

The voice, role and participation of children and young people



Summary of existing research

This paper is a summary of literature and research into the voice, role and participation of children and young people (C&YP) in teaching and learning.

There are six sections:

1. Defining pupil voice, role and participation
2. The benefits for learning: research findings and theories
3. Methods and practices
4. Principles for practice
5. Risks and obstacles
6. Where is further research and intervention needed?

Three comprehensive reviews of relevant literature have taken place in the last three years:

- **The voice of young people: an engine for improvement**, an extensive literature review carried out by the National Foundation for Education Research (NfER), April 2007 (Hasey et al, 2007)
- **Inspiring Schools: Impact and Outcomes**: analysed 75 sources of evidence on pupil participation in schools and colleges, mainly from the UK. Published by the Carnegie Young People Initiative and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation in 2006 (Davies et al, 2006)
- **Children's voices** – an investigation carried out by Kaye Johnson for the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in 2004 (Johnson, 2004)

This summary draws on the above three sources, the results of our own literature search and other key sources, notably the recent DCSF research on school councils and pupil voice (Whitty and Wisby, 2007) and the Teaching and Learning Research Programme findings on voice, role and participation. A more detailed summary of this TLRP research is published on the GTC's Research of the Month website (www.gtce.org.uk/research).

1. Defining voice, role and participation

There are a range of definitions covering the concept of enhancing pupil voice, role and participation. In most studies, the concept is often referred to as 'pupil voice' or 'student voice'. As Johnson (2004, p3) and Thompson and Holdsworth (2003) indicate, a school's definition could range from pupils simply attending school or pupil representation on a school council, to active involvement in decision-making, including leadership and activism in the wider community.

Researchers have universally adopted wide and highly participative definitions. For example:

- the Inspiring Schools research (Davies et al, 2006) defined pupil participation as *"involvement in a collective decision-making process with a recognisable social and/or educational outcome"*;
- the Teaching and Learning Research Programme research considered the approach to be practices that involve schools consulting their pupils and involving them as active participants in classroom-based research investigations to help them identify ways of improving teaching and learning;
- Hargreaves (2004: 7) describes 'student voice' as "how students come to play a more active role in their education and schooling as a direct result of teachers becoming more attentive, in sustained or routine ways, to what students want say about their experience of learning and of school life."

In its advice to the government on personalised learning in April 2007, the GTC recommended a 'pupil voice' approach, involving:

"dialogue with pupils which enables children and young people to play an active role in their learning, schooling and education, making their needs and interests known".

The Council's particular interest in C&YP voice, role and participation is in its potential to support teaching and learning, raise achievement and motivation and support every child's well-being. The GTC recommended that teacher receive support and learning opportunities to explore and develop these principles as a classroom-based teaching practice.

It is also useful to consider voice, role and participation in the light of wider policy developments and legislation. One of the four basic principles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) is the child's right to be heard. The convention states

"... the child who is capable of forming his or her own views [shall be assured of] the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

There are high-profile attempts to increase children's voices, in particular through organisations such as 11 Million, Schools Councils UK and the English Secondary Students Association.

In their research report for the DCSF, Whitty and Wisby (2007:5) identify four main arguments for pupil voice:

- **children's rights** - children have the right to have their opinions taken into account in decisions that concern them;
- **active citizenship** - how pupil voice can contribute to citizenship and democracy by improving pupils' knowledge and their 'transferable' and 'social' skills;
- **school improvement** - consultation with pupils can lead to better school performance in terms of behaviour, engagement or attainment;
- **personalisation** - using pupil voice to ensure that schools are meeting the specific needs of their pupils as consumers of education.

According to Johnson (2004: 3), support for C&YP voice, role and participation approaches comes from a range of sources, including:

- advocates of children's rights (Alderson 2003);
- proponents of school reform and school improvement (Macbeath 1999);
- those who argue for distributed leadership (Gronn, 1999);
- promoters of civics and citizenship education (Thompson and Holdsworth, 2003);
- those who feel that schools' current practices are based on outdated constructions of childhood (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000).

2. Research and theories on the benefits for pupil learning

Hargreaves (2004: 5-8) believes that enhancing the voice, role and participation of pupils, alongside complementary approaches such as assessment for learning, can improve areas such as pupil engagement, responsibility, meta-cognitive skills (control over thinking and learning), relationships with staff, social skills and participation.

The NFER literature review of research into 'pupil voice' approaches found nine areas of positive impact where it is used effectively:

- confidence and self-esteem;
- social, personal and emotional confidence;
- sense of responsibility, efficacy and skills;
- new knowledge and skills;
- communication and collaborative skills;
- civic and political competence;
- attendance;
- achievement;
- behaviour.

