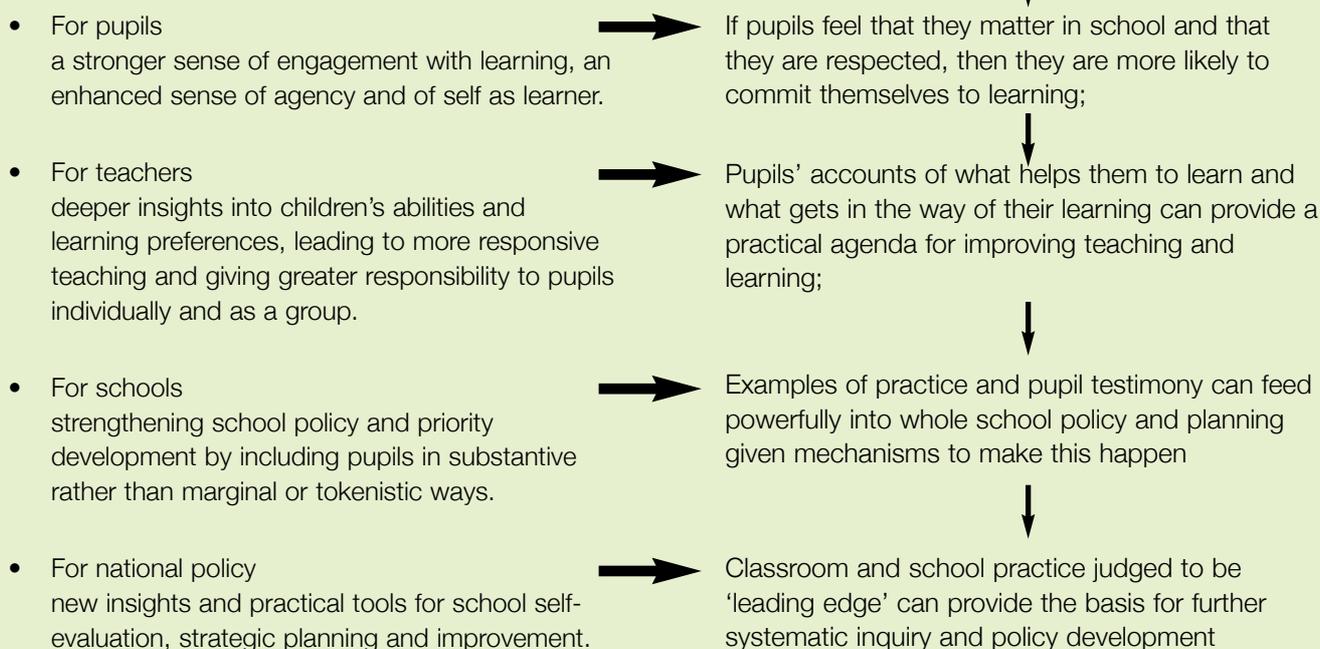


## Consulting Pupils About Teaching and Learning

There is a growing recognition that young people have a right to be heard and have something worthwhile to say about their school experiences. Policy makers internationally are thinking differently – and urgently - about the contribution of young people to today's and tomorrow's world. The U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) included 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. How to listen and learn, as well as to teach and lead, is the challenge for teachers, schools and their communities.

### Developmental processes seem linked in this way:



# The research

## The context

This Research Briefing reports on a network of six projects. They are:

1. How teachers respond to pupils' ideas on improving teaching and learning in different subjects (Donald McIntyre and David Pedder)
2. Ways of consulting pupils about teaching and learning (John MacBeath, Kate Myers, Helen Demetriou)
3. Pupil perspectives and participation: starting and sustaining the process (Michael Fielding and Sara Bragg)
4. The potential of pupils to act as (co)researchers into the process of teaching and learning (Michael Fielding and Sara Bragg)
5. How the conditions of learning in school and classroom affect the identity and participation of different groups of pupils Madeleine Arnot, Diane Reay and Beth Wang
6. Breaking new ground: innovative initiatives involving pupil consultation and participation (Julia Flutter)

In addition the Project supported a network of about 300 interested teachers, lecturers and advisers.

