**What are the positive impacts of vertical grouping for year nine pupils involved in collaborative House tasks, and how can they be accessed?**

**Summary of enquiry**

*Introduction: the context, my rationale, and prior expectations*

In its opening stages, my enquiry was designed to explore the affirmative aspects of my schools recently established house system; the fundamental objective of the house environment was to foster collaborative vertical team efforts across all secondary school key stages. As a Head of House, I proposed to discover the explicit advantages for pupils engaged in house-based vertical tasks. My personal stance, reached at that point through two terms of leading the newly established House system, was that there was significant potential to expose pupils to valuable skills and experience through vertical collaboration. Following this enquiry I intended to bring about a change in staff and pupil attitudes, and so a change in how the House system was put into practice by leaders and participants. This enquiry was intended, firstly, to facilitate wider exposure to the advantages of a House system, secondly to support my professional development as a leader of a recently established system, and thirdly to demonstrate ways in which vertical groupings could contribute more widely to activities within school. Within my school there was a clear need for pupils to engage constructively with pupils not in their age group; it had become evident through the first two terms of the House system that numbers of pupils across the key stages exhibited apprehension when asked to work with students from other years. Similarly, staff leading activities reported that many pupils found collaborative tasks challenging. I thus felt that drawing attention to the pupil-centred merits of vertical groupings would enable the school Houses to have staff who were further invested in their houses’, and pupils’, successes. Increased staff positivity would, in turn, continue to broaden the number of pupils “on side” with the House system, thus enabling them to access all the benefits the system has to offer.

Before data collection, I expected pupils’ and staffs’ negativity towards vertical groupings to be dominant. I pre-empted that whilst staff, and perhaps some pupils, would be able to articulate the advantages of a House system, they would argue these were not yet taking place in our school.

Reflections on Data Collection Methods

To collect the transcribed data (Appendix 2) I used the following stages:

**Stage A:** I gathered baseline data for my small-scale study by assessing current attitudes regarding the benefits of vertical systems for year nines.I used two focus groups of six, one for staff and one for year nine pupils, participants were of mixed gender, religion and ethnicity. Whilst I considered this number of participants to be small, it generated more data than I would now consider manageable to fully analyse. Nevertheless, the varied natures within the staff and pupil groups did provide a representative sample. In previous conclusions I stated that to produce valid data would require ‘participants who most effectively indicate a normal school classroom dynamic’, which I attained.

Furthermore, the ‘Philosophy for Children’ (<http://www.philosophyforchildren.co.uk/>) approach to discussions (specifically used to avoid pressurising my participants) effectively facilitated a comfortable discursive environment and what I perceived to be authentic conversations. I believe this is due to staff and pupil familiarity with this philosophical strategy through lessons, but also because as researcher I could also act as a passive listener. Initially in the first discussion there were less confident participants, such as pupil three who Wilson would at this point have labelled a “non-influential contributor” (2013: 138); pupil three showed through paralinguistic features such as gestures and facial expressions, and through initial lack of active commenting, that they were shy at first. However, the nature of the discussion enabled pupil three to join in with increasing confidence towards the end of the first discussion, and more so in the second discussion (Appendix 2). I therefore believe that my sample did represent views from some of the more reticent members of the pupil community, a crucial perspective for this study. Additionally, I took my representative staff sample from those I had most friendly relationships with. I consider this decision to have been most effective; these participants appeared relaxed due to their willingness to laugh at humorous comments, to correct themselves, and to share experiences of instances when pupils in their class had been off task or uncomfortable (Appendix 2).

My prompt for discussion in Stage A was the following statement on card: ‘*There are benefits of year nine pupils being in mixed age House groups.*’ The focus group discussions were recorded in order to decrease my subjectivity as the researcher, I then re-played the data to check I had interpreted statements accurately and literally and to minimise “partial recall, bias, and error” (Denscombe, 2005: 175). It became increasingly evident to me as I listened to the recorded discussions, and again as I typed up the transcripts, that it is easy to misinterpret or misrepresent specific quotations, in this report I have therefore kept quotations within their context as far as possible by not quoting single words or phrases.

* **Stage B:** I revealed any unidentified positives to the participants.
* **Stage C:** I left enough time between focus group discussions for all participants to partake in the school’s scheduled House P.S.H.E lesson and assemblies. I, as planned, did not use the vertical lessons or assemblies directly as a source of data collection, this stage simply served to ensure participants had time to actively consider the ‘positives’ raised in Stage B, and this effectively enabled them to reflect more accurately on their attitudes towards vertical groupings when they took part in Stage D.
* **Stage D:** I assessed their developing attitudes.I held each focus group’s second discussion, centring on the ‘positives’ declared to them in Stage B. As in Stage A, the discussions were recorded. McNiff and Whitehead (2006: 79) urge researchers to ask themselves “how will I ensure that conclusions I come to are reasonably fair and accurate?”. As stated following my literature research, I claimed I would ensure valid data by avoiding using too many of my own improvised prompts and contributions to discussions, this too was in keeping with the ‘Philosophy for Children’ discussion format. I asserted that the initial statement as stimulus in Stage A should enable pupils and staff to provide valuable and honest insights, though I was aware that there was the possibility I may have needed to use “probing” and “prompting” (Bell, 2005: 161) more actively in Stage D depending on the quality of the data being collected at that stage. I, in fact, used no probes or prompts in Stage D. (Similarly, in Stage A I merely responded once to a pupil’s question, which was directed to me!) Whilst this created a comfortable atmosphere for participators, my reluctance to prompt resulted in me having no data for my following my research areas: ‘Varied learning methods found across different ages are essential’, ‘Varied conversational styles support learning’, ‘Improved psychological health’. However, that the lack of data in these specific areas is of interest, and is worth analysing too.

**Presenting and Analysing the Data**

Methods of Presentation

Due to my desire to work with what Denscombe (2005: 300) refers to as “thick” qualitative data, data which is “multi-layered, providing… insights on a number of levels about a variety of topics, I partly used Wilson’s (2013: 135) “constant comparative method” of data analysis. Thus, in order to analyse and present the large quantity of data from my four focus group transcripts I followed the steps detailed below:

1. **I generated deductive focuses before holding focus group discussions**: I used “coding” (Wilson, 2013: 135) during my literary research to generate a list of the main themes, in this enquiry’s case these were the main researched affirmative aspects of vertical groupings (Appendix 3). I opted to create these themes, the “temporary constructs”, deductively from my literature research due to the nature of my enquiry and the school context; many pupils and staff had not been fully exposed to the array of pupil centred benefits to a vertical system. Therefore one of the main intentions of my research process, and of the overall enquiry, was to expose any of these positives which appeared to have so far been hidden to the school community. In my methodology I had planned to use ‘Social confidence’ and ‘Constructive and cooperative mixing’ as two separately listed themes, however in a vertical classroom social confidence is a prerequisite of constructive and cooperative mixing, and in the transcribed data both themes often overlapped as a result. Thus I placed these together to make the quantities of data more practical. Wilson (2013: 135) does states that in “constant comparative analysis” the researcher should “delete any temporary constructs that are not earning their keep”, however I did not feel that any of my “temporary constructs” fitted into this description, so I kept them all as I was wary of losing valuable data.
2. **I used a classification table**: I used the listed “temporary constructs” (Wilson, 2013: 135) as a focus when listening live, and re-listening, to the different focus group discussions. To do this I created a classification table of the deductive themes, and used this initially to tick each theme off once it had arisen in the focus groups’ discussions. Despite the assertion in my methodology that I would use purely qualitative data, this quantitative method of data presentation was necessary as it provided a more immediate and accessible overview of themes raised (and when) than the subsequent qualitative transcripts. To ensure later comparisons were able to be drawn between staff and pupil themes raised, I used separate copies of the checklist for the staff and pupil focus groups:

