

Embedding the EPQ/HPQ in school culture (Q&A)

Host: Dr Emma Thompson (Learn with US Transition Leader, University of Southampton)

Guest: Jenny Clements (EPQ Co-ordinator, Sweyne Park School)

Introduction

ET: Welcome to another one of our EPQ videos. Today we are joined by Jenny Clements from Sweyne Park School. I will allow Jenny to introduce herself. She's an EPQ and HPQ Coordinator. She's going to be telling us about her experience of embedding both EPQ and HPQ into her school culture. So over to Jenny.

JC: Hello Emma, thank you for the opportunity again and to making sure that we actually have this opportunity to discuss the HPQ and EPQ that I know we both enjoy doing along with other colleagues each year. For me, certainly, the HPQ was my starting point, so I began as a HPQ coordinator seven-eight years ago now and then as our school grew and we took on a Sixth Form, the EPQ role became available and I was very interested in it. I think originally it was down to be just a small role in the Sixth Form, perhaps taking over General Studies - that maybe only a few people might want to get involved in... But gradually, as we've spoken before about the importance of embedding a research culture, I managed to expand the EPQ to the point where it is very much part of the Sixth Form, not just an adjunct subject that's added. It is, what I hope, one of the key points of being a Sixth Former at Sweyne.

Along with this as you mentioned earlier, I am very much involved in the HPQ and that stayed dear to my heart, so alongside the EPQ I also run the HPQ. I feel in terms of my leadership of it, that it is a subject that I like to think everybody has the capability of getting involved in. I know that sometimes the HPQ can be advertised, or perhaps delivered in schools as a gifted and talented operation, so it's something that only certain students can get involved in, but I certainly believe, and I think actually over the years I've come to give it a title that I can't claim to a given it, but Jerome Bruno actually says that any subject can be taught to any student at any time, as long as it's in an honest form, and I think actually, that's probably what I've been adhering to all these years, but Bruno seems to have said it much more eloquently than what I was doing at the time, but I think that's true. So the HPQ cohort, it's not just about Year 10 and 11, and I think typically people feel that that's where you might want to start the HPQ - certainly discussions I've had at your conferences. Most people tend to have a small group of Year 10s that are involved, but over the years I think what perhaps makes my approach a little different is that I've opened it up as low as Year 8.

So last year was the first year where I did actually start it at the end of Year 8. So students had the summer to get involved in, to plan and think about what they wanted to do in Year 9. So we do have a cross section of students taking part in the HPQ and that is important to me, and it's not just necessarily academically able. I think that anybody can take part in research if they are passionate about it and they want to develop their skills. Of course, I think differentiation is important, so I go back to Bruno there and the importance of dialogue and how you engage and support students with the written process, because of course, not every student is able to write in the same way. I'm not suggesting a Year 8 can necessarily write in the same way as a Year 10. I think there are very different writing challenges, opportunities for them, but I do think that to invite students, perhaps in Key Stage 3 to make that critical commitment to research only serves what you get later on as hopefully engaged and inquisitive Sixth Formers in Year 13.

And so the HPQ and EPQ, they're very important as a school, and when we've spoken about a culture, I don't think that happens quickly. I'm not suggesting that in the first year or so I was able to do this. I did start with Year 10 and Year 9, and then I gradually worked my way in, cast the research net wider and more inclusive, with more pupils I invite. I think, actually it's probably a good time to say that I've taken a more inclusive whole school approach down to Key Stage 3, we do the same with supervisors. So, supervisors for me anyway in part of my team, there are also non-teaching staff who we attach to projects. So we've had caretakers, learning support assistants, signers in our hearing impaired unit. We also have, perhaps outside experts come in who we know, work with Sixth Formers to also work with students. So this is something that we've trialled quite recently, where we've had two supervisors on hand, so we may have a main supervisor and we also have a supporting supervisor, so that might be the non-teaching member of staff who's there as another springboard so you can actually have two voices. And I know from conducting research now, I have two supervisors and that can be very useful, so you're not just having one input. Time is interesting, of course, I think because members of staff are busy. So to have one member of staff perhaps meet you one week and the second member of staff alternate weeks, I think that helps, so that's what we've been doing most recently.