Our starting point is with the recognition that schools have changed less over the last twenty years or so than the change in young people's life style and expectations. Previous studies have suggested that consulting pupils can help to bridge the gap by enabling teachers to recognise pupils' social maturity and harness their ability to make a greater contribution to their own learning and to school improvement.

Teachers and schools consult pupils for a number of reasons, some to do with learning and some to do with conditions of learning. They take the following forms:

1. A 'wide angle' approach to identify generalised issues in schools, for example an occasional large-scale 'referendum' where the opinions of pupils are canvassed on a significant issue;
2. A 'spotlighting' issues of concern or on particular groups of pupils (for example, the disengaged, high achievers, girls, boys);
3. As part of systemic approach to monitoring and evaluating new strategies and interventions, drawing on pupils' expertise, for example in ICT;
4. As a technique for supporting individual learners who are experiencing difficulties with their learning;
5. As preparation for inspection or review or as an on-going system for keeping school under self-review;
6. As a way of establishing a more democratic school system, putting citizenship education into action or enlisting pupils to be researchers and co-researchers into aspects of school life.

This project built on previous knowledge and frameworks, bringing together a team with a significant body of collective expertise in this field of work. The key analytic concepts in our framework are *agency and power* (in each case for pupils, teachers and schools).

The aims of the project were to:

- identify strategies which help teachers consult pupils about teaching and learning;
- gather evidence of the power of pupils' comments to improve teaching and learning;
- gather evidence of the impact of consultation on pupils, teachers and schools;
- develop ways of building consultation into the organisational structure of schools

The project team worked with volunteer primary and secondary schools on the basis of their interest or willingness to be involved. Two projects were researcher-led, the agenda being set by the project team; in three projects the team worked with schools which already had some experience of pupil consultation, while the sixth project offered small grants to schools to support the development of new initiatives.

## What were pupils consulted about?

### 1. School-wide issues

Pupils were consulted on issues such as revising school mission statements, systems of rewards and sanctions, revising school rules, qualities needed in a new teacher or headteacher, getting the school council to work well the contribution of pupils as researchers.

### 2. Year group issues

Some of the issues at this level were planning an induction for next year's year group, organising parents' evenings, qualities needed in a year-tutor, suggestions for timetabling and class grouping and ways of organising homework or study support.

### 3. Issues in their class

Classroom issues included learning styles or preferences, things that help pupils learn and get in the way of learning, understanding what makes a 'good piece of work', peer support, how to improve group work and ways of catching up if you don't understand or miss work.

Consultations at these various levels share a broadly similar purpose but are shaped differently by the context in which they occur. In the classroom context teachers have always routinely consulted pupils, checking out whether they understand something, or need help in their learning, but consultation in the sense we are using it here exemplifies a different quality of interaction, something more sustained and far-reaching and requiring a broader repertoire of professional skills. At school level consultation also calls on a different set of conditions, skills and sensitivities, going beyond token representation to develop an attuned 'acoustic' to a range and tonality of voices.

## What are the benefits?

Our data, across projects, highlight a range of potential outcomes of consulting pupils and strengthening their participation. However, the following benefits for pupils, teachers and schools depend, among other things, on a clarity of purpose, a careful climate setting, an ability and willingness to listen and an understanding of what 'consultation' really means.

## What's in it for pupils?

Being able to talk about your learning helps students:

- develop a stronger sense of membership, feeling more positive about school and more included in its purposes - *the organisational dimension*;
- a stronger sense of respect and self worth so that they feel positive about themselves - *the personal dimension*;
- a stronger sense of self-as-learner so that they are better able to manage their own learning - *the pedagogic dimension*;
- a stronger sense of agency so that they see it as worthwhile to school matters and contribute to improvement in teaching and learning and wider school matters - *the political dimension*.

## 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 agendas for improvement;
- a renewed sense of excitement in teaching.