**KEY**

**√ = in first focus group discussion during Methodology Stage A**

**√ = in second focus group discussion during Methodology Stage D**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **RESEARCHED POSITIVE IMPACTS OF VERTICAL GROUPING FOR YEAR 9 PUPILS INVOLVED IN COLLABORATIVE HOUSE TASKS** | **RAISED BY STAFF?** | **NOT RAISED BY STAFF?** |
| Exposure to new perspectives | **√** | **√** |
| Providing leadership roles | **√ √** |  |
| Pro-social behaviour: increased civic values and social responsibility | **√** | **√** |
| Social confidence, constructive and cooperative mixing | **√ √** |  |
| Enhanced motivation | **√√** |  |
| Increased “self esteem” and “self acceptance” | **√** | **√** |
| Improved psychological health | **√** | **√** |
| Varied conversational styles support learning |  | **√ √** |
| Varied learning methods found across different ages are essential |  | **√ √** |
| Importance of establishing sense of community within schools | **√ √** |  |
| Individuals increase their expectations of themselves when exposed to wider communities | **√** | **√** |
| Positivity; more ‘resources’ are available to achieve a goal | **√** | **√** |
|  |  |  |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **RESEARCHED POSITIVE IMPACTS OF VERTICAL GROUPING FOR YEAR 9 PUPILS INVOLVED IN COLLABORATIVE HOUSE TASKS** | **RAISED BY PUPILS?** | **NOT RAISED BY PUPILS?** |
| Exposure to new perspectives | **√√** |  |
| Providing leadership roles | **√ √** |  |
| Pro-social behaviour: increased civic values and social responsibility | **√** | **√** |
| Social confidence, constructive and cooperative mixing | **√ √** |  |
| Enhanced motivation | **√ √** |  |
| Increased “self esteem” and “self acceptance” | **√** | **√** |
| Improved psychological health |  | **√√** |
| Varied conversational styles support learning |  | **√√** |
| Varied learning methods found across different ages are essential |  | **√√** |
| Importance of establishing sense of community within schools | **√** | **√** |
| Individuals increase their expectations of themselves when exposed to wider communities | **√ √** |  |
| Positivity; more ‘resources’ are available to achieve a goal | **√** | **√** |
|  |  |  |

1. **I listed any unspoken themes:** Any of the “temporary constructs” (Wilson, 2013: 135) which were not actively raised by any participants in each of the focus groups’ first (methodology Stage A) discussions, were then used as the new guiding stimulus for each of the focus groups’ second (methodology Stage D) discussions. These lists of stimulus on card also served as data to be analysed:

**STAFF STIMULUS FOR STAGE D**

**Do vertical groups help year nine pupils with:**

1. **gaining new perspectives**
2. **pro-social behaviour**
3. **self esteem and self-acceptance**
4. **psychological health**
5. **different learning styles**
6. **different conversational styles**

**PUPIL STIMULUS FOR STAGE D**

**Do vertical groups help year nine pupils with:**

1. **pro-social behaviour**
2. **self esteem and self-acceptance**
3. **psychological health**
4. **different learning styles**
5. **different conversational styles**
6. **helping achieve goals with others**

1. **I interpreted the transcripts**: when interpreting the transcripts of the focus group discussions, I highlighted the data (Appendix 2) by matching all relevant utterances of the participants to one, or where possible more than one, of the coloured coded themes, or “temporary constructs” (Wilson, 2013: 153). I then used the staff and pupil classification charts to categorise the highlighted data more clearly into themes (Appendix 1). This method of presenting such “thick” data (Denscombe, 2005; 300) generated the most useful, interesting findings as it demonstrated how participants drew detailed, thoughtful insights from their experiences of working with, or being, year nines in a vertical classroom. In future enquiries using qualitative data I would reuse this “constant comparative” (Wilson, 2013: 135) format.
2. **Acknowledging themes not raised**: I then listed any “temporary constructs” (Wilson, 2013: 153) not raised at all by participants after all focus group discussions had occurred(after methodology Stage D):

**PUPIL THEMES NEVER RAISED**

* Varied learning methods found across different ages are essential.
* Varied conversational styles support learning.
* Improved psychological health.

**STAFF THEMES NEVER RAISED**

* Varied learning methods found across different ages are essential.
* Varied conversational styles support learning.

I felt these unidentified positives would have a significant role to play in the forward orientation of my enquiry. It was also important to me to remain open to my own findings, as Amos Hatch (2002: 40)expresses that researchers should avoid “processes that feel like confirming or disconfirming hypothesis”.

1. **Collating new ideas**: I then, with a slightly more inductive approach in the final stages, collated a list of new ideas raised. These were positive aspects of vertical groupings for year nines which were not listed as “temporary constructs” (Wilson, 2013: 153) following my literature research, which were actively raised by participants during the different focus group discussions. As Denscombe (2005: 302) asserts, researchers should not “avoid neglecting data [which] does not fit the analysis”.

**NEW THEMES RAISED DURING PUPIL DISCUSSIONS**

* Opportunities to study new topics in vertical lessons

**NEW THEMES RAISED DURING STAFF DISCUSSIONS**

* Opportunities to invert stereotypical leadership role expectations

The Data Analysis

My key findings are summarised in bullet points below:

* year nine pupils already acknowledge that the House system is widely

beneficial to them

* pupils can still benefit from exposure to new perspectives without it being

clearly demonstrated to teachers in the classroom

* year nine need more opportunities in vertical P.S.H.E lessons and

assemblies to work as a vertical team to achieve a clear group outcome

* the gains most prominent in vertical classroom environments in my

school so far are: provision of leadership roles; enhanced motivation; and

social confidence, constructive and cooperative mixing

* Heads of House need to plan vertical lessons and assemblies to involve

more variety in learning and conversational styles for all pupils

* the start of vertical systems are crucial for year nine; leaders and pupils

themselves must be able to turn initial feelings of fear into aspiration

* leadership practice and training should not be reserved for older year

pupils, but provided for year nines and lower years, to develop them into

more effective leaders

* teacher facilitation and behaviour management are central to making vertical classrooms work

To ensure it is clear which area of data these findings came from, I have then used each data area as a subheading, under which I have detailed my analysis.

**The deductive focuses and the classification table:**

My deductive focuses (Appendix 3) partly served to validate the qualitative data collected later from students and staff; participants’ insights were evidently drawn from their experiences, as they mostly matched previously researched assertions.

The quantitative use of my classification table, ticking off the deductive focuses raised by pupils in Stage A and D discussions, provided interesting findings. Firstly, this suggested that pupils in Stage A discussions already had the following advantages of a House system made clear to them through lessons and assemblies: availability of leadership roles; increased confidence, constructive and cooperative mixing; enhanced motivation; there are more ‘resources’ are available to achieve a goal; it establishes sense of community; and increases their expectations of themselves. It is therefore evident to me now that year nines have acknowledged that the House system is widely beneficial to them. There is more positivity from this year group towards vertical groupings than I, as a teacher and leader of the system, had realised.

From this data it was also evident that the only differences between the staff and pupil Stage A discussions were: (a) unlike pupils, staff did not acknowledge that year nines can benefit from exposure to new perspectives, and (b) unlike in the staff initial discussion, the year nines did not highlight the value of having more ‘resources’ available in vertical groups to reach a goal. It is arguable, therefore, that (a) pupils can benefit from exposure to new perspectives without it being clearly demonstrated to teachers in the classroom, and (b) that year nine had not had enough opportunity in vertical P.S.H.E lessons and assemblies prior to this discussion to work as a vertical team to complete a task or reach a decision. Both these areas were, however, positively explored in the respective Stage D discussions following me highlighting these new possible advantages, participants then partaking in the new vertical lessons and assemblies, and the use of the stimulus cards in the final discussions afterwards. This implies that though these advantages may be less overt to staff and pupils, they do exist currently within the House system.

The following positive aspects of vertical systems for year nines were the only areas referred to persistently throughout both discussions in each group: providing leadership roles; enhanced motivation; and social confidence, constructive and cooperative mixing. Therefore it is evident that these three gains have been made most prominent in vertical classroom environments in my school so far.

**Interpreting the transcripts: (350 left)**

Insights regarding new perspectives and leadership opportunities gained from multi-age groups were detailed. This complied data drew the following conclusion: all ages must learn from each other, the older years must appreciate simplicity and the unguarded, honest nature of expressions; “younger utterances make them realise it’s not necessary to over complicate” and when “the older pupils [want] to appear "cool" it's nice…when a younger student speaks they get reminded of what an honest answer really is” (Staff, Appendix 1). Contrastingly, younger years are exposed to higher age thoughts and ideas; “sixth formers got up and talked about their experiences and things, so erm that gave a whole new perspective on what we could do” (Appendix 1). Year nines, thus, stand to benefit from both these gains due to their middle age position. It was also clear that staff and students considered teacher facilitation central to making vertical classrooms work: “it basically just lies in the teaching” (Pupil, Appendix 1), therefore leading staff to deliver lessons effectively is key.

