

Homerton Project on Boys' Performance in MFL

Research methodology:

Because of the exploratory nature of the investigation designed specifically to illuminate issues around boys' performance, a qualitative approach was implemented

Field work design:

Several concerns influenced the field work design:

- a. to look at schools that represent
 - * the national picture - where boys were not doing well in MFL, and
 - * the exceptions - schools where they are doing well
- b. to look at the experiences and attitudes of two cohorts of pupils:
 - * at the end of Year 9 and
 - * near the start of year 11 - i.e. before and after the start of GCSE work;
- c. while concentrating on boys to take some account of the perspectives of girls - including their views of why boys do or do not do well in MFL classes;
- d. to focus centrally on pupils but also to gather data from Heads of School, Heads of MFL departments and MFL teachers
- e. to work within academic years so that data gathering with year 9 pupils would take place with a 1998-9 cohort and the year 11 pupils would be from a 1999-2000 academic year

Therefore, although random sampling is generally thought to be desirable to secure an unbiased representative sample, in this instance, a carefully targeted sample was selected.

Features of the design:

- f. 7 comprehensive schools were targetted for two parallel investigations; Investigation A with 4 schools; cohort A and Investigation B with 3 schools; cohort B;
- g. where Investigation A sought to identify why boys do not perform as well in MFL as they do in other subjects, Investigation B sought to identify factors which contribute to success;
- h. a similar sample was taken and similar data collected in both cohort A and B schools so that comparisons could also be made;

Selection of schools:

Schools were selected in partnership with LEA advisers who had good data on performance in MFL.

Criteria for selection:

- * in 30%-60% GCSE A*-C range
- * mixed comprehensives with 5 form entry
- * no extremes of social class or multi-ethnicity in catchment (and not on special measures)
- * with MFL results showing lower than national /local residual for Cohort A schools and higher for Cohort B schools

(see separate sheet: Peter Downes)

Access was negotiated directly with the head teachers and heads of Department who had agreed to participate.

The overall data base:

A range of data sources was tapped to investigate performance; methodological triangulation strengthens the reliability of the data.

For Cohort A the data base consisted of :

- * crude questionnaire data from Year 9 pupils in 4 schools
- * focus group (3 pupils per group) data from 24 boys and 12 girls (year 9)
- * focus group data from 12 boys and 12 girls (year 11)
- * individual interview data from 32 Year 9 boys and 24 Year 11 boys
- * interview data from 4 Heads, 4 Heads of Department and 16 MFL teachers
- * observation data from 4 lessons (Year 9)
- * documentary evidence- pupil performance profiles, information from MFL departments

For Cohort B:

- * crude questionnaire data from Year 9 pupils in 3 schools
- * focus group (3 pupils per group) data from 18 boys and 9 girls (year 9)
- * focus group data from 18 boys (year 11)
- * individual interview data from 18 Year 9 boys and 18 Year 11 boys
- * interview data from 3 Heads, 3 Heads of Department and 12 MFL teachers
- * observation data from 6 lessons (Year 9)
- * documentary evidence- pupil performance profiles, information from MFL departments

Data gathering:

1. The questionnaire: (Appendices- 1a)

A crude-four question (5 minute) written response questionnaire was completed across the whole Year 9 group for both cohorts to give a general indication of pupils' enthusiasm for MFL and elicit their views on its importance as a subject.

The focus of the questionnaire was on three main areas :

- how pupils rate MFL as a subject
- how they rate MFL in relation to other school subjects and
- the degree of importance pupils place on MFL in relation to other school subjects

The pilot:

A pilot was undertaken to ensure clarity; particularly important, as the final questionnaire would not be administered by members of the research team.

The questionnaire was trialled by a MFL teacher who had been briefed on the focus of the investigation, in a school where pupils learn French with Spanish as the 2nd. MFL. The pilot was administered in setted language lessons to 60 pupils in sets 1, 2 and 4. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured although this school did not form part of either cohort for data collection.

Interview relationships:

With pupils:

As facilitators, the interviewers showed empathy and understanding and the students confided easily. The relationship between the interviewer and participants was friendly but power relations were not entirely symmetrical. Although the interviewers were not introduced as teachers, as adults they were more inclined to direct the conversations according to their specific concerns and participants were positioned in particular ways. Although frank, loyalties to peers and teachers were clearly maintained by some interviewees; also, those who had been observed prior to the interview may have reacted differently as a result. (This may also have been the case during observation when the timing of the interview / observation was reversed).

With teachers:

These informal peer interviews centred around issues reflecting personal as well as collective working practices and as such, teachers were inclined to be mutually supportive and project a positive ethos of their MFL department. However, personal perspectives and theories as well as individual concerns were openly discussed.

Observation of classes:

Observation of pupils during lessons allowed the interviewer to put comment into context. Year 9 and Year 11 classes in both cohorts were observed by the interviewer allocated to each investigation, when time allowed. These observations were informal, not systematic, and of classes where a pupil selected for interview was present. (The pupil was discretely identified to the interviewer by the teacher). The observer was as unobtrusive as possible and recorded detail concerning teacher gender, class size, seating arrangements, teaching style, lesson content, balance of skills and resources and boy / girl working strategies.

Documentation:

Information was gathered from each participating MFL department describing policy, practices and schemes of work and related to:- gender groupings, the range of languages taught, the use of the target language in lessons, examination boards, syllabi, entry policy and results, rewards and sanctions, courses and resources and teaching topic sequencing. In particular:-

- OFSTED report - to highlight strengths and weaknesses of school and MFL Department
- MFL Policy Document- gender groupings in MFL lessons : range of languages: ethos of Department : Examination Boards: policy for use of TL: sanctions for uncompleted work/homework misbehaviour
- MFL scheme of work- MFL course content: materials and details of resources: sequence of teaching topics ; Year 7 - 11
- MFL GCSE results for last 3 years'

Ethical Issues:

A protocol concerning research ethics was made available to participating schools. Pupils were given the opportunity to choose whether or not to complete the questionnaire and whether to be interviewed