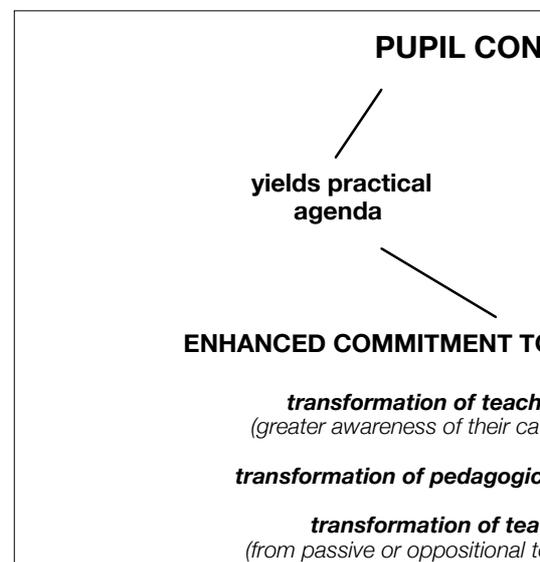


Figure 1 From consultation to transformation

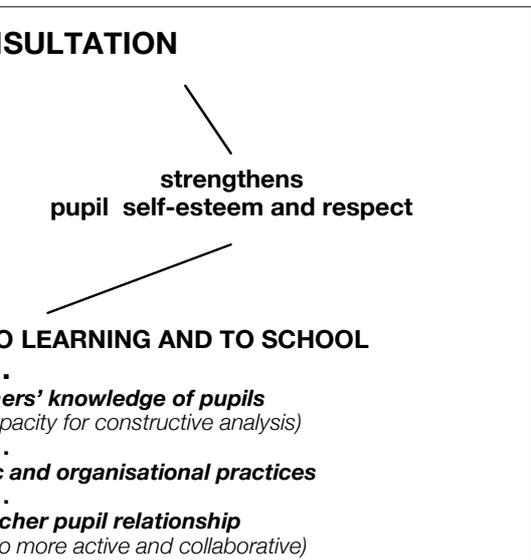
# What's in it for schools?

Strengthening opportunities for greater participation by pupils can yield

- a practical agenda for change that pupils can identify with;
- enhanced engagement with school and school learning;
- a different, more partnership oriented relationship between pupils and teachers;
- a sound basis for developing democratic principles and practices;
- a more inclusive approach to self-evaluation;
- developing the capacity of the school as a learning organisation.

# One size does not fit all

Schools vary enormously in their commitment to and experience of pupil consultation. Schools consult in different ways and extend the principle across the school to different degrees. Schools in which pupils are consulted are likely to be places which have built a strong sense of inclusive membership, where differences among pupils are accepted, and where opportunities for dialogue and discussion are there for *all* pupils. Even within such schools, however, pupils' contribution is variable. Some pupils are more articulate than others, have a clear rationale for what they are asking for and express their views with a sense of audience. Others struggle to find clarity, and experience difficulty putting their ideas into words. Some have a capacity for taking the perspective of their teacher while, for the teacher, listening is easier when the case is articulated well. So teachers' professional learning and practice is mediated by their perception of pupils' status and credibility. In socially and ethnically diverse schools within the project it was the middle class pupils, especially girls, who were more likely to feel listened to while working class pupils expressed a stronger sense of exclusion from this dialogue.



# Major implications

*'We strongly support the Government's ambition to raise standards for all children; but we believe this will best be achieved - indeed, arguably, will only be achieved - if education is undertaken in partnership with children.'* (Hodgkin, 1998, p11)

During the life time of the project national support for pupil consultation –and participation – has grown apace. This may, in part be due to the changing social fabric, to a current of ideas growing internationally, and/or to the a groundswell of practice among schools who can bear witness to the positive power of pupil voice. There is, as in any movement of ideas, the danger of a new orthodoxy, mandated, monitored and measured from the top down.