In terms of vertical groups improving pupils’ pro-social values, confidence and cooperative mixing, it is evident that behaviour management must be effective before this can occur: “if the behaviour management is good, then it can be great for pro social behaviour, but if it’s not it has the opposite effect” (Staff, Appendix 1). It is interesting that year nine pupils had varied experiences of being “awkward” or “joining in” (Pupils, Appendix 1) within different vertical classes, and it is also interesting that staff drew more positive experiences of year nine inclusion and behaviour from “vertical trips” (Staff, Appendix 1) which were not House related. This implies perhaps that there needs to be more consistent, effective behaviour management in vertical House groups in order for confidence and increased pro-social behaviour to be fostered; this might reduce chances of a year nine pupil asking “"sir, I've got a sore throat, please can I not talk today?" because they are scared to be “judged by years around them” (Staff, Appendix 1). It is also necessary to consider how year nine, when exposed to wider communities, are not instantly motivated, but perhaps initially loose confidence: “they are now at the bottom of the chain for key stage four, and they are thinking that they don’t know it all, I think their mood has changed a little bit. When they are put into those groups they realise tens and elevens know a little bit more than they do” (Staff, Appendix 1). Therefore this suggests that the start of vertical systems are crucial for year nine; leaders and pupils themselves must be able to turn initial feelings of fear into aspiration.

When considering how year nines can access enhanced motivation and positivity to reach goals through vertical groups, less data was produced in comparison to themes like leadership. Nevertheless, there were valuable insights from both groups: “some of the year nines were watching intently, maybe thinking yea “I could do that too, it’s not just for the ‘best’ kids in each class to lead” (Staff, Appendix 1); “there was always a sense of socialising well because our class were talking well” (Pupil, Appendix 1). There is evidence already that working together effectively is a motivator for year nine, these pupils appeared to enjoy it when the different years got on with them, and this became a motive for them to join and achieve the lesson outcomes. It is interesting to reflect on why staff found it a challenge to maintain a focus on the motivational benefits for year nines: “we had year sevens chatting to year twelves about how they'd achieved their grades and…offers and it promoted a sense of value to learning and helping one another get there from year seven onwards” (Staff, Appendix 1). Perhaps staff themselves are not familiar enough with this new vertical system to be able to distinguish the benefits for different years clearly yet, whereas the pupils in the focus group were year nine, so could access a more specific viewpoint.

I would like to acknowledge that, had my time been less restricted, it would have been beneficial to my research to have used more thorough “triangulation” (Wilson, 2013: 151-153). I would have observed, or video recorded, Stage C of the research. This is because I could have used these lesson observations, focussing on (a) the six year nine pupils from my focus group and (b) the six staff in my other focus group, as an extra method of data collection. This could ensure, firstly, that I understood exactly why pupils and staff made the insights they did in their final focus group discussions during Stage D, and secondly it would serve to check the reliability of the statements made. Reliability is crucial since, as Head of House and researcher, it seemed impossible to fully guard against staff and pupils succumbing to the “Hawthorne effect” (Cook, 1962: 116). To ensure “three quite different points of view” (Hopkins, 2008:133) I would, given time, have had a more independent observer interpreting the observations with me to validate my own interpretations when analysing the data.

**Testing unspoken themes and acknowledging those never raised:**

It was important to analyse the affirmative aspects of vertical classrooms for year nines which were not raised in either of the Stage A or Stage D discussions. Research suggests strongly that varied learning methods and conversational style, which are found across different ages, are essential to effective learning. As Kutnick (2005: 48) concludes: “tasks must be selected that involve different particular types of intellect and interaction”. However, even in a culture and school where pupils are frequently encouraged to explore different forms of learning, neither groups ever referred to: (a) varied learning methods found across different ages being essential to learning; or (b) to varied conversational styles supporting learning. The consistency of both groups avoiding these topics suggests they had less evidence so far from vertical P.S.H.E and assemblies, and so less opinions, concerning these linked themes. Thus there is further potential within our school to exploit these benefits; I and the other Heads of House need to plan vertical lessons and assemblies to involve more variety in learning and conversational styles. From looking at previous lesson plans it is clear that vertical lessons so far are formulaic; they open with a short kinaesthetic connector, then a teacher or older pupil leads a casual class discussion culminating in a small group written task. There are many more unused learning methods which students in vertical classes could benefit from.

Denscombe (2005: 312) suggests that it is necessary to consider “the possibility of more than one explanation being valid”, thus it is also worth accepting that participants might have not raised these final themes, despite prompting by the stimulus bullet points, because they simply and logically chose to discuss the first themes listed. Staff in particular structured their discussion in order of the provided bullet points. For instance, staff one opened by stating: ‘I agree with new perspectives as…’ and staff two then moved the group onto the next bullet point by prompting: ‘so for the pro social behaviour bullet point…’ (Appendix 2, Stage D Staff Focus Group). As previously addressed, I should perhaps have used “probing” and “prompting” (Bell, 2005: 161) after discussions had drawn to their natural closes, instead of allowing the conversations to finished when participants thought they were finished. Staff participant one asserts: “year nine is probably, in terms of history, is always the biggest behaviour year in terms of problems”, and staff participant two agrees: “they are a tricky year group to manage and engage in things”. This reinforces the need for varied learning styles, as year nine seemingly require extra efforts to engage them.

With hindsight, instead of using bullet pointed lists on my stimulus card for discussions, laying out my stimulus themes as mind maps, or in a non-logical order such as a circle, could have avoided the risk of participants avoiding the themes at the bottom, as participants would have had to choose themes to discuss in a manner which showed preference for one theme over another.

Nevertheless, the participants all engaged with some the new themes analytically, considering different possible responses, and also developed previous responses following their additional House P.S.H.E lesson. Thus reinforcing the idea that increasing familiarity with their vertical group can help year nine pupils increase their exposure to the benefits of a vertical system.

**Collating new ideas:**

A new potential year nine outcome of vertical groups was raised by staff participant one - there are opportunities to invert stereotypical leadership role expectations:

*Staff 1: “So would it be, yea, beneficial to have mini leadership roles for students of different year groups including the younger ones? The P.S.H.E, the mixed age group of P.S.H.E, they might have certain roles and sometimes actually give the leadership responsibility to younger pupils, that might be helpful, and why not? The older lot need to respect and nurture the learning of the younger lot, this could nurture that!”* (Appendix 2, Stage A Staff Focus Group)

This idea is supported by pupils’ comments about leadership more generally, such as pupil three stating: “younger years like year nines need more leadership too to get confident. They think ‘yea these lot are older, they’ll not listen and I can’t get what I want across anyway, plus, yea, they’ll not even listen to me’, so.” (Appendix 2, Stage A Pupil Focus Group) As Little’s (1995: 26) research findings of multi-age education suggests, “education is a socialising process [which should] provide leadership training”. Therefore, we should not suddenly expect the older pupils to stand up and lead when they get above year nine or ten, we should train them from the younger years onwards to develop into effective leaders.

A second potential year nine outcome of vertical groups was raised by pupil participant one: there are opportunities to study new topics in vertical lessons.

*Pupil 5: “ Does anyone else want to make a point?”*

*Pupil 1: “I think we could have pupils suggesting better topics, you know more interesting new ones, ones we’ve never looked at at all, ever, not like bullying again we do that in year nine already.”*

(Appendix 2, Stage A Pupil Focus Group)

Though this suggests the year nine pupils may have not felt enthused so far by the vertical lesson activities, or the topic matter, it is also important to consider that qualitative research does involve “contraditions” (Denscombe, 2005: 312). As in this case pupil one later also claims in the same discussion: ‘at least people seem to enjoy the lessons’ (Appendix 2, Stage A Pupil Focus Group). I have therefore discarded this small section of data from my findings, as it is not reliable.

