



# Supporting retrieval and memory in learning: An account of practice from collaborative action research in Banister Primary School

## The Research-Practice Partnership

The **School Voices Research-Practice Partnership** aims to support schools in **responding to student diversity** and **improving learning outcomes** for all, whilst at the same time **promoting inclusion**. This will be achieved by focusing on **students' voices and dialogues** between teachers and children and young people through **participatory research approaches**.

The Partnership has been partly funded by **UKRI – Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF)**. The Partnership consists of a collaboration between: **University of Southampton** and three **hub schools (St John's Primary and Nursery School, St Mary's CE Primary School, Redbridge Primary School)** that were involved in an earlier pilot study. The hub schools and the University of Southampton support other schools in introducing these ideas through collaborative action research, considering the complexities within each school context. For more information - [www.schoolvoices.soton.ac.uk](http://www.schoolvoices.soton.ac.uk)

## The school

Banister Primary School is part of the Southampton Cooperative Learning Trust. The school has 419 students (4-11 years olds) and is larger than the average-sized primary school in which there are 14 classes (two for each year group), 14 teachers and 20 Learning support assistants, and 5 members of the Senior Leadership Team. The school has a diverse range of students including: 63% with English as an Additional Language, 23% with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, 27.7% of students on free school meals, 78% coming from a range of ethnic minority groups with approximately 22% of students having White British heritage. Since 2018, they have had the 'School of Sanctuary' status. This award highlights the school's devotion to welcoming both children and their families from all backgrounds, faith, and countries.

The school's vision is highlighted in the motto: 'Belief, Pride and Success'. Their aim is that children believe in both themselves and their abilities, be proud of their achievements and aim for success. The staff believe that an enriched curriculum and supporting children based on their own life experiences is the key to their pupils succeeding. Their curriculum planning has been designed to support and encourage all similarities and differences. Due to this, children feel safe, respected and included at school.

## Research focus and process

The Deputy Head led the process and was the one who identified the research area after careful consideration of the school's improvement priority and the previous year's experience of working with students as researchers. The research focus was

influenced by the OFSTED 2024 outcome which suggested that the school needed to check pupils' learning accurately in order to build on prior knowledge effectively over time. The school has been carrying out professional development for staff around retrieval and how teachers can get students to retain the skills and knowledge that they have been taught. Therefore, the research focus was to explore children's perceptions of the impact of teacher professional development on knowledge retrieval in the classroom, using the following research question:

- **What helps us to remember the knowledge and skills we have learnt?**

The school adopted the 'Students as Researchers' approach and six Year 5 students (three from each class) were identified by the Deputy Head and invited to participate. All of these students were known as a 'pupil researcher' in their school and were chosen to take part because they were seen as 'hard to reach' in some ways, such as with very quiet and passive behaviour, with poor school attendance, with a refugee background and having been identified as having special educational needs and disabilities.



*The six new pupil researchers from Year 5*

In the first two sessions, the pupil researchers from the previous year (six Year 6 students) helped the Deputy to train the new pupil researchers. They described their feelings and the various activities that they had carried out. The conversations with the former pupil researchers served as useful peer training and helped the new pupil researchers to develop insights about being a researcher.

Following the peer training, the former and the new pupil researchers discussed and mutually decided the agreed behaviours that would show when they were carrying out the research – while going into the classroom or speaking to other children while

carrying out the research. These behaviours included – being kind and supportive and to respect everyone. Subsequently, an agreement was signed by all the pupil researchers to commit to the mutually decided behaviours.

The Deputy Head then introduced the focus of the research and the school improvement target for this year. They then phrased the research question jointly and discussed the approach that would help them address the question. The pupil researchers were also given information about what the teachers' professional development included, in relation to knowledge retrieval.

Following this, the Deputy Head shared information about 'pupil conferences' and modelled how these pupil conferences could be carried out. To carry out the pupil conferences, a questionnaire was designed by the Deputy Head and the subject leads in advance. In order to build confidence before talking to their peers through pupil conferences, the pupil researchers practised with each other. This practice helped them realise that a Google form did not work very well to collect responses from their peers. Therefore, a written form was used to record the responses.

The pupil researchers spoke to several students through pupil conferences. The questions that they asked their peers were about how children remember the knowledge and skills that they learnt in class. The pupil researchers gathered a range of responses and worked with the Deputy Head to collate all the data. They then talked with the subject leaders, sharing what works well, what is not working so well, and some ideas about potential changes that can be made to help children remember knowledge and skills moving forward.

## **Participatory methods**

**Pupil conferences:** Usually pupil conferences are carried out by the subject leads around their respective subject areas. This year, pupil researchers were involved in carrying out these pupil conferences. In order to gather information about students' experiences of what helps them remember the knowledge and skills learnt in the classroom, the pupil researchers spoke to several

students. A questionnaire about retrieval and working memory, that would fit all subjects, was put together by the Deputy Head, with the help of the subject leaders. Most questions were Yes-No responses questions, while some required a more expanded response. The pupil researchers initially conducted the pupil conferences in pairs, gradually progressing to working independently. Over a four-week period, they gathered data from approximately 40 children across the school. Most conferences involved each researcher speaking individually with their peers to collect responses.