Policy-makers know something about consultation, about when it is genuine and when simply symbolic. Teachers and pupils too tend to know when they are genuinely listened to, setting this within their school history which tells them just how much their views count. This subjective knowledge may be the best source of evidence there is on what it means to feel heard and included in decisions that affect you.

Consulting pupils assumes great importance because so much rests on it. Not being consulted or being 'consulted' tokenistically can lead to cynicism and disengagement. Being consulted genuinely can help pupils feel that they are respected as individuals and as a body within the school and that they can make a real contribution to the life of classrooms and to the work of the school. It does, however, take time for teachers and pupils to develop mutually trusting relationships which allow them to work together to build a constructive review of teaching and learning. In this the commitment and support of school leaders is crucial.

*For (new) values to count they need to be ... articulated sincerely by significant figures in the organisation do that they become part of the taken-for-grantedness of the place'<sup>2</sup>* (Corson, 1992)

Ways of consulting pupils may be built in to qualifying courses such as NPQH and Leading from the Middle and reinforced as integral to notions of distributed leadership. There are equally implications for the professional development of teachers and those who work with them, learning support assistants, for example. Whether the following are pursued through courses, in service or embedded in the ongoing life of the school, the following are some key principles:

- re-assuring teachers, pupils, parents and governors that consulting pupils is recognised nationally as both legitimate and desirable;
- building up support among teachers (who may be sceptical) by presenting evidence of the positive outcomes of consultation;
- being sensitive to the anxiety experienced by teachers who have not before consulted pupils about teaching and

learning;

- encouraging and supporting initiatives among volunteers, including newly qualified teachers;
- devising procedures which allow teachers to observe and learn from one another's consultative practices;
- making innovative practice public, sensitively and supportively;
- ensuring that other school policies and initiatives are in harmony with the values that underpin pupil consultation;
- modelling behaviour which demonstrates openness to learning from pupils;
- ensuring that consultation is pursued through a range of avenues and not seen as something simply for a school council;
- developing links with other schools that have ideas and practices to share;
- organising workshops and inviting facilitators (preferably teachers) who can demonstrate, advise and support new forms of consultation;
- giving pupil voice a central place in school self-evaluation;

## Some cautions

The potential for consulting pupils is considerable but can fail to make a real difference because of ingrained habits of 'hearing' what pupils have to say. Pupils, for their part, often expect not to be heard. Breaking these habits requires not only new ways of listening but conditions and support for that to take place. It is important, therefore to be alive to the following issues:

**Hearing the quiet voice in the acoustic of the school** - Listening only to the strident or articulate voices risks disenfranchising others.

**Avoiding the creation of a 'pupil voice elite'** - Any pioneering group can easily become a new elite and create new hierarchies within the pupil group.

**Maintaining authenticity** - Pupils tire of invitations (a) to express a view on matters they do not think are important, (b) are framed in a language they find alienating or patronising, and (c) that seldom result in actions that affects the quality of their lives in school.

**Sharing data and/or offering feedback to pupils** - Pupils need to know what is happening as a result of what they have said, what is possible and what is not possible given diverse perspectives and external pressures.

**Trust and openness as a pre-condition of dialogue and action** - This requires a framework that legitimates comment and provides reassurance that ideas will be welcome and not simply 'accommodated' so as not to disturb existing orthodoxy.

## Notes and references

Hodgkin, R (1998) Partnerships with children, *Children UK*, Summer (p115) Corson, D.J. (1992)

Language, gender and education: a critical review linking social justice and power, *Gender and Education*, 4, 3, 229-254.

# Further information

Project publications:

- Ten project Newsletters (many items written by teachers).
- Articles written by team members and teachers who worked with us.
- Outline of the project and of the six sub-projects.

A practitioner-friendly series from Pearson Publishing, Cambridge:

- MacBeath, J., Demetriou, H., Rudduck, J. & Myers, K. (2003) *Consulting Pupils: A Toolkit for Teachers*.
- Fielding, M. & Bragg, S. (2003) *Students as Researchers: Making a Difference*.
- Bragg, S. & Fielding, M. (2003) *Pupil Participation: Building a Whole School Commitment*.
- Arnot, M., McIntyre, D., Pedder, D. & Reay, D. (2003) *Consultation in the Classroom: Pupil Perspectives on Teaching and Learning*.

