

## Setting up a pupil council: the head's story

*Mike Kent, Head of Comber Grove Primary School in Southwark, describes how, despite a measure of initial scepticism, he was won over, through the process of setting up a pupil council, to appreciating the value and strength of pupil voice.*

A number of children in the upper Juniors had asked me about the possibility of starting a school council, and it seemed as if the time was right to try it ... and some of the younger teachers were very keen. They felt that issues often arise which only the children can really resolve effectively. We had a number of staff meetings to discuss the setting up of a council and various ideas and procedures were mooted. We identified six possible benefits. It could enable children to:

- make a real difference on issues they felt strongly about;*
- understand how a democratic process works, and appreciate the difficulties;*
- think school problems through, by trial and error;*
- have a chance to be even more involved in their school;*
- build greater self-confidence and esteem;*
- learn that sometimes very different views have to be reconciled, and complicated issues resolved, often by compromise.*

Teachers spent some time discussing the idea with their classes, and listening to the views of the children. They identified the sort of issues their representatives might wish to raise. Time was spent on talking about electing representatives, the qualities they would need, how matters would be raised, and how the council would report back to the children.

After the initial discussion, things took shape. The School Council would be composed of eighteen children, two from each KS2 class and two from the Year 2 classes. It was decided not to go lower than Year 2.

*Each class would provide an elected boy and a girl.*

*The two children would be elected, by paper ballot, by the children in their class. Before the election, teachers would describe how choices should be made.*

*Nominated children would need to be willing to say why they thought they could do the job and what they hoped to achieve. Children would be able to nominate themselves.*

*The elected children would have specially designed badges and their photos would be placed on a School Council board. It was important for their status to be recognised.*

*The children would hold office for one year and meetings would happen once a month.*

*There would be two teachers at each meeting (to provide continuity, the headteacher would be one of them).*

*The class representatives would raise issues put forward by children in their classes.*

*The class representatives would feed back to their classes. A reasonable amount of time would be allowed for this and for the discussion of issues arising. Some time would be given in assembly too.*

*The eventual aim would be for an older child to chair the meeting.*

To date, twelve meetings have been held. The first one resulted in a very large and haphazard number of issues. Not all councillors got the chance to say enough. Care had to be taken to give the younger children an opportunity to speak. Many of the issues raised were hopelessly optimistic, such as, 'My class say they'd like the school to have its own swimming pool'. A lot of time was spent in discussing how to be realistic and how councillors should persuade their classes to be thoughtful and sensible in the topics they put forward for discussion.

The second meeting was much more successful. Even though the number of issues was again large, the discussion was intense, children listened more carefully to each other and everybody involved, including the teachers, felt very optimistic about it. By the fourth meeting, realistic topics were there in abundance: school

lunches, the state of the toilets, school clubs, increasing facilities for the children at lunch times, starting a tuck shop, running more fund raising activities, homework. By meeting seven, the children, still very optimistic about the effects the council might have, had been somewhat disappointed about one of the major issues – having soft toilet paper in the toilets. Following the previous meeting, paper dispensers had been fixed on the toilet walls, but the paper had been misused and the children had managed to block the sink, causing a flood! The Premises Officer was brought to the meeting to discuss the matter and the children came up with various ways around the problem.

Virtually all of the councillors have taken their role very seriously. One or two haven't and it has been necessary to stress that children who are on the school council are expected to set a strong example. It is

likely that, as the idea of the council becomes fully embedded in the school culture, the level of responsibility will climb.

At the end of our first year we issued a questionnaire to assess the effect of school council. The children expressed broad satisfaction with it and with the councillors and the achievements so far – and in fact the achievements have been considerable. Children were enthusiastic about having a formal opportunity to talk with other children about issues on which they had concerns rather than taking them straight to a teacher.

A School Council now seems to me to be an essential of school life and could well be an important factor in raising achievement. I certainly wouldn't have said that two years ago.



## Pupils observe lessons and give feedback to teachers

*Geraldine Norman, Deputy Headteacher of Matthew Moss High School, explains how her involvement in the National College of School Leadership 'Established Leader' pilot course led to direct pupil involvement in assessing the quality of learning in her school.*

As a Training School, we have had a lot of experience in lesson observation, the training of new teachers and the analysis of what makes a good lesson. When we were awarded Leading Edge status, we felt that it was time to push this work to the next logical level: involving the students in deciding what a good lesson looked like.