**Peer training by former pupil researchers:** The former pupil researchers met with the Deputy Head to discuss what they wanted to share with the new pupil researchers. They focused on what they felt was important and what was not important for the new pupil researchers to know. After planning alongside the Deputy Head, the former pupil researchers carried out two training sessions with the new pupil researchers. The training involved understanding the vocabulary of research and

and served as 'role models' for the new pupil researchers.

## Outcomes

**Enabling teachers to reflect on their retrieval practices:** Using the pupil feedback gathered by pupil researchers, through pupil conferencing, the teachers received information about how their classroom practices around retrieval and memory, aided students' learning. The pupil researchers gathered information about what helps and what does not help students to remember the knowledge and skills learnt in their lessons. For example, 62% of the responses indicated that end-of-unit quizzes did not help them remember key knowledge and skills. When this information was communicated to the subject leaders, by the pupil researchers, the leaders were able to reflect on the school's current methods, specifically which retrieval practices are most effective and which ones are not. This reflection enables leaders to refine and adapt the retrieval opportunities in the classroom.

**Pupils leading pupil conferences:** The pupil researchers were meaningfully involved in carrying out the pupil conferences, to understand students' experiences of retrieval practices. These pupil conferences, which are usually carried out by subject leads, were now being facilitated by pupil researchers, who were identified as 'hard to reach' students with low levels of confidence. Leading the conversations with their peers through these pupil conferences, helped them not only to address the research question, but also to develop their confidence in talking to their peers and critically collating pupil feedback about teaching practices. Additionally, sharing the pupil feedback with the subject leaders, further strengthened their confidence.

**Pupils supporting the school's improvement priorities:** The research focus was closely linked with the school improvement priority around retrieval and memory, and how pupils' learning needs to be checked accurately in order to build on prior knowledge effectively over time. Involving pupil researchers instead of the subject leads, to carry out the pupil conferences and gather pupil



*Students filling out the written form during pupil conferences*

researchers, and addressing any misconceptions about being a pupil researcher. The former pupil researchers shared their experiences, what they learnt from the previous year, and about their anxiousness at the beginning compared to their confidence that developed by the end. They also shared advice and tips about being a researcher, especially while talking to other children and adults,



feedback, reinforces the school's approach towards pupils' role in addressing school improvement priorities.

## Key ideas emerging

**Meaningfully embedding students' voices in the school:** By leveraging the former pupil researchers in training the new pupil researchers, the Deputy Head created an opportunity to share the responsibility of training student-researchers with other students. This opportunity, through the first two training sessions, not only shaped the role of the new pupil researchers but also ensured that the first-hand experiences of the former pupil researchers were valued by the school. The engagement of former pupil researchers as trainers, of new pupil researchers as facilitators of pupil conferences and communicators of pupil feedback, depict the school's collaborative approach and commitment towards meaningfully embedding students' voices in the school, especially to address school improvement priorities. Such an approach also paves the way for adaptable and sustainable practices, informed by students' voices.

**Structured planning and adaptability:** The Deputy Head had a detailed and careful plan from the beginning, which allowed the process to run smoothly. Despite the structured planning, there was flexibility to adapt and modify as needed. An example of this was the shift from Google forms to written forms for pupil conferences. The balance between structured planning and scope for adapting embraced the evolving nature of working with students as researchers.

**Choosing student researchers who were seen as 'hard to reach':** Giving these students the prominent role of student researcher, and with the appropriate support, they managed to complete all tasks successfully. The support of the Deputy Head and the other student researchers from the previous year was significant in this respect.

## Teachers' and Students' thoughts

...learning walks, lesson observations, work scrutiny pupil conferences. That's a lot to squeeze in, in the time I've given them [subject leads]. And so I thought I could pull away some of that and use our researchers to gather that information and make them part of that journey of understanding of how effective we're being with the systems and the processes we've put in place to support memory and learning.

Deputy Head

I think the best thing [about being a pupil researcher] was knowing that you'd be able to help others... and that what we were doing was for good.

Student Researcher

It was just very fun because we got to ask students questions and we got their answers, and we got to get to know each other a bit more.

Student Researcher

We have lots of friends who come, and then we can make even more friends, by being the researcher.

Student Researcher

## Teacher team

- Tracy Price (Deputy Head)

**Headteacher:** Kate Vincent

## Research team

- Professor Kiki Messiou
- Dr Jay de los Reyes
- Chinmaya Potnis
- Ping Dong
- Karen Ibáñez Riquelme

We would also like to acknowledge the participation of many children and other staff in the school who have contributed in various ways.