

Communicating...

The ESRC Network Project Newsletter

No 6 September 2002

Did *we* decide that?

The Growth of a Student as Researcher Group

Gill Mullis of Hastingsbury School writes: We began with the aim of developing students' involvement in decision making within the school by working with Student Council members. In doing so, we slowly redefined the 'we', began to challenge discourse and practice which excluded students from decision making, and transformed the 'that' – no longer a discussion about paint pots and social areas, but a dialogue about relationships and teaching and learning. What follows is my conversation with two of the students involved.

Our research all began when we were in Year 10. We started off by forming a Student Council which consisted of a number of elected members from the year. There were several roles such as Secretary, Chairperson, Vice-Chair and Treasurer. Throughout the year we got stronger and better as a team. We gained integrity and respect from the other students in the Year. We started off by achieving lockers, refurbishing toilets and organising discos. As the Council was extremely effective, we decided to run sub-committees; one of these was 'Research'. We attended a number of trips to be trained – we are now at the stage of applying our knowledge to our school.

At first, the training was about how to run an effective council. This helped us when we decided to put on training for younger Council members to support them and when we ran workshops at student voice conferences. We also interviewed other students who wanted to join the students as researchers group. Our current group is made up of twelve students from years 9 to 11.

We decided to look at how to improve relationships and got some training into different ways of researching. After this, we decided to focus on what makes a good lesson. We brainstormed ideas and decided that we wanted to make up a questionnaire to add ideas from other students and teachers. We're going to carry out interviews before observing a range of lessons.

worked together, co-operated, we wanted to improve things.

What about the training? For me that was a significant feature.

We wouldn't be this far without the training. We've developed knowledge about research methods and got a sense of direction. Before all this, we didn't know about roles on the Council - it helped to get us organised. We were beginners - things weren't going to get done if we didn't allocate jobs.

Why did you start with painting the Social Area?

It was nothing big - it took time to build up trust and to climb the ladder. You can't go straight to the top step.

You've only got so much influence as students.

If we could prove to teachers we can do that, they would say 'Wow - they *are* the responsible students they say they are'.

What helped you to move things on?

We did a speech in front of sixty Head teachers and it was - wow - we gained a lot of confidence from that. There was the point of being asked, then the doing it and then getting a letter back saying thanks - makes you want to get more involved.

For me it was the Student Network Conference - a lot more responsibility was passed on to me and I was able to put forward my ideas and show that I was OK at giving presentations.

How can we know it's making a difference?

I'm more confident. My English has improved. I type up everything and distribute it and giving presentations, my oral work, things like that, don't bother me anymore. Thirty teachers, six different schools, it doesn't bother me now to stand in front of a class, or, the other day, to speak to our old Middle School teachers.

Approaching teachers about my work - I feel so much more comfortable and try to communicate as an equal.

Also, in front of 'posh' people I can talk formally, getting my point across.

Why did you do it? Why did you want to support a research team?

It was to do with recognising the potential: the rights of students to get involved in teaching and learning; the issue of student voice; the unheard voices; changing relationships and looking at ways to work together; stopping the shouting.

Have you noticed the change in us and how we've applied ourselves? Do *you* reckon we're different?

You're more reflective ... independent ... critical - in a positive way. You contribute more views in lessons and take on more responsibilities ... And you do the informing and chasing. If you're not sure, you ask for advice. Otherwise you let me know what you've organised. I trust you.

We thought *we* could ask *you* a question now - and you could turn it back on us! So, where do you think we should go? ... Then you could say, 'Where do *you* think?'

What made a difference?

The Council members were committed, we



O.K. (laughter). Tell me.

I think we'd like to see the present year 9 training up new students like we did, so we're continually developing students throughout the year groups on research and presentations.

We shouldn't be the main people in all this because we're eventually going to go. If we take control they won't know where to start. We need to make sure they have the skills.

What about the research into what makes a good lesson?

Possibly work towards a code of conduct and classroom practice, try to get teachers to use our research. It might be hard for them to change, but the ideas are there for them to use.

We don't want to say, 'You have to do this', we're going to say 'These are the results. If you use them, great!'

Will the process - doing all this - make a difference?

Yes - our relationships will change. We'll get to know each other better and be able to improve what we do in school, improve

relationships, improve work.

Normally teachers just observe other teachers. It will be bringing us into it.

That will make all the difference.

***Acknowledgements:** Our work has been supported by Julia Flutter and Jean Rudduck at the University of Cambridge through the ESRC Project and by the Bedfordshire Upper School Improvement Project. Thanks also go to Youth Action (Bedford), to Jude and to Sanita, to staff and students at Hastingsbury School and to Michael Fielding.*

Is this a good idea? It's a great idea!