A TLRP 'gateway' book, in the *Improving Learning* series, is in preparation. This will be published by RoutledgeFalmer, in 2004. Other articles for academic and professional journals on various aspects of the work are also planned.

See also:

- Rudduck, J & Flutter, J. (2003) *Involving Pupils, Improving School*, London: Continuum.
- Fielding, M. (ed) (2001) *Forum* 43, 2 (Special edition on Pupil Voice).
- Flutter, J & Rudduck, J (2004) *Supporting Learning*, London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- MacBeath, J. with Jakobsen, L., Schratz, M. and Meuret, D. (2001) *Self-evaluation in European Schools: a story of change*, London, Routledge.
- MacBeath, J. and Sugimura, H. (eds.) with Sutherland, G. and Nishimura, M. and students of the Learning School (2003) *Self-evaluation in the Global Classroom*, London, Routledge.

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# The warrant

Taken together, the six projects in the network involved teachers in 43 schools. The purposes of the project – to develop and map new ways of thinking and talking about learning – have thus been realised in many different contexts and with a range of methodologies.

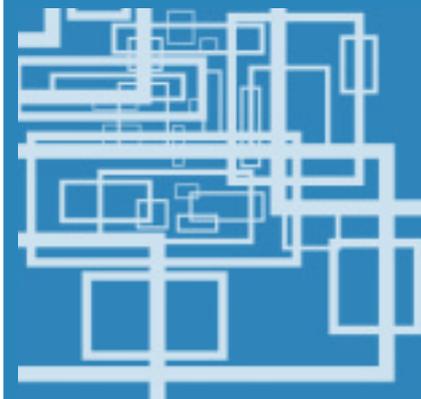
Our primary, and most robust, source of evidence is the testimony of teachers and pupils regarding the impact in their classrooms and in their schools. Their testimony as to changes in their thinking and their practice is validated through:

- documentation and audio recording of the views of teachers, pupils and headteachers, individually in interviews, and collectively in group discussions;
- observations in classrooms;
- video recording of classroom interactions;
- products of classroom work and workshop activities.

These accounts provide powerful evidence of changing dispositions among pupils, and of their teachers. They demonstrate the potential that lies within the consultation process; and the leverage for constructive innovation that can occur when teachers have access to tools and strategies and alternative ways of thinking about teaching and learning.

Confidence in these outcomes is enhanced by their consonance with previous and emerging research on the value and impact of consulting pupils about their learning.

# Teaching and Learning Research Programme



TLRP is the largest education research programme in the UK, and benefits from research teams and funding contributions from England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Projects began in 2000 and will continue with dissemination and impact work extending through 2008/9.

**Learning:** TLRP's overarching aim is to improve outcomes for learners of all ages in teaching and learning contexts within the UK.

**Outcomes:** TLRP studies a broad range of learning outcomes. These include both the acquisition of skill, understanding, knowledge and qualifications and the development of attitudes, values and identities relevant to a learning society.

**Lifecourse:** TLRP supports research projects and related activities at many ages and stages in education, training and lifelong learning.

**Enrichment:** TLRP commits to user engagement at all stages of research. The Programme promotes research across disciplines, methodologies and sectors, and supports various forms of national and international co-operation and comparison.

**Expertise:** TLRP works to enhance capacity for all forms of research on teaching and learning, and for research-informed policy and practice.

**Improvement:** TLRP develops the knowledge base on teaching and learning and collaborates with users to transform this into effective policy and practice in the UK.

TLRP is managed by the Economic and Social Research Council research mission is to advance knowledge and to promote its use to enhance the quality of life, develop policy and practice and strengthen economic competitiveness. ESRC is guided by principles of quality, relevance and independence.

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