ET: That sounds fantastic that you have all levels, of both students and staff across the school, working on this with you. You know, really as a cultural thing - and I can look at that and I can say that is amazing - but I can imagine there are probably people who are going to be watching this video who will say 'well, that's fantastic, but how on earth has she managed to achieve that buy-in?' in a way that is so engrained within what the school does.

Question: How have you achieved buy-in from across the school?

JC: I think in terms of buy-in and buy-in, as we said in terms of embedding a culture, does take time and I think at the heart of everything that we do as teachers and also as project leaders - I think we're very passionate and I think when that passion is reflected in the students achievements and it's a public recognition, that is quite powerful. So what I would find myself doing is I would have poster conferences where we would have boards, and it would be individuals or students with pictures, highlights from their research and they would present it as you would perhaps at University level, and they would have a chance to discuss before the viva, which I know of course is needed for the qualification, and schools will do this I'm sure in their different forms. But I made it a very celebratory event. So I would invite supervisors, parents... I know Emma, I've been thankful - lucky enough - to have you visit as well, so raising the status of research qualifications, so not just a 'I'm going to invite people from school', but 'other people are celebrating what I've done and are impressed'.

I think that's raised the 'capital' - if I can call it that, so it's made it seem like it's important beyond the classroom walls, and there are some students, I think in terms of my own experiences and research that have reflected quite sadly at times and said 'people don't know what the HPQ/EPQ is [...]'. So having outside organisations to recognise it is really important. And of course then, from a whole school perspective, staff get interested and we've had morning briefings where I've had... It's almost like an Honorary Guard where the staff walk into the staff briefing, and you've got the students each side with their boards and they walk past them and they talk to them as well. So we try and make it so it's a discussion that everybody has. So all staff are invited, and I think when they know that students as young as perhaps 14/15 are asking the really big questions about very important topics they're surprised - they're surprised that at that age they are able to be so interested and so engaged beyond the curriculum.

So my suggestion is that - what you say - get staff involved by wider discussions and taking opportunities outside the classroom to promote. One of the things that I really liked about the event I came to - that you kindly invited me to - was that it was about getting the parents on board as well. It was a celebration of the work that those students had done and bringing the parents in to see that, and it was amazing to see quite how they were blown away by what their children have done, and what their friends had done

ET: and do you feel that that's an important part of it as well?

JC: Yeah, I really do actually and I think it's an achievement. Sometimes, conducting research can feel quite lonely and you feel as if it's just you. And we do say to students: it's never a good time to conduct

research. There are always things for you to be focused on as an A Level student and you've got other priorities in your life, but when you achieve something that you're so passionate about and you've committed to and you show your parents - because sometimes students won't show their parents what they're doing. So to be publicly recognised is important. I can actually remember... a very long time ago actually, an older cohort now, but one of the students took part in this. He wasn't perhaps planning on University, he didn't particularly enjoy a lot of school, and I think I can say that he would say that himself if he were here. And he said to me, 'miss, I've completed this'. It was looking at football hooliganism. He decorated his board, it looked wonderful and he said, 'can I invite my family to the poster event?' I said, 'of course you can', because we refer to it as a conference, a poster conference, and he said 'do I need to wear a suit?' And I said 'you don't need to wear a suit', and he said 'but I've never been to an event like this before where I've celebrated what I've done', and he invited six people - so he had his grandparents, his parents, a girlfriend in tow, but I think importantly he had gone through... I mean, there are bigger questions to be asked here - but he had gone through from Year 7 to Year 13, all that time without perhaps being celebrated in that way and it was a topic that he was really passionate about and it was wonderful to see. So I think as you said, Emma, it's important that families recognise how hard students can work and present themselves.

