Does how much you enjoy a subject affect how good you are at it?

A small-scale study by Daisy Wooller

Introduction

The subjects that I enjoyed most were the ones I excelled in and my least favourite subjects I was less able in. I wanted to find out whether this was the case with other children although I knew this may not be as straightforward as it seems. In a large-scale study of how pupils respond to teachers, Wragg and Wood(1984) stressed the importance of positive relationships with teacher and pupil. This factor would, more than likely, affect pupils' enjoyment and success in particular subjects. The enjoyment of lessons with less able students may be affected by factors such as their sense that less is expected of them, their unwillingness to risk failure and their inability to concentrate Lansdell(2002). While it would've been difficult for me to assess how the factors described by Lansdell may be affecting my sample (because pupils may be unwilling to state if they consider themselves less able or may feel threatened by being asked this), I decided that it would be possible for me to consider pupil-teacher relationships when planning the collection of my data.

After I had thought carefully about what it was I wanted to find out, I came up with my research question: "Does how much you enjoy a subject affect how good you are at it?"

Methodology

Questionnaires were given to a sample of sixty pupils in Year 6 and 60 questionnaires were given out to Year 5 and Year 7 pupils. Forty-nine completed questionnaires were given back by Year 6 pupils but it was decided that most of those returned by younger pupils were incomplete or unclear and these were not used during data analysis.

The questionnaire was drafted with the help of a research assistant whose advice was needed in order to edit the questions and to make sure that the questions were clear, concise and unambiguous. The final version was piloted by other children taking part in the Children’s Research Centre to check that children in my sample would find it simple to complete.

Before handing out the questionnaire to the pupils, the consent of the headteacher was needed. The childrens’ parents were informed in the school newsletter and were asked to fill in a permission slip. The questionnaires were completed anonymously so that the children could write their true feelings without the worry of getting into trouble. Pupils weren’t asked their class or their teacher’s name - just their year group - so teachers could not be identified.

The questionnaires were handed out during school time and the children were given approximately ten minutes to fill it in, during afternoon registration.

Findings

Pupils were asked to tick the statement which best showed how much they enjoyed three subjects: English, Maths and Science. They were also asked to rate themselves from one to ten on their abilities in each of the subjects – one being the lowest and ten being the highest. These two questions were compared.

The boxes with the majority of people have been highlighted for clear answers.
### English

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The results showed that the people who enjoyed English excelled and the people who disliked it felt they were less able than others.

### Maths

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The results showed that generally people who enjoyed Maths excelled at it but some pupils, who thoroughly disliked it, thought that they were fairly able at the subject.

### Science

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The results showed that the more the pupils like Science, the more able they are in it, although pupils who dislike Science think they are good at it.

In another question the students were asked to state why they picked their above answer. They could either tick the statement they agreed with or write their own. The choices were as followed: I like the teacher; I dislike the teacher; I find the subject boring or I find the subject interesting. Pupils were able to select up to two answers meaning percentages may not total one hundred.
**English**

I love it!

100% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated that they liked the teacher.

100% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found English interesting.

I like it.

25% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they liked the teacher.

29.25% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found English interesting.

16.5% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found English boring.

29.25% of the pupils who selected this answer gave other reasons for liking/disliking English.

I don't mind it.

50% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they liked the teacher.

9.09% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they disliked the teacher.

18.18% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found English interesting.

68.25% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found English boring.

4.55% of the pupils who selected this answer gave other reasons for liking/disliking English.

I don't like it.

28.58% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they liked the teacher.

85.71% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found English boring.

14.29% of the pupils who selected this answer gave other reasons for liking/disliking English.

It's awful!

42.87% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they liked the teacher.

28.58% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they disliked the teacher.

71.45% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found English boring.

**Maths**

I love it!

70% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they liked the teacher.

90% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Maths interesting.
I like it.

50% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they liked the teacher.
75% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Maths interesting.
12.5% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Maths boring.

I don’t mind it.