I used an opportunity afforded by my involvement in NCSL's 'Established Leader' pilot Course to introduce the training of students in the skills of lesson observation and feedback. I invited three of my deputy colleagues from the course to visit Matthew Moss High School and pair up with six students in observing six lessons in a day and feeding back to the teachers.

The visitors provided an objective, supportive and experienced partner for the Year 11 students who had undergone their training beforehand. The visitors modelled the process for the students who often led the feedback meeting. The day was a great success. The visitors were very impressed by the way the Year 11 students had grasped the concept of what makes a good lesson, could articulate this in discussion and could challenge teachers appropriately and perceptively. They understood the need to try and identify if learning had taken place and how different learning styles were being catered for.

The teachers involved were equally impressed with the quality of the feedback. Other teachers want students to observe them soon!

After the success of the pilot, it is intended to use the Year 11s in training a group of Year 10 students and so to extend the project. The visitors have invited the student observers to their school and we would like the students to deliver some of our LEA-wide NQT Induction training. We would also wish to use student observers in our ITT programme, especially with our Graduate Trainees; we consider this to be an exciting innovation to the programme we offer our trainees.

# How we feel about learning - a student research project

*The following article was sent to us by Julie Wilson of Hartsdown Technology College and outlines work carried out there there by a Student Research Team and Annie Hamlaoui of Creative Partnerships*

We, the Student Research Team, feel that learning in the classroom could be made much more fun and effective for everyone. We are being encouraged and supported by our school to investigate these feelings.

We understand that there is a shared responsibility in learning between the teacher and the student. The focus of our initial observations was on the teacher's presentation and teaching methods - our aim was to find what worked well and why and what was less effective and why.

We decided to focus on:

*relationships between staff and students*

*classroom environment (room design, temperature, lighting)*

*teaching methods which are effective and inclusive*

We are still in the early stages of our project; we have had six one-hour sessions together over a two month period and we have observed:

*25 separate lessons at different times of the day and 25 different teachers in 10 different subject areas – History, English, P.E., Art, Geography, French, Spanish, Maths, P.S.E., Science.*

We created a checklist to be used during the classroom observations (see page 4).

We have not yet fully evaluated our findings. A brief look at our data indicates that the following help lessons to be more enjoyable and effective:

## Teachers who:

*arrive on time, give a warm welcome to the students and offer an interesting starter activity*

*use positive facial expressions (smiles), good eye contact, and who listen to students with interest*

*move around the room rather than sitting or standing in one place*

*explain the lesson clearly so that everyone can understand what they are doing before they start*

*break up the lesson into chunks so that there is some talking and discussion, some writing and reading*

*let you talk quietly if you finish your work*

*give out work that is suitable for everyone's ability*

*tell jokes, make the lesson fun and allow us to laugh*

Observation criteria	Good	Satisfactory	?	Comments
----------------------	------	--------------	---	----------

Teacher arrived on time

Teacher offered warm welcome

Good starting activity

Teacher used positive facial expressions

Teacher used positive body language

Teacher used positive verbal language

Teaching methods varied to suit all learning styles

Teacher provides suitable materials for all student levels of ability

What was the general mood of the class?

How effective was the communication between teacher and students?

Write about one student who seemed to enjoy the lesson and record how his/her feelings were reflected in their behaviour.

Write about one student who did not seem to enjoy the lesson and record how his/her feelings were reflected in their behaviour.

Do you think the lesson was effective and enjoyable for students and teacher?

Yes  
Why?

No  
Why not?

## Observations of students who seemed to enjoy lessons:

In general they:

*Participate all the way through*  
*Ask and answer lots of questions*  
*Enjoy tests*  
*Listen well and don't get distracted*  
*Make lots of notes*  
*Get all the work done*  
*Sit up straight*  
*Show a positive attitude*  
*Are very enthusiastic*  
*Behave well*  
*Offer to read out loud to the class*  
*Sit still*  
*Produce good work*

## Observations of students who did not seem to enjoy lessons:

*Can't settle down to work*  
*Get sent out of the class*  
*Fidget*  
*Unable to concentrate*  
*Act silly*  
*Slump against the table*  
*Don't get their work done*  
*Don't listen well*  
*Get the work done but show they are not enjoying it*  
*Talk to other students and try to distract them*  
*Never put their hands up*  
*Play up to get attention*  
*Get very loud*

Our next step will be to look at our data and use our own experiences to see if there is a link between the positive teaching methods we described above and the students' behaviour. (We know there are some students who do not respond well in the classroom even when teaching is good.)