**Conclusions**

Reflections on Research Processes: Limitations and Successes

When I was collating new ideas from the transcripts, I found not only more positives to a vertical system to share with my school community, but less predictable, more interesting data. In my methodology I stated: ‘I will use methods which minimise the use of my voice in order to maximise participants’ perspectives…it is beneficial for… to remain open to my own data findings, removing my own voice… should minimise the risk of my data being used simply to confirm the assumptions I have based my enquiry upon.’ In many ways my data collection achieved this, I also feel the ‘Philosophy for Children’ discussion format, and my lack of probing, successfully avoided too directive an approach. My main reflections during the enquiry stemmed from mindfulness concerning the reliability, and validity, of my qualitative data; I sought to achieve an objective enough stance as researcher, whilst acknowledging that my self and my position (as Head of House) were important to the investigation. As Denscombe (2005: 300) states: “researchers know that their self is intertwined with their research activity, but proceed on the basis that they can exercise sufficient self control over their normal attitudes to allow them to operate in a detached manner”. In this respect, I consider myself to have conducted the data collection successfully. However, I should have “prompted” (Bell, 2005: 161) after Stage D discussions, I was too embedded in the ‘Philosophy for Children’ format; I was over-conscious of allowing my personal stance to influence participants and the data. In addition, my data presentation and analysis was predominantly deductive which I feel detracted from my desires to remain fully open to my findings. When coding the data, I was searching for set themes to highlight, and it required a constant effort to not to force my interpretations of the data to match the themes.

When considering the data’s validity it is also important to address that my enquiry was focussing on ‘positive impacts of vertical groupings for year nine’. Hence I purposefully avoided analysing fully “deviant cases” (Denscombe, 2005: 302), in this case those which referred to negative aspects of vertical systems. In this study “deviant cases” (Denscombe, 2005: 302) were only addressed through the positive effects of vertical systems for year nine pupils which had not been set as one of my deductive “temporary analysis constructs” (Wilson, 2013: 135). This ensured my enquiry had a sharp focus, which produced valuable, relevant data. I had predicted that predominantly negative comments would be made by pupils and staff, therefore it was fortunate for my data collection that, despite my prediction, many positives were also raised. Had more time been available, I would have explored the negatives too to allow more objectivity and openness. As Denscombe (2005: 302) asserts: “check rival explanations…there [may be] hidden problems with the theory”.

In terms of research processes I have also learnt that, with qualitative data, twelve “temporary constructs” create too expansive a quantity of data even after they have been coded.

The Significance of my Enquiry and the Wider Impact on the School

This was an internal study, by which I mean the research was solely in my school context and provided findings relate directly to my school’s year nine pupils. Though my findings would not have what Wilson refers to as “external reliability (2013: 147), I do consider my research to have “internal reliability’; if an independent researcher used my data and methods of analysis they would likely reach the same conclusions. My findings suggest that the school is, and was, developing positivity towards vertical groupings and therefore improving the outcomes for pupils, perhaps not only for year nines. The wider impact of my findings on the school begun before the analysis had been completed as two thirty minute Teacher Training sessions have already been delivered by me, along with two other House Heads to whom I detailed my research, highlighting the potential positives of a House system and of vertical classrooms. Teaching staff from my school volunteered to come to the session and a total of forty five staff attended. One of the resources (Appendix 4) used at this session were derived from the “temporary constructs” (Wilson, 2013: 135) list, to ensure staff are aware from now onwards of all researched potential advantages.

The impacts of the House system, and more positive attitudes towards it, have evolved since the initial stages of my enquiry. I will continue to take this positivity further by putting my findings into practice through my roles as Head of House and Lead Learning Practitioner. Based on what I know now, my recommendations and actions for change when planning whole school vertical lessons are:

* include reflections (written, silent, or discursive) at the end of all vertical

lessons which encourage pupils to reflect on: other perspectives heard,

how they worked together to meet the lesson’s objective, and how

different members of the class lead

* Heads of House will plan vertical lessons and assemblies to involve

more varied teaching and learning styles for all pupils

* use ice breaker games as connectors to improve social confidence
* plan for, and direct teaching staff to, develop small leadership

opportunities in vertical lessons for year nines (and below).

For colleagues this will improve the vertical classroom atmospheres over time, and in turn the effects on pupils, especially year nines who are in the centre of this change, could be dramatic. As a staff member remarked about a successful, vertically run, Student Learning Conference: “they realised it wasn't isolating, actually in other years there are many like them and they had a community there which made them flourish!” (Staff, Appendix 1).

Word Count: 5246

**Bibliography**

Amos Hatch, J. (2002). Doing *qualitative research in education settings*, New York Press.

Bell, J. (2005). *Doing your research project – a guide for first-time researchers in education, health and social science*, Berkshire: Open University Press.

Cohen, L. et al. (2011). *Research Methods in Education*, London: Routledge.

Cook, D. L. (1962). *The Hawthorne effect in educational research*, Phi Delta Kappan Publishers.

Denscombe, M. (2005). *The good research guide for small scale social research projects*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Hopkins, D. (2008). *A teacher’s guide to classroom research*, New York: Open University Press.

Kutnick, P. (2005). *The Effects of Pupil Grouping: Literature Review*, Brighton: University of Brighton.

Little, A. (1995). *Multi-grade teaching: a review of research and practice*, London: Overseas Development Administration.

McNiff, J. and Whitehead, J. (2006). *All you need to know about action research*, London: Sage Publications Limited.

‘Philosophy for Children’ (<http://www.philosophyforchildren.co.uk/>).

Wilson, E. (2013). *School based research: a guide for education students*, London: Sage Publications Limited.

