

# Teaching and Learning Research Programme

Consulting Pupils about  
Teaching and Learning

## CONSULTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN SCHOOLS

Jean  
Rudduck  
and  
Julia  
Flutter

Homerton College  
Cambridge

### **T**he argument for consulting pupils and some of the issues

Schools have changed less over the last twenty years or so than young people have changed and many young people struggle to reconcile the often complex relationships and responsibilities of their life out of school with their life in school: in school many young people claim that they continue to be ‘treated like children’ and they can become increasingly disengaged. Moreover, some develop, quite early in their school careers, a negative sense of themselves as learners and feel that the system is rejecting them. One pupil said, ‘School is a good place but I don’t fit’.

Consulting young people is one way of responding to both these situations. Being consulted can help pupils feel that they are respected as individuals and as a body within the school, that they belong, and that they are being treated in an adult way. Pupils who are at risk of disengaging may come back on board if they think that they matter to the school. Schools where 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 support are made available for pupils who find learning a struggle.

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But consultation has to be genuine and pupils need to be sure that teachers are really interested in what they have to say, that their views will be given careful consideration, and that they will also receive feedback on what they have said and some explanation of any decisions taken as a result of the consultation.

We would make a distinction between classroom research where pupils are asked about their experiences of learning in a subject so that a teacher can improve his or her practice, and consultations about broader policy issues in school. It seems appropriate to discuss the purposes and outcomes of both kinds of enquiry with pupils.

Traditionally schools have consulted pupils - often via a school council - about a predictable set of topics (uniform, school meals, and lockers). Over the last few years, however, both the range of topics and the manner of consultation have been extended.

Support for pupil consultation has come from different sources: from recent work on citizenship in schools; from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989; in particular article 12) and from the school improvement movement which offers a common sense rationale: if we want to improve pupils' achievements and commitment then we may need to take our agenda for change, at least in part, from what they can tell us about lessons and learning.

Where consultation is new for the school, teachers can feel uneasy about:

- talking with pupils in a way that changes the traditional power relationships**
- whether pupils will offer their real views or 'please the teacher' views**

Some teachers, uneasy about the idea of consulting pupils, have said that in their experience pupils have very little to say that is worth hearing about learning and teaching in the school. Where teachers hold such views genuine consultation will be difficult to manage. But there are other concerns that can more easily be dealt with. For instance, teachers may feel that there is little time to consult pupils; they may be uncertain about the process of consultation, and about how to record and analyse responses. Here discussion with others who have found consultation productive will be helpful. This may offer some immediate guidance.

## Overview of issues and approaches

### **The argument for involving and consulting young people**

their maturity and desire to be treated in an adult way  
importance of feeling 'respected' and listened to in school, as individuals and as a group  
the sense of membership and inclusion that consultation can communicate, especially for young people who feel marginalised

## Principles that should guide the consultation

that the desire to hear what young people have to say is genuine

that the topic is not trivial

that the purpose of the consultation is explained to the young people

that young people know what will happen to the data and are confident that expressing a sincerely held opinion, or describing a feeling or an experience, will not disadvantage them

that feedback is offered to those who have been consulted

that action taken is explained and where necessary justified so that young people understand the wider context of concerns, alongside their own input, that shape decisions

## The topics that pupils might be consulted about

Schools we have worked with have consulted pupils about:

### *aspects of classroom learning, for example:*

what gets in the way of their learning in class and what helps them to learn

what are the qualities of a good teacher

what makes a good lesson

how they see feedback and how they use it to improve their work

which friends they work well with in class

whether they know what working hard and working harder mean in different subjects

why boys seem to do less well than girls in some subjects, e.g. English

### *school policies and structures, for example:*

what pupils think of the merits/rewards system and how it might be improved

what pupils think of the school rules and sanctions and whether there are any grounds for modifying them

what the school might do, or do more of, to help pupils who find it difficult to catch up and keep up

aspects of school that pupils would like more information about or more opportunity to discuss, whether with teachers or with older pupils

how pupils see years 3 and 8 (identified as years when performance can dip)

### *relationships with teachers, pupils and the community:*

to what extent bullying happens, what form it takes and what might be done to try to diminish it  
ideas for special events that would encourage parents to come into the school

ideas for special events or activities that would strengthen links between the school and its community

how opportunities for dialogue about learning, with teachers and/or with older pupils, might be structured

## The frequency of consultation

Pupils might be consulted

### *regularly*

at classroom level, e.g. at the end of a block of work  
at school level through the regular meetings of the school council  
through a 'head's consultation' with each form once a year

### *occasionally*

through a one-off referendum, e.g. about uniform  
in relation to a particular event, e.g. planning a parents' evening for year 8, or, as in one school, planning a staff development day for the teachers in the school

## Ways of consulting

The approach will vary according to *the scale of the enquiry* which could be school-wide or be relevant to a particular class, form, year cohort or other group.

### *The consultation could be carried out by*

teachers  
researchers or local advisers working with the school  
in some settings and for some topics it could be managed by pupils taking a research role and formally consulting other pupils

### *The data could be gathered through*

questionnaires requiring ticks or short responses  
diary or learning log entries  
'focus group' discussions  
individual or small-group interviews

## Recording the evidence

It is our experience that while useful data can come from seeing the weight of opinion on a particular issue in questionnaire responses, the richest data - the data that give teachers the greatest insight - come from interviews or carefully handled group discussion, especially where the interview or discussion can be recorded in full notes or on a tape-recorder.