We have fed back our findings to the entire staff at Hartsdown Technology College on a Staff Training Day. This was received very positively and tied in very well to work the teachers were doing on that day.

# Training materials for students-as-researchers initiatives - Julia Flutter reports

Through our work with schools in Network Project 6, 'Breaking New Ground', we have developed a set of resources for use with students in Key Stage 3 and 4. The materials, which are presented in three sets, form an introduction to the key ideas and techniques for student-researcher initiatives and they can be used as student worksheets or lesson plans. Each set contains information, guidelines and activities for students.

## Set 1. A question of research

This set introduces some basic ideas about research and explains, through a worked example, how research on a social issue can be carried out and the findings used to develop new ways of tackling problems. The set covers questions like: What is research? What do you need when you start a research project? How can research findings be used?

## Set 2. Gathering data: interviews and surveys

Interviews and surveys are commonly used techniques for gathering data and can form the basis of students-as-researchers projects. This set describes the techniques and gives straightforward guidance on practical and ethical aspects of data gathering.

## Set 3. Analysing and using data

This set contains advice on how to analyse quantitative and qualitative data and shows how to make use of findings in developing new directions. The set also includes guidance on monitoring and evaluating developments.

If you would like an electronic copy of these draft materials, please email Julia Flutter ([jaed100@cam.ac.uk](mailto:jaed100@cam.ac.uk)) - we can supply MSWord or Text file formats.

# Researching transfer using computerised questionnaires

*For the past few years, students at Sarah Bonnell School have been involved in carrying out self-evaluation exercises on aspects of school life, using questionnaires, surveys, and photo-evaluations.*

A 'Student Self Evaluation Group' leads the student self-evaluation programme and in 2002 the group decided to research student experiences of transferring to secondary school. As a first step, they asked the Year 7 students how they would like to be consulted. As a result of this preliminary research, the group chose to draw up a questionnaire (although interviews were also favoured). At the same time, and separately, the LEA came into the school with a computer-based questionnaire for the School Council members to complete. The system uses hand-held voting pads which enable the results to be flashed up instantaneously on a screen. This was felt to be such an exciting development, enabling our self-evaluation team to access and analyse many more responses, that the group plumped for this new device. The drawback, as they found out, was that all the questions would have to be of the multi-choice or Yes/ No type.

The self-evaluation group amended its questionnaire accordingly and decided that Year 7 students would be invited subsequently to come to individual or group interviews if they wished to talk in more depth about issues raised. (The group had drawn on their own experiences in previous years to prepare an extensive list of controversial issues!) The questionnaire was accordingly administered to groups of 100 Year 7 students in the summer term, with the self-evaluation group members acting as facilitators and organisers at the three sessions. There was great excitement in the Assembly Hall amongst the Year 7 students as the responses started to flash up on the screen and, at the end, a sizeable group requested 'follow up' interviews in order to express their views further.

What follows are comments from the student researchers and respondents:

*"I think it made you feel individual" Haley, Year 7*

*"Using the push buttons made answers private, so no-one else knew what you were saying" Patricia, Year 7*

*"It didn't make you feel awkward - you didn't have to speak out loud" Zoe, Year 7*

*"It was a good experience and different, being on the organising side, instead of always answering" Alex, organising team, Year 9*

*"It was fun because I got to speak up in front of an audience and read out the questions to help the Year 7 students! A good experience" Aneeka, organising team, Year 9*

*"I was nervous when I had to ring up the council, to organise hiring the equipment, but in the end it went O.K." Natalie, organising team, Year 9*

In the end, we had a valuable body of information, which was disseminated to all teaching staff via a Self Evaluation team presentation at a staff meeting. The main issues raised were: -

- *the adjustment needed, on transfer, to the multiplicity of teaching staff and the diversity of classroom protocols and subject demands;*
- *the need for teaching staff to be aware that the Year 7s had occupied positions of responsibility in their primary schools and been regarded as 'mature' members of their primary school communities;*
- *the need for more subject-focused liaison with primary schools and for a more informed progression programme.*

# Student Perspectives

*Miles Bacon, deputy head teacher at Chantry High School and Sixth Form Centre in Ipswich has been working on a student consultation initiative focused on students' perspectives on teaching and learning and the school as a learning environment.*

