

Communicating...

The ESRC Network Project Newsletter

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Focus on ... a school working with Project 2

In 1998, Caldecote Primary School, a school of only 53 pupils outside Cambridge, was on Special Measures. Prue Rayner, appointed as the new Head and buzzing with inspiration from her M.Ed., arrived with a vision - to turn the school around by placing the pupils' voices at the centre of learning. Now, the school is not only thriving and expanding, with a large building programme planned, but has glowing OFSTED recognition to authenticate the change in pupil attitude. She explained to me just how she had achieved this remarkable reversal ...

It was clear to me that the older children in the school were so angry. Their attention was not on what they were doing, but on making sure that they had superiority over the other pupils. And I think they knew their work wasn't really at the level that they were capable of producing. I was just in such despair about how to get through to them. I remember one day I listed their names on the board and I said 'Every time you say something positive I'm going to put a mark this side and every time you say something negative I'll put a mark that side.' And even they were astounded - because there was nothing on the positive side. ...

I started to look with the children at what they thought learning was and why they felt they needed to learn, to begin to give them a reason for being in school. They told me that if they're told what to do, they just listen and then do it, really. But as soon as they had to be responsive, then they would realise that their understanding wasn't as good as they thought it was at the time they were listening. And I think that was really important because there's now two-way exchange most of the time in the classroom even when there's direct delivery from me. One of the interesting things is that the children very freely now say, 'Can you go over that again, I don't understand it'. They may have confidence in you as the knower but they can lose confidence in their

interpretation of what you're saying unless they have that freedom to come back. ...

We also looked at sharing learning objectives. We looked at it at the start of the lesson and reviewing at the end of the lesson but to do it properly there just isn't the time in one lesson. So we established it over a week. And initially because they were taking the responsibility for what they were doing there was less confidence in my role as the teacher. They had to take on responsibility and to be able to say at the end 'Yes I do understand it' or 'No, I don't,' rather than having a piece of work that says, 'Good' or 'Not good'. But now I've got a Maths group who run completely on their own because they're very capable and they have ownership of their work. ...

Another thing this approach has made me think a lot about is children with specific learning difficulties. The same things keep coming up in their weekly reviews - like spelling. Children who have a spelling problem, of course they can share that and they can talk about it, but sometimes you have to go back and back and back until you find the thing that does finally give them either the confidence or the where-withal or the understanding to be able to do something a little bit better. And I think when children do have a problem sometimes we don't pay enough attention in terms of time to the root of the problem. ...

I want the children's understanding of their learning to be reflected in staff curriculum development meetings. Now, in the school development plan, what we're going to be looking at is putting in skills development through year groups. Given an outline of that, I want the children's input as to whether they think they're appropriate,

because it's so easy for us to take the National Curriculum and to take QCA schemes of work and say, 'This is what it says for year 4'. But what do year 4 think about that? ...

I'm not unrealistic enough to think that everybody will want their children to be part of all this, but it was wonderful to have it recognised in the OFSTED report. We are getting a lot of positive feedback from new parents too. But it's not something you can go easy on. You've got to keep working at it and keep reinforcing it. ...

There are some people who claim to be on the road to understanding how to involve pupils and yet they speak about the pupils almost in a patronising way. I want it just to be what happens in school. It would be easy at this stage to focus on things like the building project or developing our curriculum and forget about where the pupils are with them. It's made me want to lose the patronising attitude to giving children their own voice and turn that into just what we expect - pupils to be our partners. And I get very excited about it!

These are very brief, edited extracts from a longer account of the work the school has been undertaking in the last couple of years. If you would like a fuller copy of an edited version of the whole interview, please contact Nichola Daily (see contact details at the bottom of page 4).

OVER TO YOU

Feedback from the member survey on pupil consultation for improving teaching and learning

Last term we sent out a short survey to find out how members use pupil consultation and pupil participation to improve teaching and learning. Many thanks to all those who replied: it was good to hear about innovative work in schools around the country. We will be in touch with some of you over the next few months to find out more about what your school is doing and we hope that future editions of *Communicating...* will feature school profiles.

'Pupils provide the best feedback in terms of how effective teaching and delivery of the curriculum is.'

The aim of the survey¹ was to give us a clearer picture of how schools are developing pupil consultation and participation, why they are keen to do so and what teachers think the impact on pupil motivation and/or teaching and learning is. From the responses it was clear that just over half the schools were focusing on issues directly concerned with teaching and learning in the classroom.

Reasons for consulting pupils varied - some schools emphasised the contribution of pupils' views for improving teaching and learning. Others were keen to establish partnership and a sense of community with pupils.

Some introduced pupil consultation as a means of evaluating new strategies whilst others were using it as a tool to investigate particular issues such as pupil motivation or behaviour management. Teachers' involvement in research projects and professional development courses are starting points for new initiatives.