**Appendices**

**Appendix 1**

“Constant comparative” (Wilson, 2013: 135) format, interpreted data:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **RESEARCHED POSITIVE IMPACTS OF VERTICAL GROUPING FOR YEAR 9 PUPILS INVOLVED IN COLLABORATIVE HOUSE TASKS** | **MOST RELEVANT UTTERANCES BY STAFF**  **IN 1ST DISCUSSION (Stage A)** | **MOST RELEVANT UTTERANCES BY STAFF**  **IN 2ND DISCUSSION (Stage D)** |
| **Exposure to new perspectives** | (None) | **-yea other opinions helped sort of open their eyes a little more**  **-I agree with new perspectives as I can see how pupils gain new perspectives from others but only if it's facilitated in the right way, I think I noticed that in the first PSHE lesson I took because older students were sharing experiences with younger students about their experiences of bullying.**  **- it's healthy, and from the younger kids perspectives when the older kids are speaking its like "oh I would never have said or known that" or "why is he saying it like that I'd never have said it that way" and it makes then consider others and themselves in more depth. They think about what happens when they're older. - I agree, and sometimes they think of the more obvious things to say but try to make it sound clever if they're older, but the younger perspectives and utterances make them realise it’s not necessary to over complicate things all the time, it takes them back to basics and actually they appreciate the topic studied more if you start with the basics.**  **- yea I agree, with the whole "cool" image thing of the older pupils wanting to appear "cool" it's nice that when a younger student speaks they get reminded of what an honest answer really is, not lame thing that is said to further a reputation. The younger years are less filtered, less image conscious, they're more honest, and the older years have a lot to learn from that**  **- they can learn from experience, there is a lot for the year tens and elevens to tell the year nines, and the year nines can pass on what they have learned from seven and eight and all the way through, they can tell all the other age groups how it is, because they have lived through it, seven and eight.** |
| **Providing leadership roles** | - **I have got some quite challenging tens, and twelves and thirteens that clearly didn’t want to be there. And the year nines actually, and the lower year groups really were leading it, they were the ones telling year elevens to shut up. It was completely different.**  **-or year nine it is quite interesting because they are obviously the middle year group, because they can benefit from having leadership experience with the younger years.**  **- I think the vast majority of them are that age where they are kind of thinking “I’m not old enough to be a leader, because these guys are doing it, and I’m not young enough to be following orders, so therefore I’m stuck in the middle and don’t have to lead the younger ones because there is year ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen to do it”.** | **- Yea, plus seeing some pupils who don’t normally lead, like some of the year elevens who are shy in their own years or older pupils renowned for poor behaviour, so some of the year nines were watching intently, maybe thinking yea “I could do that too, it’s not just for the ‘best’ kids in each class to lead”.** |
| **Pro-social behaviour: increased civic values and social responsibility** | (None) | **-yea I agree, with the whole "cool" image thing of the older pupils wanting to appear "cool" it's nice that when a younger student speaks they get reminded of what an honest answer really is, not lame thing that is said to further a reputation. The younger years are less filtered, less image conscious, they're more honest, and the older years have a lot to learn from that**  **-[in vertical trips] there is a lot of mixing, sharing and support. Very pro social.**  **-But we were just talking in our TLR seven meeting today about the vertical detention, as it’s for years sevens, eights, and nines, and the year sevens are seeing behaviour displayed by year nines which is dreadful, and they're**  **learning that sort of negative, anti social behaviour and I think if vertical groups are in good environments, and if the behaviour management is good, then it can be great for pro social behaviour, but if it’s not it has the opposite effect. The younger ones aspire to the anti social behaviour they see from those above them.** |
| **Social confidence, and constructive and cooperative mixing** | -**because we are doing it with year sevens and eights, by the time they get into year nine, I think it will be a lot better than probably how it has been this year, because they will be used to being in mixed age house groups**  **-I think a little bit that year nine don’t really know their place, and I think they are a little bit unsure about where they fit in. Because they are not quite key stage three, and they are not quite key stage four. So perhaps being able to see all of them, all the above and below in a vertical group, could kind of, is the bridge for them maybe.**  **-with year nines, probably not the best word to use but some of them can get a bit arrogant thinking at this point “we know it all”, and by being with the year tens and year elevens it’s perhaps a reminder that you don’t, there’s still people above us.**  **-I often find that the year nines are the quietest.**  **they are socially aware, they are at that point, out of everybody they are the most socially aware**  **-I have got a student same issue in my English class, and he is less cheeky and more serious when we are doing the vertical P.S.H.E lessons, and I definitely think the second time round he has felt a bit more comfortable, but again he has been more serious.**  **-They don’t want to get picked on for anything, they don’t want to do anything that will make them stand out.**  **-Not willing to take the risk is it, to be, they don’t want to be the subject of humiliation.**  **-I’ve got a boy in my year nine vertical P.S.H.E who I also teach in my English class, and the difference in him, between the two different environments that I have seen him in is unbelievable. I would agree with you when you say he is mimicking the behaviour of the older students, and not anyone, I think he almost fears that if he says something silly in his year group everyone will laugh with him, but I think he thinks if he was to say something with older students, they might laugh at him and he is not willing to take that risk.** | **-there was a lot of mixing, sharing and support. Very pro social.**  **-a lot of them**... **feel slightly on the edge of their comfort zone.**  **-They're wont sure how valid their contributions are in a mixed age class, they might feel they're being judged by others not supported. There's a weak ability boy in year nine who came and said to me at the start of the lesson, knowing he's not a confident reader or speaker, "sir I've got a sore throat, please can I or talk today?" You know he doesn't want to be put on the spot with others younger there, and older. It undermined  his own self confidence. Especially when you've got a bright year seven who can speak big words.**  **-for my class that was more an issue at the beginning as now they're getting more familiar with one another. They're increasingly comfortable. You know the younger or older years aren't "the other", a feared unknown creature, they're more like them than they thought which is comforting to them, I think!**  **-you know because its established now, and its less new and risky, and they realise it’s still a classroom and it’s still a learning environment, and it’s just slightly different as there's more different views in the room.** |
| **Enhanced motivation** | **-I think as well that they need to have those people to aspire to. So as much as it can be a shock to the system, to be like “oh, yeah maybe we are not as clever as we think, but that is what I want to aspire to”.**  **-it is quite good for them actually to have something to aspire to**  **-** | **-plus seeing some pupils who don’t normally lead, like some of the year elevens who are shy in their own years or older pupils renowned for poor behaviour, so some of the year nines were watching intently, maybe thinking yea “I could do that too, it’s not just for the ‘best’ kids in each class to lead”.**  **- If students leave a room thinking "wow yes I contributed something to other year groups today" then that's a huge achievement and would provide mental and social stability. And if a year eleven leaves thinking "yes I modelled something hard for younger years today and they understood it, great" then that would have the same effect on them I am sure.** |
| **Increased “self esteem” and “self acceptance”** | (None) | **-** **now self acceptance, hmm, I'm not sure if there is that whole situation yet where they're feeling comfortable with each other in vertical all P.S.H.E, in terms of the whole "my role is valid in this class because I'm different", I think a lot of them, question their sense of belonging**  **- that was more an issue at the beginning as now they're getting more familiar with one another. They're increasingly comfortable. You know the younger or older years aren't "the other", a feared unknown creature, they're more like them than they thought which is comforting to them, I think!**  **- they're now more accepting of the vertical situation and therefore they're more sure of the,selves in and around school. They're more accepting of themselves in they're group, and their role, and more secure.**  **-the student learning conference was vertical and so they saw others from above years or below them who were also "gifted and talented" and they realised it wasn't isolating, actually in other years there are many like them and they had a community there which made them flourish!** |
| **Improved psychological health** | (None) | **- in terms lastly then of improved psychological health, I think if everyone has contributed and feels a sense of worth, that they've done something positive, then vertical P.S.H.E can be great!** |
| **Varied conversational styles support learning** | (None) | (None) |
| **Varied learning methods found across different ages are essential** | (None) | (None) |
| **Importance of establishing sense of community within schools** | - **they are a tricky year group to manage and engage in things, if they get involved more in P.S.H.E they will get more involved around school in general too maybe, and that would be great for the school community to see them being more included and pro-active.** | **- there was a lot of mixing, sharing and support. Very pro social.** |
| **Individuals increase their expectations of themselves when exposed to wider communities** | - **I think it has changed now because of the three year key stage four now, because no longer year nines are like “Oh we are top of key stage three, we know best”. They are now at the bottom of the chain for key stage four, and they are thinking that they don’t know it all, I think their mood has changed a little bit. When they are put into those groups they realise tens and elevens know a little bit more than they do.** | (None) |
| **Positivity; more ‘resources’ are available to achieve a goal** | - t makes it something not to be ashamed of which is a great thing to have available in a school! And there we had year sevens chatting to year twelves about how they'd achieved their grades and their university offers and it promoted a sense of value to learning and helping one another get there from year seven onwards. | (None) |
| **RESEARCHED POSITIVE IMPACTS OF VERTICAL GROUPING FOR YEAR 9 PUPILS INVOLVED IN COLLABORATIVE HOUSE TASKS** | **MOST RELEVANT UTTERANCES BY PUPILS**  **IN 1ST DISCUSSION (Stage A)** | **MOST RELEVANT UTTERANCES BY PUPILS**  **IN 2ND DISCUSSION (Stage D)** |
| **Exposure to new perspectives** | **-you know other people’s point of view as well, so like if you go ask someone in year nine they are more likely to say the same thing as you, but like if you go ask someone in like year eleven like year seven, they might have a different answer.** | **-we need new perspectives 'cause we need to hear like older ones like sixth formers**  **- it does help get new perspectives 'cause they have different ideas on things.**  **- yea like last time we had the aspirations and careers day lessons, and e sixth formers got up and talked about their experiences and things, so erm that gave a whole new perspective on what we could do** |
| **Providing leadership roles** | - **So younger years like year nines need more leadership too to get confident. They think “yea these lot are older, they’ll not listen and I can’t get what I want across anyway, plus, yea, they’ll not even listen to me”.** | **- the sixth formers there and that teacher they were the only ones talking so, yea, the year eights, nines, and tens, oh and sevens, had no input whatsoever**  **-so I guess it basically just lies in the teaching? Because in ours the older ones just told us about what they did and if they failed or not but in other groups like yours you all got to chat about yourselves and stuff, not just the other older students**  **- we could have it like that, only missing with groups we have lunch with, then each have one or two older students to lead then it would be more mixed but still work when we had to chat?** |
| **Pro-social behaviour: increased civic values and social responsibility** | (None) | **- in some ways it does improve your social behaviour because in some ways it is helping your social confidence 'cause you're mixing together**  **- that's not really true because in our group everyone joined in**  **- in ours we were in sub groups to chat so the teacher wasn’t like taking a class, we were just chatting, that's better because its laid back so we could talk more freely, like a casual conversation**  **-what we are all chatting about now goes under pro social behaviour then doesn't it, because we think house groups help the way we talk to each other, get the younger ones to talk, and how the sixth formers help us**  **- for me there was always a sense of socialising well because our class were talking well**  **- so the pro social behaviour for years seven, eight, and nine could be better 'cause they were a bit shy, but maybe then the pro social behaviour of the older lot should be better then to help them, the younger ones, get**  **-but if you were to do [makes groups only mix with one other year] then it wouldn't really promote social behaviour across years 'cause then no ones really mixing with anyone new or different to them really** |
| **Social confidence, and constructive and cooperative mixing** | -**I think it is also very awkward, ‘cause the last one I went to, we were just sitting there, there wasn’t much communication amongst each other so it was pretty awkward.**  **they might feel left out because they are younger. So they feel like they don’t have a bigger voice, they feel like they can’t talk over the others and they can’t get their point across with the older years.**  **-but if forms mixed up it would also be less awkward, ‘cause we’d know them a bit at least if they were in our year group**  - **It’s harder for year sevens ‘cause they’ve just got used to this school then they get dumped in a room with you know all the older ones, when they don’t even know half the people in their own year (laughs)** | **-I agree you grow confident**  **-it helps you become confident because you're around people you like don't know that much**  **- it is helping your social confidence 'cause you're mixing together**  **-the sixth formers there and that teacher they were the only ones talking so, yea, the year eights, nines, and tens, oh and sevens, had no input whatsoever**  **-that's not really true because in our group everyone joined in**  **- our teacher told us, like, go off in your mixed groups and all about what you wanna be, so we just chatter to like a lesson, it was fun**  **-oh our teacher didn't we had to talk as a class, all together, so no one joined in**  **-some groups are more compatible though isn't it, they get on but some won't, so that's sometimes why groups talk or not, not just the teachers**  **- for me there was always a sense of socialising well because our class were talking well**  **- year seven and eight should be in a group together as they all have lunch together, year nine and ten should be in the PSHE groups together as they have lunch times together in school, and the older years should go together as they're all going in the same direction, like going to be leaving school soon. Then we'd all mix with other years but be less shy.** |
| **Enhanced motivation** | - **it is better than sitting in your own class and erm you know it is something new and you can discuss with more people**  **-** **the younger ones should be able to talk to older students because they can learn from them.** | **-** **but in ours we were in sub groups to chat so the teacher wasn’t like taking a class, we were just chatting, that's better because its laid back so we could talk more freely, like a casual conversation**  **- for me there was always a sense of socialising well because our class were talking well** |
| **Increased “self esteem” and “self acceptance”** | (None) | **-**, **our group was just talking like 'so yea what do you want to be when you’re older?'** |
| **Improved psychological health** | (None) | (None) |
| **Varied conversational styles support learning** | (None) | (None) |
| **Varied learning methods found across different ages are essential** | (None) | (None) |
| **Importance of establishing sense of community within schools** | -**they get to learn with people that aren’t their age, so also then the school gets on better together overall, which has to be good for year nine and everyone else, and so so in future when you go to a job and there is someone like ten years older than you, you know how to work with them, you are not just working with people your year.** | (None) |
| **Individuals increase their expectations of themselves when exposed to wider communities** | - **Plus it’s easier to finish tasks and do more if there are more people with more different ideas.** | - **and we thought we could achieve more than we thought after chatting to older kids even** |
| **Positivity; more ‘resources’ are available to achieve a goal** | - there was this guy in year seven who was going on about how he wants to be a pilot and so the older ones helped him work out what he needed to do to get to be that | (None) |

