

Pupil voice is here to stay!

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Recent years have seen a wealth of statements supporting the idea of young people in school finding and using their voices: *'The fact is that pupils themselves have a huge potential contribution to make, not as passive objects but as active players in the education system.'*ⁱ *'Students can and should participate, not only in the construction of their own learning environments, but as research partners in examining questions of learning and anything else that happens in and around schools.'*ⁱⁱ

Why has 'pupil voice' gained such a high profile? Will it turn out to be just another quick innovative buzz or is there the potential to build a new order of experience for young people in schools?

What do we mean by pupil voice?

Pupil voice is the consultative wing of pupil participation. Consultation is about talking with pupils about things that matter in school. It may involve: conversations about teaching and learning; seeking advice from pupils about new initiatives; inviting comment on ways of solving problems that are affecting the teacher's right to teach and the pupil's right to learn; inviting evaluative comment on recent developments in school or classroom policy and practice.

Arguments in support of pupil voice

These four are heard most often and are perhaps the most persuasive:

Argument 1: We need a better fit between young people's capabilities and their standing and responsibility in

school; talking to pupils can help us bridge the gap

We need a more accomplished way of recognising and harnessing young people's capabilities and insights. Pupils have a lot to tell us about ways of strengthening their commitment to learning in school; they say they want:

- to be treated in more adult ways and to have more responsibility
- to have choices and make decisions
- more opportunities to talk about what helps and what hinders their learning.

Argument 2: The Children's Rights movement is behind it and 'everybody's doing it!'

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the subsequent Children's Act highlight the importance of young people having their say on matters that concern them, both in and out of school. Ofsted inspection frameworks for pupil participation and consultation offer a useful set of benchmarks for monitoring the development of pupil voice.

Many national and local agencies and professional groups have an interest in pupil voice. It is one of the nine gateways to personalised learning and it is also fundamental to the realisation of citizenship education in the community of the school.

Argument 3: School improvement gains from pupil participation

An American researcher sets the scene: 'Decades of calls for educational reform have not succeeded in making schools places where all young people want to and are able to learn. It is time to invite pupils to join the conversations about how we might accomplish that.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Among the pragmatic arguments from a Canadian policy maker^{iv}, the strongest is the appeal to students as experts in the task of improving their experiences of learning in school; these are some of his other arguments:

- students' views can help mobilise staff and parent opinion in favour of meaningful reform
- constructivist learning, which is increasingly important to high standards reforms, requires a more active student role in school
- students are the producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is fundamental to all improvement.

Argument 4: The qualities that we look for in young people are those that participation and consultation can help develop

The table below^v identifies four generalised 'pupil states' whose reality teachers readily recognise:

	PASSIVE	
Accepting		Indifferent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attends regular • quite likes school and teachers • does what is required • trusts school to deliver a future 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mistrust of school and teachers • withdraws from sources of support • denies concern about progress • does not look ahead
POSITIVE		NEGATIVE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wants to understand and contribute • wants to discuss progress in learning • is ready to organise things and take responsibility • is ready to help other pupils 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is skilled at disrupting teaching and learning • behaviour is anti-social • attends irregularly • frequently on report and sometimes excluded
Influencing	ACTIVE	Rejecting

The 'positive-passive' pupil may be more compliant and easier to teach but with the new emphasis on the school as a community, teachers are increasingly valuing the 'positive-active' pupil. And looking to life beyond school, employers seem to be valuing similar qualities: a capacity for independent initiative, working collaboratively, and competence in the management of time and task. Consultation can help develop these qualities.

Evidence of the potential

Our evidence comes from a number of recent pupil voice projects^{vi} where we have relied heavily on the testimony of pupil and teachers.

What's in it for teachers and schools?

- a practical agenda for change that pupils identify with
- enhanced engagement with school and learning
- a partnership between pupils and teachers
- seeing the familiar from a different angle
- a better understanding of young people's insight and capability
- a basis for developing democratic principles and practices
- a more inclusive approach to school self-review.

What's in it for pupils?

- opportunities to discuss things that matter to you in school
- feeling respected, being listened to and taken seriously
- feeling that you belong and can make a difference to how things are done
- being involved, understanding more and having more control over your learning.

Consultation can help pupils develop a stronger sense of:

- membership – so that they feel more included in the school's purposes

- respect and self-worth – so that they feel positive about themselves
- agency – so that they feel able to contribute something to the school.

Understanding the problems is halfway to solving them

The current popularity of pupil voice can make consultation seem easy – but in many settings it is not: it challenges traditional power relationships and both teachers and students may be uncertain what the boundaries are. But the main problem from the teachers' perspective is time: consultation takes time – and it takes time away from covering the syllabus and preparing for the tests. So consultation can either become an end-of-term treat or it is routinised.

Then there is the question of inclusion. In developing consultation, we have to ask, 'Whose voices are heard in the school?' Pupils are often able to tell us: 'I think they listen to some people, like the good ones'; 'If you're doing well they listen'. Consultation assumes a degree of social confidence and of linguistic competence and we have found that the more self-assured (often middle-class pupils) who talk the language of the school can tend to dominate conversations. But one of the strengths of consultation is the opportunity it provides to hear from the silent – or silenced – pupils and to understand why some disengage and what would help them get back on track.

Another issue is authenticity. Authenticity is about communicating a genuine interest in what pupils have to say: learning to listen, to offer feedback, to discuss lines of action, to explain why certain responses are not possible. And while there may be several patches of ground-breaking work on pupil voice in any one school, the challenge is to build pupil voice into a coherent school-wide policy that genuinely reflects a set of commonly held values in the school.

But perhaps the most important principle of all is that before teachers can focus wholeheartedly on developing pupil consultation in their school, teachers need to feel that they have a voice – that they are listened to and that they matter.

Notes

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- Levin, B, *Putting students at the centre in education reform*, unpublished paper, Canada, 1999
- Nixon, J, Martin, J, McKeown, P.O, and Ranson, S, *Encouraging learning*, Open University Press, Buckingham, 1996
- For fuller detail see Rudduck, J and Flutter, J, *How to improve your school: giving pupils voice*, Continuum, London 2004

Further reading

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- Macbeath, J, Demetriou, H, Rudduck, J, and Myers, K, *Consulting pupils – a toolkit for teachers*, Pearson, Cambridge, 2003
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