Gill Mullis here talks with Jean Rudduck about her work with her colleague Brian Roberts on student voice at Hastingsbury School and elaborates on how the project has evolved. What follows is an edited transcript of that discussion.

For me, I suppose it's just that I've always been a teacher who has wanted to listen to students and I know from working with students that the more you talk with them and involve them, the more it changes the learning relationship. So I suppose I've decided that a quite different model is possible - which can have a huge impact upon what I want my classroom to be like. It isn't like that yet, but I know the sort of classroom I want. It's one where we've planned lessons and rewritten curriculum materials and specifications in a way that enables students then to say, 'Well, I'm this sort of learner and this is what I enjoy, this is what will change me, we should try that this way'.

How much are they aware of differences in the class, so that it's not just thinking, this will suit me?

Those in the students as researchers group are able to say, 'Well, that won't suit everybody' or 'What about the students who can't read?' or 'What about the students who ... ?' And it's actually quite a representative student group. It doesn't have to be elitist. I know lots of people worry it's going to end up being predominantly female, predominantly white, which is the case still in quite a few schools, but it doesn't have to be like that. When we enlarged the students as researchers group, it was students who interviewed the younger students and their sense of justice was quite sharp in terms of making sure they got a mix of people. They raised those

sorts of issues, probably more so than teachers. There was a time when the school councils here were either non-existent or patchy and it very much depended on the enthusiasm of different post holders. In our year team, when we agreed to set up a student council again, to start with it was simply a group of enthusiastic students and we'd asked for two from each tutor group. Meetings were erratic. They depended on where we could fit them in. For example, there was initially some resistance to using, say, afternoon registration times, so that was the first issue.

What did they want to talk about at first? You said they had lots of ideas. Were they predictable ideas?

To start off with they were predictable, to do with improving the environment: they wanted things painted, toilets changed, mirrors in the toilets; those were the things that were important to them at the time. Then details of your project landed on my desk by accident one day, I don't know how things get to certain pigeonholes! It offered small grants to do something innovative. I had a meeting with one of the Deputies. We realised we couldn't write a proper bid until we had talked to the students, that it was their voice that was absent. That was the starting point. I think the council, as it stood, could have chugged along a bit but the project made me focus more on what it was I wanted to do and the way I wanted to work. I desperately wanted them to get interested in teaching and learning, but I can remember a conversation very early on when they said, 'Well, that's not what we're meant to talk about'. You know, they literally said that. It was fascinating to see how the thing has emerged, slowly. It's taken about two years to get where we are now. We took them on some training with School Councils UK,

Bedfordshire Schools Improvement Project and Homerton and we did some in-house training as well, because the students said that's what they needed: they needed to know about roles, about how to run a meeting and about structures within the school. By now the older students have trained up the younger ones, so there are lots of little ripples.

So it took about a year of sorting out things like painting the social area after school. They were doing the things they wanted like running two discos, which may sound small, but they designed the tickets, they turned up, they worked with the post-16 students, they were there, they sold the tickets. At that stage, I was attempting to provide them with processes and structures. A substantial part of our small grant has gone into the student council budget which, ironically, they're very reluctant to spend! In fact the first time they spent it, they spent it on roses for Valentine's Day, and made a profit of £45, so they've got more than they started with! They're quite, you know ... calculating! The Bursar's saying, 'Is this a good idea?' and I was saying, 'Yes, it is a great idea!' My feeling is that they *should* be able to spend money and that they'll spend it wisely. But it was me signing the forms and I wanted to establish it so that the Councils' own treasurers were the ones who signed them. It's these structural things which hold things back.

You have different councils for each year group?

Yes, there's not a whole school one. Year 11 is the most experienced group. The council started with them in Year 9. It's the group I've worked the most with. I'm trying to build in processes that will

support all the councils so that they're not dependent on me. And then there's the ethos, because although there are pockets of teachers who are supportive, there are others who are uncomfortable with certain aspects of this approach to students and there isn't yet a shared agenda.

There are teachers who are uncomfortable with it?

Some of it is to do with subjects or those who prioritise their subject, and it's different people in different departments. Most have become interested by seeing what the students have been achieving through their involvement and in hearing from them.