An initial survey was carried with students in all years to explore their views on these issues and the data highlighted some interesting variations between different year groups. It was noticed, for example, that students' engagement with learning appeared to change, from an initial enthusiasm in Year 7 which appeared to decline as they moved into later years. To investigate students' views in greater depth, some Year 8 and Year 10 students were interviewed in small focus groups by Bethan Morgan. The interview data not only confirmed the falling off in students' engagement but also shed some light on possible reasons why engagement with learning can diminish. These are some key points raised in the investigation so far:

*The majority of students like the school because they feel it is a 'good school'. In interviews they spoke of liking teachers, the friendly atmosphere and some facilities.*

*Students' views on the curriculum were less positive, particularly in Key Stage 4. Many felt that the subjects offered and topics covered were not particularly relevant for their futures.*

*Lessons could be 'boring' if activities and teaching styles lacked variety and some students wanted more opportunities for choice in their work.*

*Many students raised the school environment as a key issue and identified a number of areas where improvements were needed.*

*Students offered interesting ideas for improving the school environment and aspects of teaching and learning. They also said that they appreciated being given the opportunity to express their views and opinions.*

In the next stage of the initiative, elected school councillors will act as student-researchers to consult the student body about ways of improving the learning environment. As a first step, the researchers attended a student-researcher training day at the Faculty of Education in Cambridge, organised with the support of Julia Flutter and the Network Project team\*. Miles Bacon sums up the thinking behind the initiative: 'We are attempting to change the culture of the school from a two level "us and them" hierarchy to a participative learning community. One of the keys to this is creating mechanisms to hear student voice, and to increase the level of involvement of students in decisions that affect their school community.'

*If you would like to know more about the school's initiative, please contact Miles Bacon, Deputy Head (01473 687181).*

*\*For information about the training materials see page 5 in this Newsletter*

# A Final Word

With the completion of the ESRC TLRP project, this is, sadly, the final newsletter in the series. We hope you have valued reading them and that they have helped either spark or support the activities you have been engaged in in your own schools.

A very special word of thanks must go to all those who have contributed over the thirteen issues; they have astonished and delighted us with their vision and spirited professionalism and with the many different ways in which they have enabled pupil voices to be heard.

The work, we hope, goes on even if the project doesn't and you may wish to be sustained in it by the publications that the project has produced: three you will have received free copies of (if you want additional copies please contact Pearson Publishing). The first two publications you may want to order from the publisher.



Rudduck, J., and Flutter, J. (2004)

## **How To Improve Your School: Giving Pupils a Voice**

London: Continuum ([www.continuumbooks.com](http://www.continuumbooks.com))



Flutter, J., and Rudduck, J. (2004)

## **Consulting Pupils: What's in it for Schools?**

London: RoutledgeFalmer ([www.routledgefalmer.com](http://www.routledgefalmer.com))



MacBeath, J., Demetriou, H., Rudduck, J. and Myers, K. (2003)

## **Consulting Pupils: A Toolkit for Teachers**

Cambridge: Pearson Publishing ([www.pearsonpublishing.co.uk](http://www.pearsonpublishing.co.uk))



Fielding, M. and Bragg, S. (2003)

## **Students as Researchers: Making a Difference**

Cambridge: Pearson Publishing ([www.pearsonpublishing.co.uk](http://www.pearsonpublishing.co.uk))



Arnot, M., McIntyre, D., Pedder, D., and Reay, D. (2004)

## **Consultation in the Classroom: Developing Dialogue about Teaching and Learning**

Cambridge: Pearson Publishing ([www.pearsonpublishing.co.uk](http://www.pearsonpublishing.co.uk))



The website - [consultingpupils.co.uk](http://consultingpupils.co.uk) - remains online with any other resources resulting from the project available to download from it.

## **C**ontacts:

Project co-ordinator: Jean Rudduck  
Network co-ordinator: Nick Brown  
Network secretary: Nichola Daily

Faculty of Education,  
University of Cambridge,  
**Homerton Site**,  
Hills Road,  
Cambridge  
CB2 2PH

phone (+44)01223 742010  
fax (+44) 01223 742013  
e-mail [nd241@cam.ac.uk](mailto:nd241@cam.ac.uk)

[www.consultingpupils.co.uk](http://www.consultingpupils.co.uk)