

GTC pupil voice event

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Pupil voice – policy and practice

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Introduction

First of all, thank you for inviting me to make this presentation on pupil voice. I hope that in discussing the findings from the research that I conducted for the DCSF with my colleague Dr Emma Wisby, I will be able to provide a general picture of where we are in relation to pupil voice in England.

The focus of my presentation will therefore be on pupil voice in general, not just pupil involvement in decisions around teaching and learning and debates around personalisation. But as David Hargreaves has highlighted, the two are closely linked, such that collective expressions of pupil voice, like school councils, do bear on the potential of individual pupil voice for personalising learning. This is for two reasons:

- even if the individual has no direct involvement in [pupil voice] activities, their existence shapes the general culture and climate so that pupils feel they are valued and trusted, and may express themselves in open ways
- such activities affect teachers by making them generally more responsive to pupil voice and its potential values, both in what it says and in how it improves relationships.

(Hargreaves 2004: 10)

Structure of the presentation

The structure of the presentation is as follows:

- policy background
- teachers' experience of pupil voice
- pupils' views on their school councils
- enhancing provision for pupil voice.

Policy background

Although Wales has chosen to make school councils compulsory, schools in England have so far only been encouraged to develop provision for pupil voice. But the government does now see pupil voice as central to many of its broader policies, particularly those on school improvement and raising pupil attainment.

The linking of pupil voice to school improvement was initially made about ten years ago through the National Healthy Schools programme. This linked pupil voice to pupils' well-being and, therein, to pupils' engagement in learning. The introduction of citizenship into the school curriculum in 2002 further encouraged provision for pupil voice in order to improve pupils' political literacy and engagement with their

local communities. But this was soon followed by the first set of national guidance for schools on pupil voice, which encouraged a broader dialogue between schools and their pupils, including on matters relating to teaching and learning. This was cemented shortly afterwards by Ofsted's new inspection framework, which contains the expectation that schools will systematically seek the views of young people, including on matters to do with the quality of teaching and learning (Ofsted 2005b). This has since been extended through the focus on personalisation, particularly through the 2005 schools White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*. It is on the basis of this general recognition of the potential value of pupil voice, but also the recent 'ramping up' of the importance of pupil voice to government policy that the government recently committed itself to providing new national guidance for schools on this area.

It is within this context that the then Department for Education and Skills contacted me back in autumn 2005 to ask if I would undertake a review of current practice in relation to school councils in England – to inform the new guidance. With Dr Wisby, I am now developing that guidance.

Research design

Before moving on to look at our research findings, let me quickly outline the research design so that you can see how we generated those findings.

Our research design comprised:

- interviews with representatives from over 20 relevant agencies, including charities and the teaching unions
- case study visits to 15 schools – a mix of primary, secondary and SEN schools
- a national survey of 1,000 teachers in the maintained sector
- an online survey of independent school head teachers, which received a response from over 100 schools
- a national survey of over 2,400 secondary school pupils from the maintained sector.

Together, these components gave us a national picture on provision for and attitudes towards pupil voice in England and plenty of detail on issues raised by provision in practice, especially in relation to school councils.

Findings

Teacher survey

Our survey of 1,000 teachers showed that 99% worked in a school with some form of provision for pupil voice, typically a school council.

The most commonly cited reason for giving pupils a voice was to improve the school's environment and facilities (27%). The development of pupils' social and emotional skills was also cited by around a fifth of respondents. Very few mentioned links with teaching and learning.

Asked what impact their school's provision for pupil voice had had on the school, the teachers were reasonably positive, though not overwhelmingly so: 41%, for example, felt that their school's environment and facilities had improved.

When asked whether England should follow the example of Wales and make school councils statutory, 62% stated that it should. Just under half felt that pupils should be involved in the process of appointing new teaching staff. Only 35% felt that pupils should sit on school governing bodies.

So, a relatively restrained response from the teachers.

Independent schools survey

I won't cover the independent schools survey as the findings were broadly similar to those for maintained schools – in terms of both the reasons for introducing provision for pupil voice and the perceived impact of this provision.

Pupil survey

Turning to the pupil survey, this showed that for the majority, 41% (991), involvement in school decision making had meant involvement in decisions about school policies (e.g. anti-bullying) and things like which school equipment to purchase. Only relatively small numbers, around 7%, had participated in the appointment process for new teaching staff, observed lessons and given feedback to teachers or helped to design the curriculum at their school.