Raising academic achievement

The Carnegie Young People Initiative study (Davies et al, 2006) study found an indirect link with academic achievement, although states that this impact is indirect. From its review of 'pupil voice' research, the study found:

- pupils in democratic schools were happier and felt more in control of their learning;
- if students gave feedback on teaching, this improved teachers' practice and improved students' awareness of the learning process;
- participation enhanced skills of communication and competence as a learner.

The study found that students had greater self-esteem and confidence, through greater responsibility and ownership. They also felt a greater sense of agency and efficacy – ie ability to influence events and school structures and a greater sense of direction in their own lives.

Increasing pupil engagement

Ruddock (2005: 12) found that 'pupil voice' techniques can increase engagement. In a survey of teachers' perceptions as part of the research, 84% of teachers felt that consultation had a positive impact on pupils' self-esteem, and 80% thought it was helping students have a more positive attitude to school and learning.

Taking responsibility

The PELRS research, conducted by Bridget Somekh et al (2006) showed that pupils welcomed the chance to take responsibility for their own learning and that structured group work with opportunities for collaboration on joint ICT-led presentation projects was very effective both in helping learners take control of their learning, and in helping them engage with curriculum content.

Benefits for teachers' practice and understanding

The Teaching and Learning Research programme research on Students as Researchers (SaRs) projects found that these could be rewarding in a number of ways, including:

- experiencing a different way of working, involving smaller, more intense groups and teachers working with wider age ranges;
- finding pupils became more positive and active, attended more regularly, completed homework, helped other students and were ready to talk to teachers about problems or their progress;

- creating new partnerships with students, involving greater trust, more positive attitudes and higher expectations;
- gaining insights that helped their own professional development.

3. Methods and practices

The research literature is rich with examples of methods and practices that enhance the voice, role and participation of pupils. In almost all cases, these are based on case studies from existing work in schools.

Feedback on teaching and learning

- Giving students opportunities to give feedback on teaching – for example, lesson organisation, teaching techniques – so that lessons can be planned in partnership (Hargreaves, 2004: 11-13).
- Teachers having individual conversations with pupils about teaching and learning, as well as group conversations (Hargreaves, 2004: 11-13).
- Pupils receiving positive feedback and encouragement from their teachers. Even the more confident learners seemed to need reassurance that they were making good progress on a regular basis. (Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP)).

Students as Researchers

- Students designing and leading their own research studies, enabling students to work with teachers in bringing about change, with teachers supporting and facilitating the process. Students shape the form and direction of the research. (Fielding and Bragg, 2003).

Classroom choices and variety

- Pupils having genuine opportunities to make choices in the classroom, in terms of goals, lessons planning and delivery (TLRP).
- Pupils being involved in a variety of activities, and in having practical to support understanding of understand difficult concepts and engender a sense of achievement (TLRP).
- Pupils feeling that the work they were doing was interesting and pitched at a level they felt comfortable with, yet also challenged by (TLRP).
- Enabling pupils to take control of learning, negotiate timescales and engaging in metacognitive processes (Somekh et al, 2006).

Peer support

- Pupils supporting each other in their learning, involving buddying systems and peer tutoring (Fielding and Ruddock, 2004).
- Student-driven change processes, such as students as researchers exploring teaching and school issues, and pupil-to-pupil initiatives, to encourage peer support beyond teaching. (Fielding and Ruddock, 2004).
- Pupils sharing knowledge and skills through presentation, coaching and peer-assessment (Somekh et al, 2006).

Pupil groups

- Rearranging classes into multi-age groups and meet weekly for a group discussion facilitated by a teacher, to increase involvement. (Johnson 2004: 10).
- Developing a number pupil action groups which enable pupils to initiate change. Enabled greater participation and a wider range of topics. (Johnson 2004: 10).

School organisation and staff appointments

- Developing change structures, including effective and genuine school councils and pupils as school governors (Fielding and Ruddock, 2004).
- Involving students in the interview process for new staff at the institution. (Hargreaves, 2004: 11-13).

Redefining classroom roles

- Enabling learners to take on the role of teacher for a specific issue, or recasting the teacher as a learner. In the PELRS project on e-learning approaches this was found to be a powerful way to foster more creative ways of working. (Somekh et al, 2006).
- Challenging the notion of fixed roles of teachers, pupils and others within the learning sphere and showed that these roles are not given or fixed, but can be negotiated and placed in creative tension in order to find new ways of working. (Somekh et al, 2006).

