

Children should be seen and heard

Consulting pupils about teaching and learning

Project: Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning
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Background

The UN convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) had children's right to be heard as one of its four basic principles. It is seen as integral to the citizenship curriculum and lifelong learning.

Since this network of six projects began, national support for the idea of consulting pupils has grown substantially. The concept is enshrined in the government's flagship Every Child Matters agenda, and every school is now expected to have a school council.

Consulting pupils about their learning benefits not only children but teachers, schools and, in the long run, society. It is essential that such consultation is genuine, and not just for show.

Schools vary enormously in their degree of commitment to and experience of pupil consultation. Schools in which pupils are consulted are likely to have built a strong sense of inclusive membership, where difference is accepted and there are opportunities for dialogue and discussion for all children.

Findings	Implications
Pupils who were consulted became more engaged with learning.	Pupils who feel they matter in school are more likely to commit themselves to learning.
Teachers became more responsive to children and gave them more responsibility.	Pupils' accounts of what helps them to learn can provide a practical agenda for teaching.
School policy was strengthened by including pupils in substantive ways.	Examples of practice and pupil testimony can feed powerfully into whole school policy.
National policy can be enhanced through new insights and practical tools for school improvement.	'Leading edge' school practice can provide the basis for inquiry and policy development.

Key points

The best way to raise standards for all children is by working in partnership with them.

The growth of pupil consultation in schools has been endorsed by official support from the government. So it is important to make sure a new orthodoxy does not develop, which is mandated, monitored and measured from the top down.

Students recognise when they are genuinely listened to, and when consultation is simply symbolic. Being consulted genuinely can help pupils feel they are respected and that they can make a real contribution. But this depends upon the development of more partnership-based relationships between students and teachers.

Ways of consulting pupils may be built into heads' courses and other professional development for teachers and support staff. Some key principles are:

- Reassuring teachers, pupils, parents and governors that consulting pupils is recognised nationally as legitimate and desirable
- Building support among teachers by presenting evidence of positive outcomes
- Being sensitive to teachers' anxiety
- Encouraging and supporting initiatives among volunteers
- Making innovative practice public
- Ensuring that other school policies are in harmony with the principles that underpin pupil consultation
- Consulting through a range of avenues, not just school councils
- Giving pupil voice a central place in school self-evaluation.

What are the benefits of consultation?

The research involved a network of six projects, investigating:

- How teachers respond to pupils' ideas on improving teaching and learning
- Ways of consulting pupils about teaching and learning
- Pupils' perspectives
- The potential of pupils to act as researchers into the process of teaching and learning
- How different groups of pupils are affected by the conditions of learning in school and classrooms
- Innovations involving pupil consultation and participation.

Pupils were consulted on school-wide issues such as rewards and sanctions, year group issues such as timetabling and class grouping, and classroom issues such as what helps or hinders learning.

What's in it for pupils?

- They develop a stronger sense of membership and feel more positive about school
- They feel better about themselves
- They get a stronger sense of themselves as learners
- They come to see it as worthwhile to contribute to school matters

What's in it for teachers?

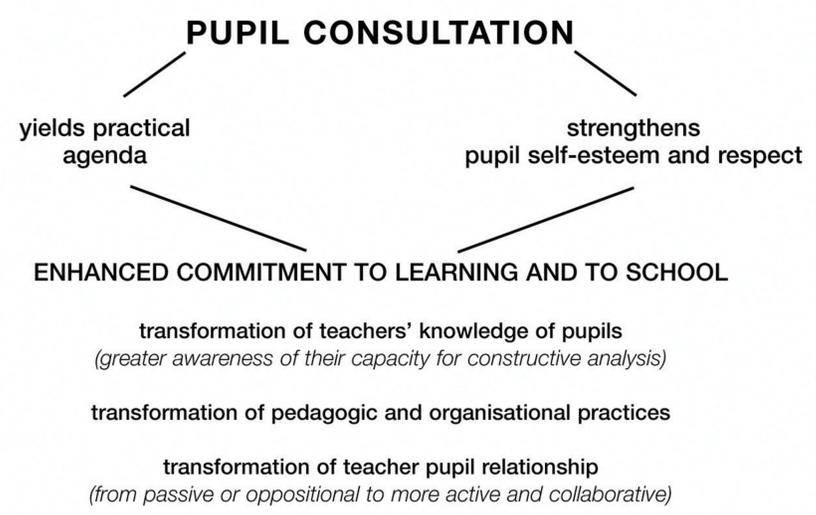
- A deeper insight into young people's capabilities
- The capacity to see the familiar from a different angle
- A practical agenda for improvement
- A renewed sense of excitement in teaching

What's in it for schools?

- A practical agenda for change, with pupils on board
- A more partnership oriented relationship between pupils and teachers
- A sound basis for developing democratic principles
- Developing the school's capacity as a learning organisation

Some cautions

- Don't forget to listen to the quiet voice in school
- Avoid creating a pupil voice elite
- Maintain authenticity – make sure consultations are about real and important issues
- Share outcomes with the pupils



From consultation to transformation

The research

The 6 projects involved teachers in 43 schools. The primary and most robust source of evidence is the testimony of teachers and students. This has been validated through documentation and audio-recording of their views; classroom observations; video-recording of classroom interactions; and the products of classroom work and workshops.

More information from: www.consultingpupils.co.uk