Asked what changes, if any, had occurred at their school as a result of having a school council, 25% (515) felt that their school's environment and facilities had improved. Small numbers of pupils felt that relationships between pupils and between pupils and teachers had improved.

When presented with the statement "every school should be required to have a school council", 55% (1,329) of the pupils agreed that they should. A very small proportion, 6% (145), disagreed with the statement, while 22% (532) neither agreed nor disagreed. Those who agreed with the statement valued school councils for giving pupils a say in school life and improving communication and relationships within school. Those who disagreed felt that having a school council did not mean that pupils were listened to.

The ambivalence towards pupil voice and school councils by our survey respondents was disappointing. But it is understandable when considered alongside the degree of involvement that the pupils had had with their school councils. Only 15% stated that their school council representatives had talked to them about their views on a given matter, and only 12% had been asked by their school council to vote on an issue. Twenty-three per cent (473) said that they did not know what changes had happened at their school as a result of the school council. A further 9% of the respondents commented that it was the responsibility of teachers to make school decisions.

This ambivalence was certainly reflected in comments from others that we interviewed for the research – and in existing research studies (eg, Alderson 2000, Wyse 2001).

Overall, then, the research findings suggest that, while the majority of pupils are positive about having a school council, the experience of a significant minority has not been what it might. The pupils' comments in our survey indicate that this may be due to deference to staff or cynicism – which each reflect the relative novelty of notions of 'pupil voice' in schools in England and the need for schools to continue to refine their practice in this area.

Enhancing provision for pupil voice

But how might schools do this? The main areas for improvement to emerge from our research were as follows:

- having a clear rationale for provision
- being prepared to change school ethos, structures and processes
- creating the necessary time and space for participation
- taking steps to raise the status of provision for pupil voice
- building teacher support for pupil voice
- involving all pupils
- providing training to support pupils' involvement.

Having a clear rationale for provision

As Fielding and Rudduck (2006) suggest, the current popularity of pupil voice can lead to surface compliance, to "...a quick response that focuses on 'how to do it' rather than a reflective review of 'why we might want to do it'" (219). This is arguably the main factor behind the reservations we've seen about pupil voice.

So, schools must develop a clear rationale for their provision. This means addressing the short- and long-term outcomes they want to achieve and which forms of pupil voice activity will best help them to achieve those objectives. Many of the schools we spoke to noted motivations like recognising children's rights, promoting active citizenship or supporting school improvement or personalisation – or all four – but there was often no apparent link between these motivations and actual provision. It is also important for schools to identify success criteria against which to evaluate their provision. Few schools seem to be doing this at present (Estyn 2007).

Being prepared to change school ethos, structures and processes

Alderson (2000) has pointed out that a school council which is seen by pupils as ineffective and tokenistic has as much of a negative impact – possibly a more negative impact – than having no council at all (see also Davies et al 2006, Rowe 2003). This observation obviously stands for all provision for pupil voice.

As well as looking at *why* they want to introduce such provision, schools need to consider whether they are *ready* to do so – in terms of whether their ethos, structures and processes are compatible with pupil voice. The objective should be to embed participation into the culture of the school, rather than positioning it as a 'one-off' event or distinct activity.

Creating the necessary time and space for participation

Pupil voice activity can place pressure on the timetable, and the difficulties of finding time and a place for meetings is frequently raised in the literature.

But part of providing sufficient time for pupil voice is also about finding time to discuss with pupils how they think this activity is operating. There is a danger of focusing too much on creating opportunities and not allowing pupils to reflect on what they have achieved and learned through them. The nature of the discussions between staff and pupils during our school visits suggested that this was the first occasion on which they'd reviewed their provision.

Taking steps to raise the status of pupil voice

Status can be accorded by close links to the school's senior management team or the governing body. Status can also be accorded by giving pupils a degree of freedom over the matters they are permitted to act on and ensuring that, as often as possible, this is driven by pupils. Pupils, though, may need encouragement to move beyond canteen and toilets issues. Giving pupils some influence over particular areas of spending can influence perceptions. In our report we suggested a budget of £1,500 for secondary school provision and £250 for primary school provision. This equates to around 0.05% of a school's budget.