It is also worth noting approaches found to switch pupils off learning. Pupils in the TLRP research felt that topics which were relevant to 'real life' situations helped make them seem more interesting, but that the following left them uninspired to learn:

- too much emphasis on written work, particularly for boys;
- disruptive behaviour;

- needing help, but not getting it - waiting for help or resources caused some pupils to engage in disruptive behaviour because they felt bored or frustrated;
- repetitious, 'easy' and mundane activities, such as completing worksheets and working from textbooks and activities that involved little movement.

4. Principles for practice

Johnson's (2004: 12-15) exploration of the research found that the following approaches gave the school the best chance of being effective:

- **Adopting a whole school approach.** Making a public statement to pursue C&YP participation and voice, generating a feeling of shared ownership and elevating its importance.
- **Systematic professional development for staff.** Staff need to know the range of effective skills, methodologies and new ways of working.
- **Democratic structures.** Organisational and decision-making structures must make visible the role of children and young people in decision-making. Pupils should be encouraged to reflect on inconsistencies between espoused comments and actual experience.
- **Overcoming barriers to listening to pupils.** Including the business of the classroom, delivering the curriculum, emphasis on assessment, discounting critical pupil comments, limiting the range of areas pupils can comment on, teachers' beliefs that pupils are unable to make a valid contribution.
- **Critical reflection by school leaders and teachers.** Questioning existing assumptions and examining costs and benefits for all stakeholders. Sometimes schools with less experience of critical reflection may benefit from an external facilitator.
- **Recognising and celebrating outcomes of partnership with pupils.** To show pupils the significance of their work and reflect and celebrate its success.

The TLRP researchers also offer a set of principles, focusing on genuine inclusive collaboration with pupils and ensuring equality. They believe schools should demonstrate:

- a genuine desire to hear what pupils have to say;
- the topic is not trivial;
- the purpose of the consultation is explained to the pupils involved;
- pupils know what will happen to what they say;

- pupils are confident that expressing their opinion or describing their experience will not disadvantage them;
- feedback is given to everyone who is consulted;
- when actions are taken and decisions made, pupils are able to understand the wider context in which their views are placed.

The TLRP researchers suggested the following questions for school leaders:

- Do pupils have a voice in your school related to teaching and learning?
- Are there issues of particular concern that your pupils could help you with?
- In what ways might consulting pupils be a useful CPD activity?
- Could you do more to support colleagues wanting to try consulting their pupils for the first time? For example, workshops, recruiting external (e.g. university education departments or other schools)?
- Would teachers find it helpful to evaluate and share with each other their experiences of responding to their pupils' suggestions?
- Does your school make the connection between pupil voice, the school council and the citizenship curriculum regarding democracy?
- Could pupil consultation help identify and overcome the difficulties encountered by different groups of pupils?
- Friendships exerted a strong influence on pupils' learning and achievement. Would it be helpful to consult your pupils about the best mix for their particular situation?
- Are there pupils who would find having a mentor or peer support helpful?
- Do all your pupils understand how they could improve their work and what they are aiming for?
- Do you find juggling the needs of slower and faster learners a problem with the classes you teach? Would you find it helpful to give your pupils greater choice in deciding how to balance their time?

5. Risks and obstacles

Ensuring trust

Jean Ruddock's research into student voice in 48 primary and secondary (Ruddock, 2005: 11) found that these approaches require a trusting relationship between the student and the institution, and that students were anxious about 'retaliation' where a trusting relationship did not exist. Student consultation challenges the traditional power relationships in schools, and it is important to establish equity and authenticity.

Ensuring equality and hearing all voices

Ruddock also notes that “more self-assured middle class students who talk the language of the school tend to dominate conversations and teachers tend to privilege them in conversation”. She also found that students are very quick to realise when consultation is tokenistic (Ruddock, 2005: 11).

Whitty and Wisby (2007: 8) stress that schools must also endeavour to include all pupils in their provision for pupil voice, not just those on a school council or who are most comfortable expressing their views in a school context. They suggest approaches which combine ‘representative’ (e.g. school councils) and ‘participatory’ (e.g. using other ways of dialogue such as email and smaller meetings) forms of democracy seem to be particularly effective.

Whitty and Wisby (2007: 8) also note that pupils with special educational needs may require particular support to participate in pupil voice approaches. Schools would benefit from greater support in designing provision for pupil voice that can accommodate a wide spectrum of abilities and disabilities.