ET: And then for the rest of the school to see that I think it just is you know, a positive cyclical effect isn't it, you know, there's those kind of events where you see a student so eager to be celebrated. It reinforces, I think - Or I imagine for schools you know, why you do this and why you want to do it more.

JC: Yeah, absolutely. I feel very passionately, again if we look at what we're talking about – embedding culture, research cultures, it's really important to me that what I reflect... and often I think as teachers we know, or we think we know what we're presenting to students, but sometimes we don't, so we may offer messages that we don't intentionally mean students to digest or accept in a certain way. So for me, I've always felt that as a leader of the research qualification, it should be as inclusive as possible. I wouldn't want anybody to think that the culture I was creating was exclusive, but I'm also mindful that I can't have everybody. Certainly not for the HPQ, and that becomes again much bigger perhaps than the time we've got today, a very complicated issue as to who takes part and who doesn't, so that's why for the EPQ in Sixth Form, we offer it to everybody regardless of the pathway. So we have what's called 'open pathway' where students might decide apprenticeships or University. We have an academic pathway so students who are pretty clear they want to go to University, or we have a flexible pathway where perhaps students might be looking more for apprenticeship and work based

positions. So I want it to be seen as 'everybody can engage in this', it isn't just one particular group, so I've tried to embed that in the culture as well.

ET: That's good and I think what you said there provides us quite a nice segue from thinking about the cultural aspects of it, to perhaps thinking about more of the practicalities. And of course they are tied together, but might be seen as distinct, and so I'm kind of interested in, you know, how it runs,

Questions: how do both programs run at your school? Do you launch it a particular time? How do you allocate supervisors? How many supervisors do you have? Is it really something that you all do and contribute to?

JC: I think certainly... actually last year at your conference I remember, the speaker kindly gave us a chance to reflect on our own programmes and I think he used a scale saying '1 to 10 - Where are you?' And I think every year as a coordinator, I sit and think what could I do better? And events like this do remind you that just because you've been doing something for a long time, it doesn't mean it's always right, and that there is a chance to change your ways and do it better. And I think this year is certainly, with returning in a very different environment in September, it does make me reflect again about delivery, programme, what students can expect. So in terms of when you were asking about the starting point, for us it is for Year 12 in September, so we will start the delivery of the programme in September, and we often have whole school... They look a little bit like INSET sessions. So all of Year 12 will be in the Hall with me for a timetabled hour each week. So we will have the chance to work as a big group, and then gradually those sessions will become more specialised in the sense that we'll look at students who are absolutely sure they want to do the EPQ, and students perhaps who we keep, but we go a little bit more sort of open, in terms of the critical thinking skills, being a better researcher for other subjects. So we start with everybody being on board in terms of being exposed to research skills and then the program gradually hones in over a few months as to who we're going to work with and allocate supervisors.

So by the time we get to December time, students complete what we've devised - I've devised with my team, we call it a 'SAF' - a supervisor application form, where we look at what the question is, because students don't always know what they're interested in at that point, or they find it very difficult to decide what they want to do, so we give them that time, we don't put any extra pressure in that sense. We say, 'well, think about it, see how your interest evolves in your A Level subjects', and people change, so we allow that change and that 'wobble room', if you want to call it that, for people to make their minds up. So the SAF form, we asked them questions, as in, 'what do you understand

your role to be in this research process?' and they will outline what they want to do, their thinking, what they've read, and what they would like help with. Interestingly, they do actually, as part of their application form, have to offer whether or not they've approached a member of staff - perhaps a department that you would like to work with, or are you unsure as to who you would work with?

