborate. They would love to share ideas with teachers and to the end would accept any 'style' that made that possible. It is not the class size as such that prevents this, although large classes are far harder to handle, as all teachers know, but the class mentality. This is not the product of teachers' will but the prevailing cultural assumption of schooling. The quality of teaching depends upon the quality of pupils learning experiences. Their learning styles require a different level of attention from teachers. Once the motivation released from being able to share personal ideas was released, pupils' achievements could be greatly enhanced.

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