Differences between practitioners and pupil perceptions

Hazel Pulley and Linda Jagger (NCSL, 2006) conducted research into the idea of student voice in primary schools. They found that although the schools involved had sought to involve and engage pupils, the pupils did not always perceive this to be the case. Indeed, the pupils’ teachers were surprised to hear the pupils’ views about their learning experiences – for example, although the teachers had placed a strong emphasis on demonstrating different learning styles (e.g. visual, auditory) (Pulley and Jagger, 2006: 3-4), the pupils did not consider this to be the case. The research demonstrates a gap in perceptions between what the teacher thought was happening in class, and the pupils’ experience.

Wider representation beyond school councils

Research by Johnson (2004: 10) found that school leaders and researchers most often refer to school councils as examples of pupil participation in their schools. However, these approaches appeared to focus on school organisation and environment issues, rather than teaching and learning approaches.

Judy Sebba et al (2007: 67) found that the existence of a school council need not be related to the level of pupil participation in decision-making. Many schools in their research recognised a serious rhetoric/reality gap on whether school councils are encouraged to address core issues that really matter and whether the decisions made by councils are actually implemented.

From Sebba et al’s survey, it appeared that giving students a real voice in their learning and in how their school is run is usually done by the school council of class/individual discussion with an adult. However, some schools

are experimenting with more radical approaches, such as involving pupils in teaching appointments, offering pupils posts on the governing body and even commissioning pupil groups to redesign the school day.

Whitty and Wisby's (2007: 10) in their specific research for the DCSF on school councils, noted that councils were just one component, albeit an important one, of overall provision for pupil voice. They also suggest (2007: 7) that there is a danger schools will become too concerned with the processes of school councils and overlook the purposes they wish to fulfil.

Staff attitudes

Sebba et al's (2007:67) research also found that in some schools, staff attitudes acted as a barrier to pupil voice and participation. One primary teacher said "*Very few staff see teaching and learning as about developing autonomy – though very able, most see it as delivering a prescribed curriculum.*"

Ensuring effective parental involvement

Sebba et al also found that communication with parents on pupil voice and choice was critical, since genuine commitment to pupil decision-making could cause discomfort in some case. One parent said "The children make choices on subjects. My son made a choice that I don't exactly agree with but then there is no point offering them choices if you can't go through with it."

Avoiding tokenism and taking a whole school approach

Michael Fielding (2007) argues that the education system cannot reach all pupils unless structures, the curriculum and pedagogy take account of relationships and human dignity.

The system needs to respect, listen to and take seriously the views and interests of pupils. Schools need to create informal and formal spaces in which pupils can have their voices heard openly. He introduced a person-centred approach to student voice based on mutual trust, care and respect, reciprocal listening between students and teachers, and students and teachers developing exploratory pedagogy together.

Fielding outlines that schools need to have a coherent view on what it is to be a person, and that their approaches need to reflect this consistently.

The conclusion from the NfER research found that a negative impact can be disillusion among pupils and conflict with other school priorities

6. Where is further research and intervention needed?

The research conducted by Geoff Whitty and Emma Wisby (2007:10) recommends that the government should work with teachers' professional associations and other relevant agencies to disseminate good practice in relation to school councils and pupil voice more generally as an important component of personalised learning.

Whitty and Wisby (2007:100) also identify a need for further research to establish more clearly any links between provision for pupil voice and school performance across a range of indicators such as behaviour and attainment.

The TLRP researchers highlighted several areas of research which were not explored by the project:

- the impact of pupil consultation on pupils' progress on particular courses of study or in particular subjects;
- gender differences in responses to consultation and the kinds of issues raised;
- parents' attitudes to consultation – the extent to which the practices and values that consultation embodies are in conflict with those of the home, and where they are, possible ways forward;
- the extent to which consultation and participation could turn around schools where considerable numbers of pupils are disengaged and where pupils are performing below their potential.

The Carnegie Young People Initiative (2006) study found the following gaps in the evidence base:

- it is perceptual: direct causation or attribution is problematic;
- the literature generally provides an uncritical presentation of participation and the quality of student input;
- there is a lack of balance of benefits and costs; and
- there is little discussion of whether outcomes could be achieved in different ways.

Hasey et al's (2007) NFER research found that there is a gap in any routine evaluation and documentation of impact. Where evaluation takes place it is rarely done in a systematic or comprehensive way. The impact of young people's voice on policy and practice has received little evaluative attention to date.

Jean Rudduck's (2005: 12) research highlights that while the idea of student voice carries potential advantages, it is important to ensure that the benefits are realised for all students, and not just those who are already confident in making their voices heard.

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