Because I know, quite interestingly, there are lots of programmes say that you don't have to have a subject specialist necessarily as your supervisor, anybody could supervise, and I'm very interested in that. Genuinely, I think that's my thing this year looking at what happens in supervisory meetings and dialogue. I'm very interested in that and deciding whether or not, perhaps having somebody you've worked with before in some capacity makes that supervisory relationship stronger, or does it actually pose more challenges. I know certainly that there's a suggestion that if you've - I'm going back to Bruno again - if you've worked with somebody before and achieved success - so it could be on any program or any events or something in a subject - it could actually inhibit students from moving on because they are wanting to keep with that success and their not as comfortable to try something new, it's an interpretation that's interesting. I'd like to try that because we do have students who work with members of staff, have got a great relationship, and say 'I want that member of staff'. Well, practically, you can't always have that member of staff because they're busy or everybody wants them, or there's one year everyone wants to look at politics, or science in certain forms - I don't know what it will be like in September, I'd be interested to see what the topics are.

So in terms of allocation, we do have a sense of 'what are the relationships like?' some students say 'I don't mind who I work with' and that's fine, but from a staffing point of view, I approach staff. I have a really confident pool of supervisors. I approach them. If they can't do it, that's when it's a good chance to say 'well, could I buddy you as a supervisor with somebody else?' and that hopefully alleviates some of the pressure because teachers, we're very busy and we want to do it well, so I think that's important to make teachers feel like they're doing it well and when your EPQ/HPQ student knocks on your door and you're very busy, I don't really want them to sigh and go 'argh you're back again, you want to talk about this'. I want it to be enjoyable, so that's something that we've worked on.

So, SAFs are helpful. I'm not saying the students necessarily get that's what they want, but they're guide so I would say that that's a useful thing for you to know, and also to monitor how many students are approaching staff because some staff could take them on and with all the will in the world, it's too much. So I think as coordinators we need to look after each other as a pool.

Question: What is your ultimate submission dates with the EPQs?

JC: We don't have an early-early deadline and late deadline as such, but we do also work on the flexibility of 'if this is something that you can run with, we will accept earlier admissions', so if some students are particularly keen [...] So, for example, we've had HPQ students in the past who have said before starting Sixth Form, 'I know what I want to do it on. Can I get started?' So yes, wonderful. That has only happened a handful of times, so I'd like it to happen more, but it has only happened a handful of times, and they've come back obviously, and we can marry them up with a supervisor and they've started so they may finish earlier. That's typically the situation there, but traditionally students will finish around February time of Year 13. So we try and make sure that it's done before their A Levels. And that's also to accommodate the wider school calendar and deadlines that students have. It's a very busy time for coursework, but we find that having it slightly longer, sort of straddling 12 and 13 means that some students, as I said, they might decide they don't want to go to University in Year 12, but then realise 'the EPQ would be excellent for me. I need to do one - help me', so we also have those situations, so we try and make sure students can join the programmes at various points, and that's our aim, really. We want people to be engaged as much as possible.

ET: So you have your SAF form they complete towards sort of Christmas time of Year 12.

JC: Yes, and then we assign supervisors in about January after Christmas.

ET: OK, and so then they will look to submit in around the same time the following year.

JC: Yes in Year 13.

ET: Which gives you then, some time to mark, moderate internally and submit for a May submission.

JC: And I think from what we were talking about at previous conferences, the dropout rate is quite high for certain students in EPQ, and we were finding actually that there some students putting so much pressure on themselves and saying 'actually miss, I can't complete this and I need that time', and we felt that actually having a longer time - yes it does feel as if it runs over a long time [...] And I also stay to students, you know 'life happens' and if life happens, which it has done for everybody recently, certainly, you might need to have a break. You might want to have an interruption, if you want to call it that, and say 'you know, actually, I'm going to leave my EPQ for four weeks, get myself reorganised, and then come back to it'. And we found actually that that is a really positive thing because then students can pick it up again and we can support them if they need that extra help.