23.52% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they liked the teacher.
5.88% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they disliked the teacher.
35.28% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Maths interesting.
41.16% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Maths boring.
11.76% of the pupils who selected this answer gave other reasons for liking/disliking Maths.

I don’t like it.

25% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Maths interesting.
100% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Maths boring.

It’s awful!

20% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they liked the teacher.
50% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they disliked the teacher.
80% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Maths boring.
10% of the pupils who selected this answer gave other reasons for liking/disliking Maths.

Science

I love it!

75% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they liked the teacher.
100% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Science interesting.
25% of the pupils who selected this answer gave other reasons for liking/disliking Science.

I like it.

83.4% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they liked the teacher.
11.12% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they disliked the teacher.
77.84% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Science interesting.
5.56% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Science boring.
I don’t mind it.

52.92% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they liked the teacher.
11.76% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they disliked the teacher.
17.64% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Science interesting.
47.04% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Science boring.

I don’t like it.

33.33% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they liked the teacher.
66.66% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they disliked the teacher.
66.66% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Science boring.

It’s awful!

71.45% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they disliked the teacher.
14.29% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated they found Science boring.
14.29% of the pupils who selected this answer indicated other reasons for liking/disliking Science.

The last question asked the children to think carefully and circle the statement that the most agreed with. Here are the results:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You have to be good at a subject to like it.</td>
<td>10.20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>You have to like a subject to be good at it.</td>
<td>14.28%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whether you're good or bad at a subject, it doesn't affect how much you like a subject.</td>
<td>46.92%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whether you like or dislike a subject, it doesn't affect how good you are at it.</td>
<td>28.60%</td>
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Discussion

It would seem that the majority of people have neutral feelings towards English and Maths whereas the majority of people fairly enjoy Science.

Two of the main reasons for enjoying a subject were that a pupil liked the teacher or actually found the subject interesting. The main reason for pupils disliking a subject was they found the subject boring although another big factor was they didn’t like the teacher. The reasons for neutral feelings towards a subject were quite widespread but some pupils said in their questionnaires that they would probably enjoy the subject more if they found it a bit more interesting. Some suggested that teachers should think of ways to make a lesson more interesting, maybe by having the class involved in the teaching.

In English, the results showed that the more a pupil enjoyed a lesson they felt more able in that area and the pupils who disliked the subject felt less able at it. However, in Maths and Science, generally pupils felt that they were more able if they enjoyed it more, until it came to the pupils who strongly disliked the subject. It would seem that the pupils who strongly disliked Maths and Science thought they were fairly able at the subject.

On the questionnaires, some children stated that they were unhappy about the fact that their teacher always chose the same people, because they knew that that student would get it right. Others felt that their
teacher picked them to answer questions too often even though they didn’t have their hand up because they didn’t know the answer. Because of this, the children in Year 6 would like their teachers to choose people randomly and try not to pick the same people too often.

If students came into a lesson with a positive attitude their performance may be affected by that and the same if they came into a classroom with a negative frame of mind. Also if the children just believed they could do something and put their mind to it, they could probably achieve a lot instead of just sitting there refusing to do any work, because they don’t think they can do it. The pupils’ performance is also affected by the environment they’re working in; if there is lots of shouting and jumping around, no-one’s going to get anything done. Therefore, pupils success and enjoyment is based on their environment and frame of mind.

**Conclusion**

At the beginning of my research I asked: “Does how much you enjoy a subject affect how good you are at it?” Some people would argue that it didn’t whereas others would argue that it does. Based on this research, I feel that, generally, how much you enjoy a subject does affect how able a pupil is at it because if a pupil comes into a lesson with an optimistic point-of-view then they are more likely to succeed than the people who are in a bad mood and refuse to work.

It would be interesting to do a long-term research project on the same classes and see how their opinions change as they get older and acquire different teachers during their time at secondary school. The research could also be done on other subjects, apart from the three main ones, such as Humanities, Art, Drama, Technology and Modern Languages.

**Bibliography**