All the schools felt that consulting pupils proved worthwhile and had a positive impact. The wide-ranging benefits are listed in the second column of the Findings.

Schools also acknowledged that they had had some problems with the process of pupil consultation. Finding time to gather and analyse data was a universal concern but other difficulties were mentioned (see below).

The survey has given us a useful overview of how our member schools are thinking about and developing pupil consultation and participation but we would like to know more about your views, ideas and approaches to these processes. In each edition of *Communicating...* you will find a section spotlighting a particular aspect of pupil consultation and participation and inviting your comments (see p.3).

'To effect worthwhile lasting change the whole school community needs to be committed. Involving students will hopefully mobilise that support.'

¹ 94 feedback sheets were sent out, 35 replies were received (response rate 37%) - 6 primary schools replied and 29 middle/secondary schools.

The Findings

How members use pupil consultation

43% of schools use pupil consultation to focus on aspects of classroom learning

32% of schools use pupil consultation to focus on school-wide issues

25% of schools use pupil consultation to focus on issues indirectly influencing pupils' learning (eg behaviour management strategies)

Impact of consulting pupils

greater pupil involvement in learning activities

improvements in aspects of pupils' learning

a more positive learning culture

lower incidence of disruptive behaviour

new ideas and strategies for teaching

increased pupil understanding of assessment processes

improved pupil-teacher relationships

raised pupil self-esteem and confidence

Problems encountered in consulting pupils

reluctance among teachers to use evidence from pupil consultation to make changes in their classroom practice

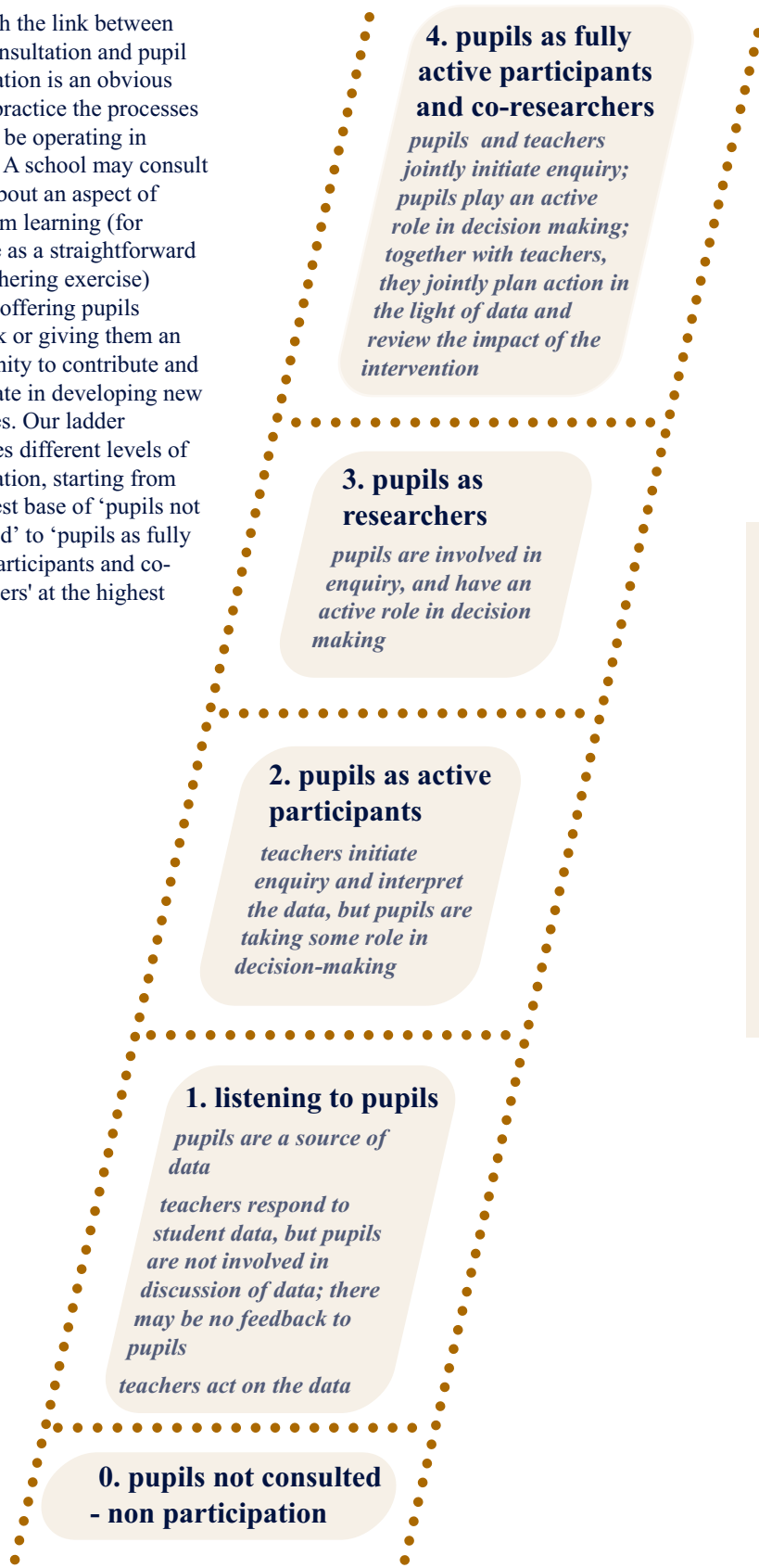
some pupils lack skills for expressing their opinions and their ideas about teaching and learning