ET: So you talked about them starting from January really, of Year 12 going through to the same time in Year 13. That's a model that I think a number of the schools that we work with would ideally like to implement, but quite often they come up against the issue of timetabling with respect to supervisors. So there might be the availability for a Year 12 to be matched with the supervisor on a timetable in Year 12, but then when things change in Year 13, that can sometimes be quite problematic.

Question: How do you manage to get around issues of supervisor availability at Sweyne?

JC: I think that this is a strength and a weakness of the school situation, at the moment. I've not ever had the situation where we've timetabled students and supervisors within the timetable. Again, as I said, sometimes this is a strength and a weakness because whilst it would be great to have teachers protected in that time, and students could go to them always, it also is quite restrictive, so we've had the opportunity, if I can call it that, although it's more time pressured and harder, students meet with their supervisors at different times, so we actually have it so students might organise during their study periods, and with staff when they have their free periods, times to meet. So we leave it where students and supervisors liaise and get together. I also run sessions in the morning. So I'm protected during tutor times, so I might start any EPQ session at 8:30 in the morning and finish about 5 past 9, so students will always have input from me in the mornings. Sometimes sessions are run three times over, so they can attend at different points.

So they have drop-in with me every week alongside the supervisor that they will see. So there's always a member of staff - I'm always there for them - but there is always a member of staff that they arrange a meeting with privately, so it is hard on staff, when staff can't always stay after school, absolutely appreciate that - I teach English, I have to be with my classes too, but if it hasn't worked, email correspondence has also been quite useful, I think, most of the time - and I'm CC'd in so I know who's liaising, what's happening, and I think that climate in September might be that we need to look at how you can best have those dialogues through discussions like this, perhaps, an email correspondence. So, I think looking at dialogue and how you talk and discuss as supervisors and students is going to be really important in September.

Question: Do you have - within your local area - EPQ support networks between schools to help your teachers?

JC: I think that is really interesting Emma, that you mentioned about support networks, and that's probably why your conferences are so successful and welcomed every year because you know that all of us come together and we feel that sense of 'I want to talk about it'. I don't think there is enough

opportunity for coordinators to talk about the EPQ/HPQ. Certainly I think locally for us, although my work within my Sixth Form - I'm also UCAS lead early applicant group, so I look at enrichment in general across the school - so I do have connections with other schools, certainly Sixth Forms, but not necessarily about EPQ. So we do have those connections - they're there, so they're 'live'. So your question is one that I've thought about quite a lot. Actually the only times we do come together - I will invite the Head of Sixth Form from other schools, perhaps to some events that I put on - so if they're external speakers, or early applicant group conference that we hold every year, but I haven't done for EPQ and I do wonder actually why it is that I haven't. So it's a really good question to ask me. Just by coincidence, actually, a pupil in Year 13 completed the artefact and his mum, a Head of a local Sixth Form came to that event. So I can't pretend that I organised that purposefully and for her to attend, but she did. And it was at that point where she said 'this is a really good opportunity to showcase Sixth Form work', and we actually do it better lower down the school. We have celebration nights, but I don't think we celebrate Sixth Formers enough and the EPQ is an excellent way to do that through research. So she was very keen on perhaps forging a connection.

I think my image, my vision would be perhaps to have a huge poster conference event. So you are looking at students commenting on research where they don't know as much and seeing 'oh, that person's as interested as me in this'. And bigger social events and networking, that would be great. And also, perhaps even... I've always wanted to have students' work published in some form. Reduced format, of course, we know how much students write for the EPQs, but to have perhaps something that galvanises the Sixth Formers together across schools. So that might be in the form of a publication where people are supported, university outreach work like yours, Emma, and another perhaps interested organisations to take part. So, you've got my vision. I can't pretend that I've had that pleasure of putting it in place yet.

ET: It might make somebody watching this also has those ideas and that passion, if that is you, please get in contact and we will look to do something.

Question: What do you feel the benefits of completing the EPQ/HPQ are for your students' skillset and transition across their school experience?