**Appendix 2**

Coded, interpreted transcripts:

KEY

|  |
| --- |
| **THE RESEARCHED POSITIVE IMPACTS OF VERTICAL GROUPING FOR YEAR 9 PUPILS INVOLVED IN COLLABORATIVE HOUSE TASKS** |
| **Exposure to new perspectives** |
| **Providing leadership roles** |
| **Pro-social behaviour: increased civic values and social responsibility** |
| **Social confidence, and constructive and cooperative mixing** |
| **Enhanced motivation** |
| **Increased “self esteem” and “self acceptance”** |
| **Improved psychological health** |
| **Varied conversational styles support learning** |
| **Varied learning methods found across different ages are essential** |
| **Importance of establishing sense of community within schools** |
| **Individuals increase their expectations of themselves when exposed to wider communities** |
| **Positivity; more ‘resources’ are available to achieve a goal** |

Stage A Pupil Focus Group

P1: I think they [year nine] do benefit, because although it can be boring, they benefit because erm they get to learn with people that aren’t their age, so also then the school gets on better together overall, which has to be good for year nine and everyone else, and so so in future when you go to a job and there is someone like ten years older than you, you know how to work with them, you are not just working with people your year. **Plus it’s easier to finish tasks and do more if there are more people with more different ideas.**

P2: I think that too because erm, **you know other people’s point of view as well, so like if you go ask someone in year nine they are more likely to say the same thing as you, but like if you go ask someone in like year eleven like year seven, they might have a different answer**, you can have like er a good experience.

P3: I think they benefit from it but they don’t like it.

P4:Yeah, I don’t mind it, because it is better than sitting in your own class and erm you know it is something new and you can discuss with more people, **I think it is also very awkward, ‘cause the last one I went to, we were just sitting there, there wasn’t much communication amongst each other so it was pretty awkward.**

P1: Maybe they should it more often, and also, erm instead of having maybe like everyone in the same house you could do other houses like two people from Liberty, do you get what I mean?

P4: Yeah.

P1: I think they should try a whole year, but like do you know how we have in form P.S.H.E, but mix just our year forms up, just for a P.S.H.E lesson, because I think people find it really awkward like year sevens, year eights, year nines, I think **they might feel left out because they are younger. So they feel like they don’t have a bigger voice, they feel like they can’t talk over the others and they can’t get their point across with the older years.**

P5: Maybe if we got to change the groups every so often that would be a bit better.

P4: Yeah cos it’s always the same group yeah.

P1: But then also you are not exactly getting used to the people, if you carry on changing it then obviously there will be less communication.

P3: Don’t change it every single time, just change it like every three times.

P4: Yeah but how many times do we have vertical P.S.H.E?

P1, P2, P3: (inaudible)

P6: Maybe like, everyone complains about the P.S.H.E lessons being boring, every single time.

P3: Because it’s the same topics.

P6: Every single year we learn the same thing so why can’t we just do it all the time in P.S.H.E.

P4: Well maybe like more fun topics, to actually to cover

P6: Yeah but it’s not even that, it’s sometimes bonding, cos in my like, for example erm, in one P.S.H.E class they do stuff like singing and stuff, and you come to my P.S.H.E class and we are just sitting there reading. So why it’s not interactive?

P3: Copying from powerpoint.

P2: So you can either start talking about it or getting the work done.

P4: So does it depend on the teacher then?

P5: Yes **but if forms mixed up it would also be less awkward, ‘cause we’d know them a bit at least if they were in our year group** (.) Does anyone else want to make a point?

P1: I think we could have pupils suggesting better topics, you know more interesting new ones, ones we’ve never looked at at all, ever, not like bullying again we do that in year 9 already.

P5: We obviously learn something from it, but yea I see what you mean. But it’s different when we do the same topic in our house groups, I mean yea we look at the same thing, but differently maybe.

P1: But sometimes it’s worse than normal, it seems, erm, too forced or something.

P3: I think it benefits the younger years but not the older years at all. Because the older years can still talk to the younger years, but not the other way around. For example, I would still talk to friends if I was year eleven and they were year seven, but they’d not want to talk to me as I am older, it’s not the same, younger years are afraid to approach older ones. **So younger years like year nines need more leadership too to get confident. They think “yea these lot are older, they’ll not listen and I can’t get what I want across anyway, plus, yea, they’ll not even listen to me”, so.** **----** Which is why I think it should not be older years and younger together.

P2: I disagree though because the older years have nothing to learn from the older years, but the younger ones should be able to talk to older students because they can learn from them.

P4: **It’s harder for year sevens ‘cause they’ve just got used to this school then they get dumped in a room with you know all the older ones, when they don’t even know half the people in their own year (laughs)** at least people seem to enjoy the lessons.

P1: maybe we should have just years seven and eight together, and then years nine and ten you know, like mix two years up in P.S.H.E. But then we need to think as well about house assemblies. Miss, do all house assemblies happen at the same time?

Myself: No, because there’s not enough room. Half the houses have P.S.H.E first then assembly, and the other houses do it the other way around. So, no.

P1: Oh, so that wouldn’t work as we have to have assembly as a House. Unless there’s a way assemblies can go on at the same time.

P2: Yea

Stage A Staff Focus Group

S1: I think urm **for year nine it is quite interesting because they are obviously the middle year group, because they can benefit from having leadership experience with the younger years**. So I think it is quite good for them actually to have something to aspire to, but also **to gain leadership experience with younger year groups**.