I started to look not just at what we were doing but what the institution was enabling and what was getting in the way. Part of my way of working became a 'that's what we do here' approach. So with the receptionist I said, 'Oh, by the way, this is Reena, she's secretary of the Student Council and in future she'll be doing bookings for the seminar room on the sheet.' So Reena now books all the Student Council meetings and no-one's ever questioned that. And then there's things like expecting teachers to distribute things that students put in registers and we looked at how we might bypass that. Now we have a folder that gets taken by Reena through to reprographics, reprographics send it back to reception, Reena picks it up, distributes the contents to Student Council reps herself. And that's much more effective, although the downside is that teachers aren't always explicitly aware of what is going on. Most important, though, has been the support of the Senior Management Team, in particular our Head Teachers, Julia Wynd and Martin Fletcher.

How do the councils feed back?

Different mechanisms. Early on I shared ideas with Senior Management Team and said, 'Let's build in some structures. If the students can report back in assembly and that's built in, then everyone including teachers will get to hear, and also Key Stage Managers will monitor what's happening'. First time it went wrong because all that happened was the day before the assembly the students were told they had a slot. Panic! In the end they planned it all in the space of an afternoon and a morning and did it.

But they also go back to tutor groups and feed back that way. We've just started up a student bulletin though students haven't made much use of that yet. It's fairly new, so I think that, like with anything, it takes a while. It will go into every classroom. When we needed student researchers, they did announcements in assembly and then the students applied. On things like 'What sort of disco do you want?' they'd go round

each tutor group, they'd generate ideas, they'd feed back. So they do vary the mechanism according to the activity. Before every council meeting, council members should, with their tutor, ask what issues they want raised, and then bring that to the meeting, but again that's still patchy. Normally I think what tends to happen quite often is that it happens informally, so a student member might come along and say, oh, so-and-so said to so-and-so that they're not happy with whatever and someone's made this decision that we need to address in student council. A lot of it's like that. I think the students in Year 11 feel very proud that they have been very successful, but the next step for me is a bigger one: it's bringing on board more staff, affecting the whole school policy and practices, and that will be an interesting stage to move on to.

What issues do they raise in relation to teaching and learning?

The first issue they raised was to do with looking at the relationships in the school between teachers and students. The students as researchers group did a presentation at the Middle School last night and they just stood up there with their OHTs talking about curriculum, teaching, learning, different learning styles and research and then saying, 'Well what we're looking at today is what makes a good lesson'. That's their research project. And they talked about the three methodologies they were going to use to investigate that. With some of them, they've gone from not saying anything in presentations to the situation last night where every year group said something. So it's quite interesting in terms of confidence building and self-esteem. Some of them were there until quarter to six. We've got a staff meeting next week and there are students who want to say something so they're coming along. Now it's just accepted that there will be meetings where they come along and share their research and then they speak for themselves and there are very few staff who aren't actually interested in what they're saying.

At the moment the students as researchers group has generated a skeleton of what makes a good lesson, and they're going to do a questionnaire for students and follow that up with interviews with staff and students. Then they plan to follow up the interviews with some observations, going into classes with an agreed observation schedule. The idea is that most of that will happen in the summer term. What's particularly good is that four of the Year 11s are staying on to Year 12, so I'm already talking to the joint Heads of Post-16 about the potential for linking post-16 students next year with each of the younger groups. If we have one of these really skilled-up post-16 students, or two pairs, looking after Years 9, 10 and 11, it will happen. What I'd like to see is a member of staff whose role

is student and staff development. I feel very strongly about training up students, for example having student interviewers in interview panels like they were for the headteacher post. I think they have an entitlement to be trained in the skills needed for all of these areas and we should sit down with students and say, 'Right, where is there student involvement? What training do they need? How are we going to fund it?'

How has it changed your teaching?

When you work with the students in that way, you can see they're learning about all sorts of things - about themselves, about the subject and how they learn about other students. And I've found that that has then impacted on the way I operate in the classroom. I've had these situations in class now where I've said, 'Laura, could you do this bit? Could you scribe at the top? Reena, could you do the OHT bit?' And I've actually handed far more over to them in lessons than probably I would have done a year ago, far more *naturally* than I would have done a year ago. With Year 11, I hear myself saying, 'Right, this is what we need to learn in the next nine weeks, this is what you need to revise, these are the number of sessions. What do you think we need to do first? What do we do next?' You know, far more consultation. It just seems so simple, when you do it.

What we're enabling them to do, I think, is to be more critical of their own education, and I mean that in the positive sense in that they're beginning to understand, and be able to articulate more about, what's going well, what's going badly, why it's going badly, and actually what their rights are. You know, they have a right to a decent learning experience and they're not always getting it. But it's enabling them to not just rebel against it but actually talk about it and say what we're going to do about it.

There was one student making a point about teaching and learning who just said about her involvement, 'It's something we think needs improving, and it interests us. It's something we already know a lot about. Some people aren't learning and we can help'. They're very generous. They feel they have something to contribute, they feel they can actually make a difference, and they want to make a difference.