ET: you know, we focus on the transition from Sixth Form to University and we know the EPQ supports that, but I'm also interested in how you see, given that it is embedded at a younger age, how you see them able to transition [...] across their education. We know that transition is not just a one off period; that students are always transitioning to new skills or new levels of working.

JC: I think yes, I agree certainly about the transitioning and what that looks like is very different at different times, and students of course transition at different points. I think what comes to mind, and you've met my old EPQ and HPQ subject ambassador, and he was wonderful and he took part in the HPQ in Year 9 and he finally gave up the badge that I gave him, in Year 13 and says he'll always come back. I think this level of resilience and emotional development is going to be even more important in September, as our students return and in terms of... I can obviously speak now for research students, but from starting something in Year 9 and being part of what we call an 'EPQ Family', and again, an old supervisor really bought into that, and so we have a little EPQ banner that comes up in my office. So in terms of what it does for them, the boy that I spoke about who kept with us from Year 9 until Year 13, he nearly gave up. He really did give up at one point and said 'I can't do this. It's too hard'. I rang his mum, I spoke to him, and he completed it and he got a C grade. I think there's a whole conversation to have about what students value as being the best grade to have, I think that's a very separate issue, very important issue, but he achieved the C, and he promised me in a thank you card that he would get an A* in Year 13 for his EPQ. And genuinely, I didn't mark it, I made sure it was outsourced - so absolutely new set of eyes, and it came back as an A* and I was chuffed for him.

ET: He was a fantastic student, wasn't he?

JC: Thank you. He felt that for you as well in your support. He was great and he's gone off now to study at different University. He did love Southampton very much but he did end up at a different Uni in the end and in terms of him - development, resilience and what he would do, would share those experiences with the students in Year 9, Year 10 conducting research, Year 8s last year and they could see a reflection hopefully from what he was saying to them in themselves, and I think that was key. So [...] I mean that's a very personal, very situated example, but overall though, I think in terms of the confidence and making a commitment to criticality at a young age and developing and also learning that it's tough, this isn't always going to go well. You're going to meet challenges [...] 'I wanted to do that and I couldn't because that stopped me'. I think in terms of resilience it's wonderful training for students to have that learning is messy, research is messy and I hope that they take that across other subjects. That yeah, OK, this is tough, I have to try and fit it in and be more reflective.

I think research students, not just... That's why I would do refer to HPQ and EPQ students as almost one. If you are a research student, I think that transcends your age. You know what it's like if you've ever sat and researched something, for a long time, you connect with someone who's done the same and I think what it's done for my older students is made them more aware, better teachers themselves to younger pupils, and I think it's made the younger pupils hopefully more confident in their abilities

as learners when they get to that stage, and I think - if it's OK just to mention - one of my best images from two years ago was when a Year 13 from another school came to visit and I was working with a HPQ student in Year 9. She was doing fine, she was writing up something in my little office area. And she joined us as I was talking to, you know, the Sixth Former as well and said, 'what's your EPQ on?', and she says 'I'm really struggling with question', and my little HPQ-er sat with her and said 'well, what are you doing? Why are you struggling?' and the two of them talked about research and their age, whatever it was perhaps that would make them different, did not matter and at the very end the Year 13 said 'I can't believe a Year 9 has given me my EPQ question'. And I mean my student was just beaming - 'did I really? Did I really?' Yes, yes you did. You did do that.

ET: So I think it just goes to show – you mentioned, you alluded to it just now but that credence that you have given to that role of HPQ/EPQ Ambassador to those students as well, is a way not only of embedding it within the teaching culture, within the parents, but also within the students themselves. And it's testament to the fantastic work that you do. So thank you so much for that work that you do but also for joining us today and yeah, thank you on behalf of all of us.

JC: My absolute pleasure. Thank you for the opportunity Emma, and good luck everyone next year as you start up again in September. Thank you.