S2: Do you think at year nine, because I think year nine is probably in terms of history is always the biggest behaviour year in terms of problems (word unintelligible) hormones. Do you think as a year nine, maybe possibly some of the more mature ones, but **I think the vast majority of them are that age where they are kind of thinking “I’m not old enough to be a leader, because these guys are doing it, and I’m not young enough to be following orders, so therefore I’m stuck in the middle and don’t have to lead the younger ones because there is year ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen to do it”**?-----

S1: So would it be, yea, beneficial to have mini leadership roles for students of different year groups including the younger ones? The P.S.H.E, the mixed age group of P.S.H.E, they might have certain roles and sometimes actually give the leadership responsibility to younger pupils, that might be helpful, and why not? The older lot need to respect and nurture the learning of the younger lot, this could nurture that! Because I agree that they are a tricky year group to manage and engage in things, if they get involved more in P.S.H.E they will get more involved around school in general too maybe, and that would be great for the school community to see them being more included and pro-active.

S2:Yeah, I mean. I think um the benefits do outweigh the negatives, and I agree with what you said. I do think that roles would be very good.

S3: I think actually, **because we are doing it with year sevens and eights, by the time they get into year nine, I think it will be a lot better than probably how it has been this year, because they will be used to being in mixed age house groups**. Whereas this year nine cohort, it is a very new thing. As with every other year group, but like you said they are more prone to being a bit hormonal.

S3,S4,S5: (laughs)

S5: Sure!

S4: **I think it has changed now because of the three year key stage four now, because no longer year nines are like “Oh we are top of key stage three, we know best”. They are now at the bottom of the chain for key stage four, and they are thinking that they don’t know it all, I think their mood has changed a little bit. When they are put into those groups they realise tens and elevens know a little bit more than they do.**

S5: **I think a little bit that year nine don’t really know their place, and I think they are a little bit unsure about where they fit in. Because they are not quite key stage three, and they are not quite key stage four. So perhaps being able to see all of them, all the above and below in a vertical group, could kind of, is the bridge for them maybe.**

S2: Why do you think, what are the benefits of you know like you were saying, about the year ten and eleven knowing more than they do, what are the benefits for year nine then for that.

S3: I think erm, **with year nines, probably not the best word to use but some of them can get a bit arrogant thinking at this point “we know it all”, and by being with the year tens and year elevens it’s perhaps a reminder that you don’t, there’s still people above us.**

S1: I think as well that they need to have those people to aspire to. So as much as it can be a shock to the system, to be like “oh, yeah maybe we are not as clever as we think, but that is what I want to aspire to”. I’ve noticed it not necessarily with year nine but with other year groups when we have gone on trips and it has been a reward trip and there have been mixed groups, it has been really nice to see them all interacting, and then you see them later on interacting in the playground a bit more. And it is like “oh ok, that is because you have got to know each other” and there is something in common in performing arts, and that carries through then and it is nice for them to have someone supportive that they know throughout the year group, and I think…

S3: Socially as well as academically.

S1: Yeah. And I think it is really good, I think it benefits different groups of students differently, and some people take more out of it than others, but I think there is (sic) definitely some students in year nine that I can identify as having someone that they can go to in year ten, that they have got to know through a vertical lesson, who they could maybe see in the playground if they were bothered about something. That would be quite good for them to have that, as sort of like an unofficial mentor or something, who is a good influence on them rather than someone who could maybe get them into a bit of trouble. But I guess that is the flip side, of it isn’t it, thinking about the groups put together, and making sure there is a real mix of students rather than people who are just going to lead off other people in the wrong direction.

S2: I think year nine are very susceptible to kind of like what goes on above all of them, which they don’t fully understand yet, and you know, from the P.S.H.E lessons that I have been delivering, **I often find that the year nines are the quietest.**

S5: I would agree.

S2: But I think that is because **they are socially aware, they are at that point, out of everybody they are the most socially aware**. Year seven and eight are there for, they are young they are the babies. Year nine are slightly, that transition period with year ten, and I think year eleven to twelve and thirteen are kind of like more, that is where they will have the most influence on year nine. Certainly sixth formers, the mixture in my group in P.S.H.E, I found that the lower years I have got some really tricky ones, certainly in year nine. There is a year nine boy in there. But then I think what really helps is that there are some very calm and very sophisticated and socially very intelligent year twelve thirteen pupils, and I think subconsciously they will mimic that. Maybe not straightaway, but I think eventually they will go, “oh gosh I remember when I was in year thirteen”.

S4: **I have the exact opposite in my group though, because I have got some quite challenging tens, and twelves and thirteens that clearly didn’t want to be there. And the year nines actually, and the lower year groups really were leading it, they were the ones telling year elevens to shut up. It was completely different.**

S5: **I’ve got a boy in my year nine vertical P.S.H.E who I also teach in my English class, and the difference in him, between the two different environments that I have seen him in is unbelievable. I would agree with you when you say he is mimicking the behaviour of the older students, and not anyone, I think he almost fears that if he says something silly in his year group everyone will laugh with him, but I think he thinks if he was to say something with older students, they might laugh at him and he is not willing to take that risk.**

S3: I agree with that. **I have got a student same issue in my English class, and he is less cheeky and more serious when we are doing the vertical P.S.H.E lessons, and I definitely think the second time round he has felt a bit more comfortable, but again he has been more serious.**

S5: **Not willing to take the risk is it, to be, they don’t want to be the subject of humiliation.**

S1: **They don’t want to get picked on for anything, they don’t want to do anything that will make them stand out.**

Stage D Pupil Focus Group

P1: **we need new perspectives 'cause we need to hear like older ones like sixth formers** and  
  
P2: yea  
  
P3: and **it helps you become confident because you're around people you like don't know that much**  
  
P4: **in some ways it does improve your social behaviour because in some ways it is helping your social confidence 'cause you're mixing together ------**  
  
P2: yea **I agree you grow confident**  
  
P5: but in some ways it isn't helping because you you won't grow confident if teachers are going to be changing the people you're going to be working with  
  
P1, P2, P3: no, no  
  
P2: we're not going to be changing though  
  
P2: yea the house groups stay the same all year  
  
P4: yea  
  
P6: we've been in the same group like three times now so we get used to it  
  
P4: they should rechange the groups maybe  
  
P5: but **it does help get new perspectives 'cause they have different ideas on things**  
  
P6: yea like last time in P.S.H.E we uh  
  
P4: **yea like last time we had the aspirations and careers day lessons, and the sixth formers got up and talked about their experiences and things, so erm that gave a whole new perspective on what we could do**  
P3: as we'll they were there to support us  
  
P3: but at the same time **the sixth formers there and that teacher they were the only ones talking so, yea, the year eights, nines, and tens, oh and sevens, had no input whatsoever ------**  
  
P1, P4, P6: nah (unintelligible)  
  
P4: **that's not really true because in our group everyone joined in**, **------** and there was this guy in year seven who was going on about how he wants to be a pilot and so the older ones helped him work out what he needed to do to get to be that  
  
P1: yea it's just 'cause ones in your class wouldn't talk, that is their fault  
  
P3: yea but some groups are different then so they, the teachers, should do the same with every group so it is fair  
  
P2: yea like in my group year eleven and sixth formers only spoke, and then obviously the teacher  
  
P4: the thing is **our teacher told us, like, go off in your mixed groups and all about what you wanna be, so we just chatter to like a lesson, it was fun**  
  
P3: **oh our teacher didn't we had to talk as a class, all together, so no one joined in**  
P5: yea all groups are different so, our group was just talking like 'so yea what do you want to be when your older?'  
  
P6: yea ours did and it just rolled from there **and we thought we could achieve more than we thought after chatting to older kids even**  
  
P3: **so I guess it basically just lies in the teaching? Because in ours the older ones just told us about what they did and if they failed or not but in other groups like yours you all got to chat about yourselves and stuff, not just the other older students**  
  
P6: yea  
  
P1: **some groups are more compatible though isn't it, they get on but some won't, so that's sometimes why groups talk or not, not just the teachers**  
  
P6, P3, P2: yea, yea  
  
P4: but what your saying was your teacher was talking, **but in ours we were in sub groups to chat so the teacher wasn’t like taking a class, we were just chatting, that's better because its laid back so we could talk more freely, like a casual conversation** ------ -----  
  
All: (unintelligible)  
  
P1: that's fine but some people didn't get it like that  
  
P3: yea if they're not going to swap around the groups at least swap around the teachers so everyone gets a chance to chat and get to know each other properly  
  
P4: so **what we are all chatting about now goes under pro social behaviour then doesn't it, because we think house groups help the way we talk to each other, get the younger ones to talk, and how the sixth formers help us**  
  
P1, P2, P3, P5, P6: yea  
  
P4: 'cause **for me there was always a sense of socialising well because our class were talking well -----** -----  
  
P3: so there needs to be more consistency from groups or teachers  
  
P2: yea so it's not awkward, it can be awkward  
  
P3: (laughs) yea sure!  
  