Acknowledgements: *The following students are members of the students as researchers group at Hastingsbury School:*

Navjot Sidhu, Reena Mamon, Laura Lindsay, Roxanne Green, Hannah Mayston, Timmy Masih, Rachel Smith, Ellen Chisman, Martyn Humphries, Pooja Nahar, Naresh Kumar and Lindsey O'Brien.

Student Voice in Recent Journals

FORUM, Volume 43 Number 2, 2001 is a special issue devoted to student voice. Michael Fielding, editor of the issue, writes:

In the past, we have tended to approach student voice from either the standpoint of young people being given greater responsibility for their own learning through a more imaginative and flexible pedagogy, or we have concentrated on ways in which institutional forms of student engagement, such as school councils, could develop a more authentic collective voice that would lead, if not to a more democratic, then at least to more engaged forms of institutional and personal learning. Those concerns and aspirations remain. What is particularly interesting here is the fact that some of the new developments presented by a range of contributors seem to provide a bridge between the individual/pedagogic and the collective/school council practices that have so often provided the two poles of past student voice work.

Now, at least within many of the examples explored and celebrated within this Special Issue, there is a sense in which not only the previously forbidden area of teaching and learning is becoming a legitimate focus of enquiry from the standpoint of students as well as teachers, but also that the roles of teachers and students are beginning to become less exclusive and excluding of each other. Similarly, there is an emerging interconnectedness between and expansion of the arenas of classroom life, the wider contexts of the school as a whole, and community spaces and practices that exist outside the school.

The reciprocity between student and teacher; school and community that has always been at the heart of a widely and richly conceived notion of education seems to be expressing itself in new ways and new forms that may hold out much hope for the future

Contents of the issue include:

- Pupils at Wheatcroft Primary School:** Working as a Team: children and teachers at Wheatcroft Primary School learning from each other
- Beth Crane:** Revolutionising School-Based Research
- Chris Harding:** Students as Researchers is as important as the National Curriculum
- Louise Raymond:** Student Involvement in School Improvement: from data source to significant voice
- Leora Cruddas:** Rehearsing for Reality: young women's voices and agendas for change
- Kate Bullock & Felicity Wikeley:** Personal Learning Planning: strategies for pupil learning
- Sara Bragg:** Taking a Joke: Learning from the Voices We Don't Want to Hear
- Perpetua Kirby:** Participatory Research in Schools
- John MacBeath, Kate Myers & Helen Demetriou:** Supporting Teachers in Consulting Pupils about Aspects of Teaching and Learning, and Evaluating Impact
- Isobel Urquart:** 'Walking on Air'? Pupil Voice and School Choice
- Marcia Prieto:** Students as Agents of Democratic Renewal in Chile
- Dana Mitra:** Opening the Floodgates: giving students a voice in school reform
- Elena Silva:** 'Squeaky Wheels and Flat Tires': a case study of students as reform participants
- Michael Fielding:** Beyond the Rhetoric of Student Voice: new departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st century schooling?

Copies of the Journal can be obtained from Triangle Journals Ltd, PO Box 65, Wallingford, Oxford OX10 0YG, United Kingdom; journals@triangle.co.uk or downloaded from the publisher's website at www.triangle.co.uk or from our own at www.consultingpupils.co.uk

Support for Learning, Vol 17 Number 3, August 2002

is a special issue devoted to Children and Young People: Advocacy and Empowerment. Support for Learning is a journal of the National Association for Special Educational Needs edited by Dr Caroline Roaf.

Contents of the issue include:

- Howard Taylor:** The 'education system': a view from the inside
- Ann Lewis:** Accessing through research interviews, the views of children with learning difficulties
- Kyriaki Messiou:** Marginalisation in primary schools: listening to children's voices
- Eve Bearne:** A good listening to: Year 3 pupils talk about learning
- Lisa Payne:** Children's rights and child impact analysis: making children visible in government
- Ianthe Maclagan:** Making rights stick: Children's Rights Commissioner work in Oxfordshire
- Hilary Cremin:** Pupils resolving disputes: successful peer mediation schemes share their secrets
- Belinda Hopkins:** Restorative justice in schools

Copies of the Journal can be obtained by going via the National Association of Special Educational Needs website at www.nasen.org.uk/ to www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk/journals/sufl/ or, if you already have a subscription, it can be downloaded online from www.ingenta.com/journals/browse/bpl/sufl

Contacts:

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 507309
fax (+44) 01223 507258
e-mail nd241@cam.ac.uk