the difficulties in feeding back sensitive and challenging information to staff

the need for outside support and guidance on ways of managing technical aspects of data gathering

WHERE IS YOUR SCHOOL ON THE LADDER?

Although the link between pupil consultation and pupil participation is an obvious one, in practice the processes may not be operating in parallel. A school may consult pupils about an aspect of classroom learning (for example as a straightforward data-gathering exercise) without offering pupils feedback or giving them an opportunity to contribute and participate in developing new strategies. Our ladder illustrates different levels of participation, starting from the lowest base of 'pupils not consulted' to 'pupils as fully active participants and co-researchers' at the highest rung.



We would like to hear your views and ideas and those of your pupils about the ladder of pupil participation **and ask you to respond to these questions:**

1. At what position on the ladder do you see your school at the moment?

2. Do you want your school to move to a higher rung on the ladder and how might you achieve this?

3. What problems and obstacles might you encounter in trying to enhance pupil participation?

Please send your replies to:

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or email nd241@cam.ac.uk

Breaking New Ground

Project 6 has had a successful first year with four schools chosen by the panel to receive a grant and research support for their innovative school initiatives involving pupil consultation and participation. Two schools decided to look at ways of enhancing the role of their student councils: **The Haven High School** in Lincolnshire is training its council members in representation and debate and **Hastingsbury Upper School** in Bedfordshire is developing ways of increasing pupils' participation in decision-making in school. Teachers at **The Streetly School** in Walsall are focusing on consultation strategies to investigate pupils' experiences of teaching and learning and at **Rivington and Blackrod School** in Bolton teachers are exploring pupils' responses to target setting.

Bedside Reading

The Network Project Meta Study is about understanding the growth of interest in pupil voice and the factors supporting and shaping its development both in the UK and internationally. Experts from a range of fields have been invited to contribute to a series of seminars focused on various dimensions of pupil voice to enable the Network Project team to build up a clearer picture of the movement and its potential for transforming the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

The first seminar (held in December 2000) was on the different ways in which people see 'childhood' and the implications for definitions of what a 'pupil' is in school. The second seminar (May 2001) focused on language and what kind of language pupils have for talking about learning and themselves as learners. The third - and final - seminar will be held in the autumn and will be on pupil voice and issues of democracy and citizenship. Copies of a short summary paper from the first seminar, *Ways of Thinking about Childhood*, can be obtained, free of charge, from Nichola Daily at the address below. (Please send A4 SAE.)

Improving Learning - The Pupils' Agenda is a national project, supported by the Nuffield Foundation, looking at how schools are listening and responding to pupils' views on teaching and learning. Two reports - one for primary schools and one on middle and secondary schools - are available, price £4.50 each (inc postage and packing) from Nichola Daily (again, see contact details below). Cheques, sent to Nichola, should be made payable to "University of Cambridge".

Does your school want to take part in Project 6?

The project's second phase starts in September 2001 and applications are invited from any member school. A small grant (£1760) is provided to help cover costs of teacher cover and other expenses and research support is offered by Network Project researchers, Julia Flutter and Nick Brown. Further details about the project and application forms for Phase 2 have already been sent to members; further copies are available from the Network secretary, Nichola Daily (contact details below) or you are welcome to discuss your ideas with Julia Flutter, the project director (telephone 01223 507191, e-mail jaed100@cam.ac.uk).

Dates for your Diary

There will be a training conference for Network members who are new to pupil consultation or who want to know more about it - **Thursday November 1, 2001**, in Cambridge. Please contact Nichola Daily if you would like to be sent further details.

A conference at which teachers will be invited to present their work with pupils - and which Lord Puttnam will attend - will be held, in Cambridge, on **Saturday March 16, 2002**.

Your comments

We invite fullest possible feedback from you and your pupils on any aspect of this newsletter - or, indeed, anything not in the newsletter that you would like to see included. We would like this newsletter to be as useful to you as possible; your comments are therefore highly valued.

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