

Example field note (excerpts)

Context: The Ms. Perry interview took place in my office after school on 23.02.2020. All proceeded smoothly: no interruptions, no extraneous noise, no equipment malfunctions. The interviewee was a skilled and highly articulate teacher of English who had been at the school for several years. I had the privilege of being her NQT induction tutor when she first joined Riverside. She presently teaches English to learners across key stages 3 and 4, including GCSE English to year 10 and 11 classes. She also teaches A level English Literature to a year 13 class. Because of school timetabling needs, she teaches a small number of Drama and Religious Studies lessons at KS3. She spearheads provision for young carers, carrying out some fantastic work with these vulnerable learners.

She is a seasoned project qualification supervisor: she has supervised pupils through FPQs and HPQs and is currently supervising two students through the EPQ (OCR). One FPQ supervisee was low ability (i.e. in the lowest English set). She has volunteered to be chairperson on two project presentation evenings, facilitating about ten presentations in all. She is a year 11 form tutor and has in her form group five learners who've done at least one project qualification, including two who were interviewed (Janice and Marele).

As part of her master's, she executed research (using group interview data collection) into ability labelling and its impact on the most able pupils in the context of English. Her thesis was that ability labelling does a disservice to the most able because it labels something un-fixed (transient and amorphous) and inhibits a growth mindset (a psychological concept from Carol Dweck which was a school teaching and learning priority a year or two before).

Summary: The interviewee was positive about the PQs. She saw them as good preparation for university. The EPQ facilitates university applications.

Formal learning (curriculum + whole-class lessons) distinguished from informal learning (no curriculum + one-to-one meetings). Formal learning typically entails limited time for learners to pursue own interests. Usually, their own interests only touched on tangentially.

PQs bequeath freedom (over subject matter) and independence (=responsibility for self).

Fresh challenges: no curriculum + no pre-structured tasks/activities/lessons + no (immediate) negative consequences (educational or punitive) → learners generating own ideas + long-termism + project management + personal (→ desire of learner to do it justice).

Virtues demanded: hard-working, conscientious, dedication...supererogation,

KS3 learners treat the PQs more like homework. They are more disciplined than older (KS5) learners. Parental involvement is greater. Younger learners are (in some way) more shaped by teacher expectations and parent expectations.

She said that she chose supervisees from the ones that approach her. She was drawn to supervise learners (a) studying topics that she was interested in + (b) who she felt were studying topics that she felt she could support them with + (c) who she already knew. She also expressed a preference for supervising (working with) learners whose journey would likely be smoother (smoother because they were more organised). A sure sign of a bumpy journey ahead was when learners (a) asked her to be their supervisor very late coupled with (b) ill thought through proposals. Smooth journey learners) can be left for weeks or even months, with the supervisor resting assured that they are beavering away at their project.

The EPQ is more complex and demands more in-depth treatment (from learners) than its younger cousins.

Marking projects: takes time, but does not feel burdensome. The judgement ('subjective') marking required resembles marking in English and is therefore easy for English teachers (and teachers of similar subjects) to apply. Experience of marking projects makes the process easier: the marker can compare the standard of one project to the standard of previously marked projects to determine marks.

Confident learners probably do not gain that much from presentation evening. But it's nevertheless a highlight for all. For diffident learners, it contributes to/evinces personal growth. Chairing presentations (and the ensuing Q&A) was interesting. There is a sense of learner ownership and expertise. It is a positive (albeit stressful) experience and there is much relief and a sense of achievement afterwards...

Reflections: I am not convinced that the distinction between formal and informal learning cast by the interviewee holds (there are still formal requirements for the PQs). Nevertheless, the difference pointed towards appears to hold. I wonder how often, if at all, learners do have the opportunity to pursue their own interests in the standard curriculum. There are two other considerations here too. (a) Enrichment activities (extra-curricular, co-curricular, super-curricular - not sure quite what the differences are) give learners the chance to do this; (b) schools presumably have a role—perhaps a key one—in shaping learners' passions and interests...

Long-termism combats the presentism (Hargreaves and Shirley) that may pervade education. The observation that it presents learners with different challenges to short termism (e.g. homework due in the next day, having made demonstrable progress in the space of a single lesson or short series of lessons) is intriguing and potentially very useful.

The notion of supererogation—my term not hers—has analytical purchase, I suspect...