Arguably more important in terms of influencing perceptions, however, is schools being seen to listen to and act on pupils' efforts or feedback (see Davies et al 2006). One way of formalising this is to involve pupils in the production of the School Development/Improvement Plan.

Building teacher support for pupil voice

It is often the case that provision for pupil voice is reliant on one or two members of staff (eg, Estyn 2007). But effective pupil voice requires the support of the whole school.

Lack of commitment to pupil voice among staff can be for practical reasons – time pressures, for example. It may also stem from adults' limiting assumptions about children and young people or reservations about the principle of pupil voice. Related to this may be teachers' concern that they themselves do not have a voice in school decision making. Equally, though, lack of support can be due to anxieties about the unknown.

Means of building commitment to pupil voice and improving teacher effectiveness in supporting provision in this area include the use of case study examples from the literature (of which there are now a few examples), attendance at local or national events on pupil voice, visits to other schools, or starting with small pupil voice activities – such as class consultations on a specific issue – and building gradually on those.

Over the longer-term, the growing policy emphasis on consultation with young people will obviously have implications for teacher training and continuing professional development provision (Fielding and Rudduck 2006).

Involving all pupils

As we have seen, it is possible for a significant minority of pupils to have little involvement with a school's provision for pupil voice, even on an informal, ad hoc basis. Means of including all pupils include having a range of provision for pupil voice, a system of class and/or year councils in addition to a school council, ad hoc working groups and good communication (eg, through notice boards, websites/email).

Providing training to support pupils' involvement

Another key issue is preparing pupils to participate in decision making.

Some groups of children are much more likely to get involved, and get involved effectively, than others (Silva 2001, Rubin and Silva 2003). Training for all pupils will help break down barriers to participation. It will also help pupils to operate pro-actively and independently of staff.

Pupils will benefit from specific skills training – for example, on running formal meetings and project management. Team building activity may also be required where participants are from different year groups and do not know each other well. Ideally, such training will continue throughout pupils' school career, thereby extending their skills and personal effectiveness.

As I indicated earlier, pupils will typically need considerable encouragement and support if they are to become comfortable in commenting on teaching and learning matters. Having a range of pupil voice provision in place will help to facilitate this. While school councils have an important role, they may actually promote a focus on 'chips and toilets' issues. Other forms of pupil voice provision, such as pupil involvement in departmental reviews, pupils conducting their own research and peer support, including peer teaching, may be more relevant to pupils' involvement in decisions around teaching and learning.

Concluding comments

I have focused today on how we can make provision for pupil voice effective. In this, I have highlighted particular aspects of provision that can have a considerable impact on how school communities view pupil voice and what they achieve through it.

Our *overarching* concern having completed the research is that the argument for pupil voice often lacks clarity. This means that related activities are often being introduced with insufficient strategic thinking in relation to the purposes they are meant to serve and without a clear idea of success criteria against which they can be properly evaluated. This is, I think, a key factor in the relative lack of enthusiasm for pupil voice that emerges from some of the research – and means that provision for pupil voice can lead to neutral or even negative outcomes.

Pupil voice should, though, lead to unintended outcomes. Another question that the research raised for us is precisely what model of pupil voice is being espoused by policy makers, teachers and, indeed, pupils at the present time. It wasn't always clear talking to some agencies and schools the extent to which pupils are being allowed a voice other than to legitimate the policies of government or school leaders.

Effective pupil voice requires some power and influence to be given to pupils, giving it the potential to disrupt the status quo in schools. If handled properly, this can have positive, if sometimes unnerving, consequences. On the other hand, where there is no such potential for challenges to the status quo there is a real danger of cynicism developing among pupils.

Notwithstanding these caveats, we encountered some excellent examples of pupil voice in action. Notably, these examples varied considerably according to local circumstances. In the absence of robust research findings on the impact of particular approaches, we concluded that further encouragement of local experimentation is preferable to national prescription of too rigid a model. In the meantime, the government will continue to encourage provision for pupil voice, particularly through the new national guidance – the impact of which the government has invited me to review in about 18 months' time.

Despite the room for improvement in provision we found this time around, there is now a strong momentum behind pupil voice in English schools, stemming from national policies and directives but also from schools' own fledgling experience of pupil voice. I hope that events such as this will continue to refine our thinking around pupil voice and related practice in schools.

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