P1: but does it really matter about which teacher as all lessons are the same for P.S.H.E  
  
P2: but that's what we're saying, yea it matters a lot, the teacher makes it more fun so were less afraid of talking in front of the others, the older pupils probably I reckon, like we all know which teachers we’d rather have  
  
P1, P3, P4, P5,P6: yea (laughs)  
  
P4: ok then but it is the lessons being the same or the teacher needing to be the same, 'cause there's a difference  
  
P3: yea I guess if the teachers all did the same thing it wouldn't matter which teacher it was, so  
  
P5: yep I agree  
  
P4: **so the pro social behaviour for years seven, eight, and nine could be better 'cause they were a bit shy, but maybe then the pro social behaviour of the older lot should be better then to help them, the younger ones, get over being shy in the first place.**P3: sure, totally, but then this is why I think that **year seven and eight should be in a group together as they all have lunch together, year nine and ten should be in the PSHE groups together as they have lunch times together in school, and the older years should go together as they're all going in the same direction, like going to be leaving school soon. Then we'd all mix with other years but be less shy.**  
P2: yea and me, I think so too  
  
P4, P6: yea  
  
P1: **but if you were to do [makes groups only mix with one other year] then it wouldn't really promote social behaviour across years 'cause then no ones really mixing with anyone new or different to them really**  
  
P4: yea but **we could have it like that, only missing with groups we have lunch with, then each have one or two older students to lead then it would be more mixed but still work when we had to chat?**  
P1, P2, P3, P5, P6: yea, yea

Stage D Staff Focus Group

S1: **I agree with new perspectives as I can see how pupils gain new perspectives from others but only if it's facilitated in the right way, I think I noticed that in the first PSHE lesson I took because older students were sharing experiences with younger students about their experiences of bullying.** That was the topic for the first lesson yea?  
  
S2: yea  
  
S1: good, **yea other opinions helped sort of open their eyes a little more**

S4: **I think they can learn from experience, there is a lot for the year tens and elevens to tell the year nines, and the year nines can pass on what they have learned from seven and eight and all the way through, they can tell all the other age groups how it is, because they have lived through it, seven and eight.**

S2: yea **plus seeing some pupils who don’t normally lead, like some of the year elevens who are shy in their own years or older pupils renowned for poor behaviour, so some of the year nines were watching intently, maybe thinking yea “I could do that too, it’s not just for the ‘best’ kids in each class to lead”. -----**  
S3: hmm  
  
S2: **yea I agree, with the whole "cool" image thing of the older pupils wanting to appear "cool" it's nice that when a younger student speaks they get reminded of what an honest answer really is, not lame thing that is said to further a reputation. The younger years are less filtered, less image conscious, they're more honest, and the older years have a lot to learn from that I think. ------**   
  
S1: yea, hmm  
  
S2: **it's healthy, and from the younger kids perspectives when the older kids are speaking its like "oh I would never have said or known that" or "why is he saying it like that I'd never have said it that way" and it makes then consider others and themselves in more depth. They think about what happens when they're older.**  
S3: **I agree, and sometimes they think of the more obvious things to say but try to make it sound clever if they're older, but the younger perspectives and utterances make them realise its not necessary to over complicate things all the time, it takes the, back to basics and actually they appreciate the topic studied more if you start with the basics.** As teacher we often forget to teach from the basics with older years, when we perhaps should be doing so.  
  
S2: sure, sure. So for the pro social behaviour bullet point I've seen both positives and negatives to vertical groups, in the class in P.S.H.E it can work quite well, also  in a drama trip with fifteen year ten, eleven, and twelve students and that was really good because they'd all been chatting about their different things, they all like chatted about the past student learning conference and their difference thoughts and experiences, so **there was a lot of mixing, sharing and support. Very pro social. They were able to chat and that sort of thing. By we were just talking in our TLR seven meeting today about the vertical detention, as its for years sevens, eights, and nines, and the year sevens are seeing behaviour displayed by year nines which is dreadful, and they're**  
S1: learning it, yea  
  
S2: yea **learning that sort of negative, anti social behaviour and I think if vertical groups are in good environments, and if the behaviour management is good, then it can be great for pro social behaviour, but if its not it has the opposite effect. The younger ones aspire to the anti social behaviour they see from those above them.**  
S1: it's true  
  
S3: yes, different contents create two extremes when the groups are vertical, it works or it doesn't work at all!  
  
S2: yea, yea.  
  
S1: So , ok, now self acceptance, hmm, I'm not sure if there is that whole situation yet where they're feeling comfortable with each other in vertical all P.S.H.E, in terms of the whole "my role is valid in this class because I'm different", I think a lot of them, question their sense of belonging **and feel slightly on the edge of their comfort zone. They're wont sure how valid their contributions are in a mixed age class, they might feel they're being judged by others not supported. There's a weak ability boy in year nine who came and said to me at the start of the lesson, knowing he's not a confident reader or speaker, "sir I've got a sore throat, please can I or talk today?" You know he doesn't want to be put on the spot with others younger there, and older. It undermined  his own self confidence. Especially when you've got a bright year seven who can speak big words.**   
  
S1, S2: mmm, yea  
  
S1: yea I have some that are the same, but **for my class that was more an issue at the beginning as now they're getting more familiar with one another. They're increasingly comfortable. You know the younger or older years aren't "the other", a feared unknown creature, they're more like them than they thought which is comforting to them, I think! ----**  
S2: sure, that's good, yea  
  
S1: they're willing to take a few more risks, and its not sudden or massive but its happening slowly, and they're now more accepting of the vertical situation and therefore they're more sure of the,selves in and around school. They're more accepting of themselves in they're group, and their role, and more secure.  
  
S1: mmm, yea most are, just some not so much  
  
S3: yea  
  
S1: **you know because its established now, and its less new and risky, and they realise its still a classroom and its still a learning environment, and its just slightly different as there's more different views in the room.**  
  
S3: and I think in terms of self acceptance, one of the things we spoke about in the student learning conference and at gifted and talented working parties was that pupils hate being labelled as anything, like "gifted", or whatever, but they hate it, but the student learning conference was vertical and so they saw others from above years or below them who were also "gifted and talented" and they realised it wasn't isolating, actually in other years there are many like them and they had a community there which made them flourish! It makes it something not to be ashamed of which is a great thing to have available in a school! And there we had year sevens chatting to year twelves about how they'd achieved their grades and their university offers and it promoted a sense of value to learning and helping one another get there from year seven onwards.  
  
S2: **in terms lastly then of improved psychological health, I think if everyone has contributed and feels a sense of worth, that they've done something positive, then vertical P.S.H.E can be great!** If students leave a room thinking "wow yes I contributed something to other year groups today" then that's a huge achievement and would provide mental and social stability. And if a year eleven leaves thinking "yes I modelled something hard for younger years today and they understood it, great" then that would have the same effect on them I am sure.  
  
S1, S3: yea

*NB. When a separate colour key appears after transcribed text, this previous data fits both colour themes shown.*

**Appendix 3**

Classification table of tTemporary construct” themes:

|  |
| --- |
| **RESEARCHED POSITIVE IMPACTS OF VERTICAL GROUPING FOR YEAR 9 PUPILS INVOLVED IN COLLABORATIVE HOUSE TASKS** |
| Exposure to new perspectives |
| Providing leadership roles |
| Pro-social behaviour: increased civic values and social responsibility |
| Social confidence, constructive and cooperative mixing |
| Enhanced motivation |
| Increased “self esteem” and “self acceptance” |
| Improved psychological health |
| Varied conversational styles support learning |
| Varied learning methods found across different ages are essential |
| Importance of establishing sense of community within schools |
| Individuals increase their expectations of themselves when exposed to wider communities |

**Appendix 4**

Document used at two staff training sessions: