

## Researching Student Perspectives

*Sarah Bennett, Head of Human Arts, Worthing High School, writes about her involvement in the LAMP Project in West Sussex.*

The Learning About Improvement Project, or LAMP as it became affectionately known at Worthing High School, was an exciting project which aimed to encourage schools to learn from each other, and from pupil voice.

We were one of nineteen secondary schools to use pupil voice to help improve the quality of learning in the classroom. Our focus, reflecting a priority in the school's Development Plan, was ways of helping y10 and y11 pupils take more responsibility for their learning and we did three things:

*We established a working group of y10 pupils;*

*We set up consultation 'cells', each of five pupils, with a teacher mentor (we did not envisage that the cell groups would operate in historic communist tradition but we hoped through them to gain the pupils' support for what we were trying to achieve and make it a common purpose);*

*We designed a questionnaire to capture the thoughts of the y11 group in their last term.*

In addition, thirty pupils in the working group kept diaries – which were only seen by, and analysed by, the school's link researcher, Nick Brown; Nick also conducted interviews with some y10 pupils. The whole process would have been meaningless without support from the staff. We presented our plans to a staff meeting and invited volunteers to join the LAMP team – eleven colleagues came forward, a cross-section of our faculty structure. Without this group the project would have been dead in the water. They were the vital link between the pupils and the whole staff. We fed back to the whole staff at intervals and to faculty teams. We were looking to the

pupils to provide us with comments on the very essence of the school, teaching and learning. This needed to be managed very carefully because we did not want the staff to feel threatened. We sought positive, constructive comments from the pupils, not just a list of grievances. We also devised firm ground rules to allay staff anxieties – like no teachers being mentioned by name.

The LAMP group met regularly to plan in detail and in doing this we realised something crucial right at the start of the consultation process; we needed to help the pupils realise what a positive learning experience was. Our Head of Expressive Arts helped by designing some sensory exercises for the pupils in the cell groups that enabled them to understand what a positive experience was.

We also gave attention to the selection of pupils. We did not just want well-motivated confident pupils; we wanted the opinions of pupils who were charismatic and well respected by their peers yet sometimes troublesome and sometimes poorly motivated in class. We believed that if these pupils could tell us about positive learning experiences we might find some real answers. Also we wanted to show these pupils that we really valued their opinion. We hoped they might buy into the learning process and because of their peer respect, bring other pupils with them. Once we had this core of pupils we invited volunteers.

During the course of the project we had **six consultations** with the pupils, between May to March. Our first round of consultation using the diaries led us in an unanticipated direction. The pupils had made it clear that they felt they had missed out in year 10 because they had not realised how important it was and, whilst teachers talked about independent learning, they had had no real conception of what this meant until most of year 10 was over. They also needed to be convinced of the relevance of the learning, and they said they really valued the process of reflection – and they wanted more praise.

As a consequence we planned a year 9 induction to prepare pupils for year 10 and we planned to introduce some form of reflection into our teaching. Future consultations now centred on what the pupils perceived as the most important aspects of an induction programme. Some of the pupils' points were so basic that it was hard to believe that we had not thought of them ourselves - such as ensuring that all subjects made the course outline and expectations explicit, and set out really clearly in the coursework planner what had to be done and when over the five terms.

There were some positive outcomes. For the first time, in the summer term, the school ran an induction week for the whole of y 9 focusing on the importance of year 10, giving them guidance on how to take control of their future and also giving them a specially designed coursework planner upon which they had to record their coursework startline and deadline dates. There were three hour induction seminars for each subject. Another tangible outcome was the complete redesigning of the organiser which included a section with key questions for self reflection and a basis for action planning. There is also a section called 'Everything Counts' which encourages pupils to realise the importance of what they are achieving in year 10. Within each faculty area there has been a drive to make reflection sheets a core part of the assessment process. This has been very successfully implemented so far. We have improved the pupils' learning experience. There have also been some indirect results like the emphasis we now have within our faculties on praise. Also the project has raised the issue of homework – which is the focus of our next LAMP project, with contributions from pupils in all year groups.

And, above all, what we've learnt is that we all still need to keep listening.

# The West Sussex Learning about Improvement Project

*This report has been put together by Jean Rudduck from short, reflective papers written by the Homerton team, Mary Berry, Nick Brown and Lesley Hendy, and by three of the participating teachers, Mike Chandler, Paul Enright and Janine Godly.*

## What is the Lamp Project?

*Learning about Improvement II* was the second phase of an initiative supported by West Sussex LEA which had two distinctive framework features: teachers learning from other schools; and a commitment to consulting students about teaching, learning and schooling.

In phase two (2000-2001), ten of the eleven schools involved in phase one continued (one middle and ten secondary) and a further nine secondary schools joined. In both phases each school's research team (up to three teachers, including one from senior management) developed and pursued their own research agenda within the common framework. Each school had an external researcher assigned to it whom they could draw on for support and advice and LEA advisors were also available to help with the research.

The higher education research team consisted of Mary Berry, Nick Brown, Lesley Hendy and Jean Rudduck from Homerton College, Cambridge. The LEA, through Penny Gaunt and Ken Pritchard, provided the opportunity and the financial support for the initiative, and Yasmin Maskatiya and Chris James, successively, coordinated the work locally and planned and organised the various meetings. The headteachers and the project teams in the

participating schools offered sustained commitment at a time of unusual pressure - and encouraged their students to contribute to the task of school improvement by reflecting on and sharing their perspectives on learning and teaching in school.

Over the five terms, the teams of participating teachers met regularly in three 'clusters' at one of the cluster schools, with a linked researcher and an adviser. Once a term, everyone involved met at one of the LEA's Professional Development Centres for a 'Dialogue Day' where progress was reported and general issues discussed. Schools determined their own focus for enquiry, respecting the two framework features, and a small grant to each school made it possible for teachers to take time off for the regular meetings and also to visit other schools; in some cases they also took students.

In a climate characterized by the metaphor of 'the quick fix', emphasis was put on 'not going too fast' and

schools were encouraged to take time to identify the issue they wanted to work on, to make sure they understood its dimensions by talking to students and colleagues about it, to plan a response that was shaped by the evidence, and to monitor the impact.

Summaries of the work of individual schools have already been compiled by Chris James. This document does not replicate existing reports nor is it a systematic overview. Instead, it discusses four themes that emerged from the data collected by the schools:

### What makes 'a good lesson' and 'a good teacher'

**Students learning from students in other schools (with particular reference to school councils)**

**The importance of the physical environment for learning**

**Talking with students about learning (and the need for a 'language for learning')**

## What makes a good lesson and a good teacher

Teachers from ten schools, across two of the clusters, wanted to know more about students' perceptions of a good teacher and a good lesson. There was remarkable similarity across the two overviews produced by the linked researchers and both sets of data are summarised here.

In one cluster, four schools asked their linked researcher to interview students who were perceived by the staff to be to some extent disaffected. The linked adviser commented that in his experience 'dissatisfaction' with some aspects of school was often interpreted as 'disaffection' - which is a much deeper and more negative experience and more difficult to deal with, as Klein suggests:

*'The young and disaffected take one of four routes in the education system. Either they are pushed out - excluded - or they truant persistently, fail their exams or drop out before taking them. Whatever direction they go in, they face a precarious future dogged by stigma, no qualifications and low self-esteem ...'* (Klein, R. 1999:9)

The evidence from the interviews suggested that students were indeed dissatisfied rather than deeply disaffected: they were disappointed in some way with their progress and by the fact that there were no, none or few opportunities to talk about their difficulties in lessons. All had some practical suggestions for improvement. The things that they thought could make a difference are all attainable. What was striking was the consistency, across schools, of the messages received from the hundred and eighty students interviewed, both male and female, particularly in saying what they thought was a 'really good lesson' and a 'really good teacher'.

### **The 'really good lesson' should:**

- give students some sort of result**
- include practical activities**
- have less teacher talk**
- have pair and group work**
- have proper time for discussion not just teachers asking questions**
- be more active, with less hand-writing**
- use computers for research and writing assignments**
- sometimes let students decide what to do**
- reflect individual needs**

### **During the 'really good lesson' the teacher should:**

- not spend so much time on disruptive students**
- be able to handle the class without shouting**
- be fair to all students**
- make sure timing of a lesson does not make students late for another lesson**
- not put so much pressure on passing GCSEs just because the school needs good results**
- make all students feel valued regardless of their ability.**

Sadly, some students who were not academically gifted felt that teachers might think that they were letting their schools down because they were 'spoiling' the league table results.

### **A 'really good teacher' is someone who:**

- is predictable and consistent in their mood**
- is calm and has a sense of humour**
- is laid back but knows how to keep control**
- is not sarcastic or vindictive**
- does not speak to you in an irritating tone of voice**
- does not shout**
- enjoys teaching**
- is knowledgeable in their subject but knows how to explain**
- varies the way they teach to suit the students in their classes**
- allows some input from the students**
- has respect for students so that they can respect teachers**
- does not assume the student has not listened when help is requested**
- knows what it is like to be young and a teenager**
- understands students and treats them 'like an equal'**
- has common sense**
- is not petty over silly things**
- does not take things personally**
- will believe students when students tell them something**
- can admit they have made a mistake**
- treats students as individuals rather than just one of the mass**
- gives praise more than punishment**
- doesn't say 'I would rather not be teaching you'.**

It is clear that the teacher is seen, by virtually all the students interviewed, as a key influence on learning:

*'The teacher makes the lesson better, even if it's a lesson you hate ... a good teacher makes you like it.'*

In another cluster, teachers from six schools were also concerned with learning and with students' experiences in the classroom. Using data from interviews with students, the linked researcher was able to produce another 'model' of a good lesson and 'good teacher'. This time we will illustrate the key dimensions with comments from the pupils. Again, there was remarkable consistency in the preoccupations and perceptions of the students, even though they came from a diverse set of schools. (In all the student interviews it was accepted that names of individuals should be excluded from the discussion.)

## Good lessons, students said, are lessons:

### with variety

*'I think in some subjects there's a lot of variety and you can do a lot of different things and it's really good and the teaching is very ... very... a high standard. But with others, it's terrible ..., it's the same thing every lesson and you just want to, like, kill someone and it's just ... God! ... yeah, it's awful ...*

*'I like lessons when we have to do something other than read, write and listen ...'*

### where you can contribute

*'I like it when everyone joins in and it's not just the teacher talking and pupils listening, like, when the whole class gets involved and everyone's, like, giving their point of view ....'*

*'The thing that I liked ... was that the whole class got up and participated in an activity.'*

### which are active

*'You need writing but you also need to be active sometimes.'*

*'Things that gets your hands on and doing stuff. You have to use your brain.'*

*'I find learning easier by doing the role plays.'*

### which are interactive and where there's discussion

*'Sharing ideas amongst the class helps you feel more involved in the subject.'*

*'I like working in groups. It gives me confidence.'*

*'In [Subject X] it's rush, rush, rush. There's never enough time to have a discussion. [So you don't get] other people's points of view .... 'Cos I'm quite stubborn and .... I think something it's definitely right but when I hear other people's points of view it sways me towards thinking their way and it makes me understand more.'*

### where there's not too much writing and copying

*'They write too much on the board. If you're a slow writer - I'm quite slow at writing - it's quite difficult to catch up sometimes. And copying out of books, I don't learn a lot from that.'*

*'Copying is a bit boring 'cos you don't get to do your own work.'*

### where there's time to finish things:

*'The feeling of completion is nice and should be used more in schools.'*

### where you have more independence<sup>2</sup>

*'I like lessons ... when I am given freedom in my work.'*

*'People just rely on the teachers. They don't really think for themselves. You get so used to it. I think people like to think they think for themselves but they don't. In some subjects it would be helpful to have more of your own room.'*

*'I like it when the whole class is involved. It's more like teaching each other than the teacher just teaching us.'*

*'I enjoyed this lesson as we worked in partners and didn't have to have any help from the teacher.'*

*'I like to be set tasks with some variation or element that I control.'*

*'I like learning but then I'm learning for me, for when I leave school. I'm not learning for being in school. It's to be successful. I personally like independent learning like me going off and finding out stuff for myself.'*

### where teachers understand the pressures:

*'It is a lot different and harder in y10 because you've obviously got to concentrate more but I think sometimes you just need... I mean, they encourage you and everything, but I think they just need to ... Just more of a happy atmosphere, basically. You know you've got to do well and you know you've got to be serious about it, you could have a bit of a laugh, a bit of enjoyment. I find if everything's really serious, you get stressed out, don't concentrate half as much.'*

## Good teachers, the students said,

### explain well:

*'S/he makes you listen. So it's not so boring. S/he doesn't just sit there and talk about it, write it up on the board and then make you write it in. S/he'll explain it and say things [in real life] that have happened.'*

*'(Sometimes, if they don't explain things) it just doesn't seem worth doing because you don't know why you're doing it.'*

### motivate you:

*'It's good if a teacher says that's excellent or something, that makes you feel better about yourself so you try harder in the next thing.'*

### have a sense of humour:

*'S/he can have a laugh. S/he is strict and that as well. The class respect him/her.'*

### interact well with students:

*'I also like how the teacher talks to you like s/he would talk to a family member not like a school kid.'*

### are supportive rather than judgmental:

*'I think it's fair the way s/he does it. Say you get something wrong, s/he doesn't write Oh, this is not very good. S/he writes You need to improve your - whatever. ... I mean, people like me, it's like ....(some teachers) put you alongside someone else and, like, say 'Oh, they're better than you', like, compare you to people higher (than you).'*

### are firm but understanding:

*'They're not so bossy. They're more understanding. If you don't understand anything you can go up to them at the end of the lesson and ask about it and they'll tell you.'*

Interestingly, teachers who embody these qualities, it would appear from the students consulted, are not too hard to find. In each of the schools where these virtues were constantly repeated in different ways, pupils were quite consciously abstracting the qualities they appreciated from their daily experience of lessons with a variety of clearly excellent and trusted teachers across a range of subjects. For some teachers the discovery of the subtlety and extent of reflection by students on the ways they learn best and the conditions that help to bring them success was a challenge - but, for most, a positive one. The challenge was how to extend these 'good' qualities, about which the students were highly perceptive, more widely in their schools.

If we are to address the learning requirements of students, we need to understand how they learn. However, by only giving them what they say they want - a diet of active learning, group work and practical activity - we may be restricting their range of experiences. The alternative is to spend time explaining the purposes of different teaching and learning styles, including those that they do not at the moment find congenial, and also invite more comment on aspects of pedagogy that they do not think help them to learn. What matters is that students experience not just 'surface learning' but also 'deep learning'. It is important, therefore, not just to provide a series of interactive strategies to replace the more traditional teacher talk and writing activities, but also to develop an interactive 'delivery style' which students may find comfortable because it allows them to indicate when they are lost or when they fail to understand something.

The other issues that emerged strongly from the data were about independence: students want more room for their own ideas, more choice, a greater understanding of the purposes of work they undertake - and they want to feel that the learning is 'theirs'.

# Students learning from students in other schools: breaking out of the box

The middle school asked their linked researcher to interview over thirty y7 and y8 students about the school council: was the council seen as effective? how might it be made a more positive force? Teachers were aware that the current school council was not highly regarded by the students. It was seen as: 'Not really doing anything', as lacking real credibility: 'It's there but they don't really listen to us'. Teachers wanted a council which students had confidence in, but it needed a face lift.

They decided to look for support to a school in their cluster that was reputed to have an effective school council. The first stage was a visit by two teachers to find out how the council had been set up and what made it effective. The next stage was to involve the students. A few weeks later, student members of council climbed aboard their minibus for the thirty minute journey to the cluster school. The students were to have an opportunity to see for themselves that things could be different.

They sat in on a council meeting, observing and taking notes:

*'They have a budget!'*

*'It's taken seriously – they are really important.'*

The students came away from the meeting with enthusiasm for a council that had a voice, was listened to and was going somewhere. Their visit had allowed them to move beyond their own enclosed thinking: they had been critical of their own council but unsure how to analyse the problems and move on. After the visit, their feedback to their fellow students back at their own school had a new impetus. Since then, students and teachers have worked together, considering features that attracted them and discussing why they might or might not work in their context and developing innovations of their own.

The school council now has its own budget (over £500 last year); new outdoor seating and music in the dining hall are recent council-led initiatives. The council has its own information board with pictures of representatives prominently displayed and there is a real sense of confidence in and respect for the student voice.

This happened two years ago and recent interviews with students highlighted the change in perspective. Students now value the chance to give their opinions because they feel they are listened to. Those who are council members take pride in their positive role and their peers also feel involved:

*'It's (the school council) brilliant – we all get a say. All get a chance to put forward ideas.'*

*'It's got us things like lockers and the fountain.'*

Student comments show an analytic awareness that some things are difficult to attain and priorities need to be made:

*'It works well, we get a lot of things from it, but other things are not possible because of money ... space.'*

The earlier view among students that teachers 'don't listen' had given way to a feeling of collaboration: 'everybody understands'.

The idea of students learning through focused visits to other schools is now spreading. At a recent Dialogue Day for all the participating schools, the middle school teachers were delighted to hear a colleague from a secondary school speak of the visit his students had paid to one of their School Council meetings! The visiting students thought the council was 'terrific, really effective' and had returned to their own school enthused and full of ideas about ways of improving theirs.

A secondary school in another cluster has also benefited from their students visiting other schools. The aim was to develop student councils and use them to 'drive an agenda of improvement'. But progress was hampered by the fact that the students' only experience of secondary school was just the one school they were in. Whilst they knew what they were not happy with, they found it difficult to formulate ideas about how their school could change; effectively they were: 'discussing things in a box'.

The students were keen to spend time in other schools. They held meetings to decide what aspects of their 'host' school they would focus on. They decided that the key areas should be: (a) break times, lunch times, tutor time; (b) looking at organisation, facilities, opportunities; and (c) the role of students - a broad brief!

The students spent a full day at their 'host' school taking in a range of experiences. They sat in on a council meeting; they shared free time; they were guided round the school by 'host' students and they sat in on some lessons. They returned to base full of ideas and enthusiasm. They too were able to analyse differences and weigh up possibilities - and, importantly, recognise that transplanting an idea from one setting to another may not bring instant benefit. They were impressed with their 'host' school's support systems for younger children but thought that the 'older kids would (have to learn to) look after the younger kids'. They also remarked upon the visible aspects of a different school culture:

*'It was so different – uniforms, head boy and head girl, prefects, different school day, having a social area ...'*

*'The best things were the buddy system and the reading partners, y11 privileges and a common room. Being able to stay in one place for lunchtime was good and also having lockers.'*

Their comments highlight how, whilst teachers place emphasis on teaching and learning, school is a total experience for children. Issues like ownership of space are central to the quality of their experience. Accounts of the visit drew attention to common rooms, snack bars, lockers - all features which offer students a space of their own. This theme was continued when the students visited a second school which was different again from their own and the one they had first visited. The fact that each year group had its own area in which to 'hang out,' equipped with 'comfy chairs and vending machines' did not go unnoticed. They wanted to take the impressive student council system they sat in on back to their own school and were eager to start a pattern of regular, formal meetings which would be 'open and up front'. They still have (at the time of writing) another two schools to visit, 'but already', said their teacher, 'by visiting other schools, our students have seen how it is possible to operate differently – to have more ownership, more access - and less litter!'.

Teachers visit other schools and return with new ideas, valuing different ways of approaching a problem. Students need the same opportunity to break out of the box. They too can see that things can be different and the fresh perspective they bring back can be used as a positive force for change.

# The importance of the physical environment for students' learning

For students who have low personal expectations about school and anticipate little reward through qualifications for the time that they spend in school, daily attendance has to be a different type of deal. Many students see their relationship to the school as a set of exchange relations where they only feel obligated or willing to provide teachers with their effort to learn where they can see respect and/or tangible return. The return may be in the form of a pleasant and secure classroom environment that they can see the teacher working hard to create and maintain. But students don't only move between teachers and their classrooms; they also spend a considerable amount of their most valued time moving in and out of the shared public spaces within the school. Students can see their relationship to the school as a poor deal because it fails to meet what they see as its proper obligations towards them during those periods of time between lessons.

Students' attitudes towards school, teachers, lessons, learning, friends and self are being shaped by a web of influences and daily experiences within school. Some of these are technical or structural, such as the appropriateness of the curriculum, the quality of teaching and the provision of pastoral care and tutoring. Other influences, however, are rooted in the physical environment.

A clear distinction can arise between those areas of the school that are 'owned' and controlled by the staff and those places in the school that students occupy during their free time. Teachers accept the connection that is frequently made in students' comments between smoking in the toilets and bullying:

*'I feel that the toilets in this school are disgusting, they always smell of smoke. I know that my friends feel the same way and we always wait to go to the toilet at home.'*

*'I know I shouldn't, but if the toilets are that bad and horrible I go into the staff toilets.'*

In contrast, students have also commented readily on the link between positive motivation within a subject and the classroom environment and resources:

*'I think that if a better working environment was created in the classrooms and other areas of school students would enjoy being there more and therefore work better.'*

*'In maths, languages, humanities and science I don't think I do my work as neat and as well as I do in other lessons, as the rooms are so cold and unwelcoming.'*

*'Our art facilities are good and this makes it enjoyable to do art.'*

Part of the on-going development of some student councils (see earlier) has been visits to other schools - and the features of schools visited that drew the strongest response from students in one school were the provision of common rooms for each year group, access to tutor bases during non-lesson time, pleasant dining areas and clean toilets.

We should, perhaps, be aiming to extend the principle of student entitlement to include some basic environmental conditions capable of conveying the same level of respect for students as we want *them* to have for the activity of learning. Conditions of work matter for teachers - but they also matter for students.

## Talking with students about learning and the need for a 'language of learning'

Once students are secure in knowing that learning is to be discussed in a sense 'away from the teacher' they display a sophistication and perceptiveness that should be taken very seriously. It is easy to forget that students are the experts on learning. They know what works best in the classroom for them; they can tell us where the reading time or the mathematical teaser is best placed in the sequence of activities that makes up a lesson.

The interviews with students demonstrated that while teachers may see class teaching as central to learning, students were often

pre-occupied with smaller things like the effects of the seating arrangements. To the teacher observers, the students appeared to be arranged traditionally in rows but the students thought that the teacher was using seating as a form of silent setting. In another lesson, while the pair of teacher observers focused on whole class teaching, noting that the lack of variety was to some extent compensated for by a highly interactive approach, the students were making comparisons between lessons in the same subject with different teachers and also, interestingly, with the standards set in a related subject where they thought there

were higher expectations of student learning, where the resources were better and where the teaching styles were more innovative.

This does not mean that evaluations of classroom learning should become the preserve of students - although they have been the exclusive preserve of teachers for too long - but rather that we should welcome dialogue with students about what constitutes good learning. For instance, it is important to share

an understanding of what is meant by 'lesson objectives' and 'key learning points' and what makes for a *successful* plenary.

In developing useful and constructive dialogues, we also have to think whether we have a shared language for talking about learning. Such a language should not diminish the individuality and freshness of the student perspective. Engaging in a constructive and mutually understood language about learning encourages trust - and responsibility.

We were struck by the fact that students enjoyed starting to talk about their learning and found it a worthwhile end in itself. Sharing a language for discussing learning makes teaching and learning an experience that teachers and students can negotiate more effectively. This in turn can have an impact on reducing disengagement and promoting students as more independent learners.

One teacher thought that the lack of a 'language for talking about learning' may explain why school councils tend to focus on the predictable student agenda items - school dinners and school toilets - rather than on issues of teaching and learning. He said:

*'In recent years, we have sought to focus student consultation on teaching and learning and the issues are frequently placed at the top of Forum meeting agendas. However, all too rapidly discussion moves down to 'Any Other Business' and those old chestnuts, the price of food in the canteen and the state of the school toilets, inject a new vigour into the discussion.'*

He suggests that the problem could be explained by reference to Maslow's Pyramid of Needs'. If the students' physiological needs at the base of the pyramid are not met, all the others may be pushed into the background. Food is a primary concern for our students. But more significant, he suggests, is the fact that school dinners and toilets are part of the *students'* rather than the *teachers'* social world of school. Students feel comfortable discussing the price of chips but they lack a vocabulary to discuss teaching and

learning effectively. Teaching and learning are part of the teachers' realm - a world which is closed off by the barriers of language.

One of the most promising ways of bringing about improvement may be to develop a shared language of learning among students and teachers. Some progress has been made in primary schools and secondary teachers are aware of the difference: for example, the literacy and numeracy initiatives are enabling students to discuss issues such as 'pace' and 'challenge' in lessons. When students are able to talk to each other about learning there will be a new potential for student control of progress in learning.

## In conclusion

Over the last twenty years or so schools have changed less in their deep structures and patterns of relationship than young people have changed. Out of school, many young people have demanding responsibilities, but in contrast, secondary schools have, in the past, offered less responsibility and autonomy than young people are accustomed to in their lives outside school. Moreover, in secondary schools young people are often excluded from debates on issues that affect them. We would argue that it is a priority in education to consult young people about learning. The logic of the argument that links consultation and participation with motivation to learn is affirmed by the accounts from the teachers who took part in the Learning about Improvement Project. The argument has three strands:

**Consultation provides guidance on things that students say help their learning and that get in the way of their learning. It offers a practical agenda that teachers can act on.**

**Where principles of consultation and participation inform the conditions of learning, then students' attitudes to learning and to themselves as learners are likely to be more positive: consultation and participation can help strengthen students' personal confi-**

**dence (the individual dimension); sense of inclusion (the social dimension); sense of participation (the political dimension).**

**Teachers' perceptions of students may change in the light of evidence of students' capacity for insightful and constructive analysis and for carrying responsibility; changes in teachers' perceptions - and changes in teachers' capacity to see learning from the students' perspective - can affect their relationships with and aspirations for students.**

What we have seen in Phase 2 of the Project demonstrates that teachers are building the confidence and expertise that enables them to move into and beyond the first level of the pyramid - using what students say as information - and are thinking seriously about collaboration and enhanced autonomy (Mitra, 2001).

School improvement, as Ruth Jonathan (1990, p.568) has said, is not merely a matter of 'rapid response to changing market forces through a trivialised curriculum', but a question of dealing with the deep structures of school and the habits of thought and values they embody. To manage school improvement, we need to look at schools from the students' perspective. The issue of student voice is prominent in Apple and Beane's recent book, *Democratic Schools* where they argue strongly that educators should help young people to 'seek out a range of ideas and to voice their own'. This is the challenge that teachers who joined the West Sussex Project have responded to so effectively.

Note: a fuller version of pages 2 - 8, entitled 'Learning about Improvement by Talking about Improvement' has been published in *Improving Schools*, 5, 3, 34 - 45 (2002).

The authors are, as here, Mike Chandler, Paul Enright and Janine Godley from the schools and Mary Berry, Nick Brown, Lesley Hendy and Jean Rudduck.

## 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 742010  
fax (+44) 01223 742013  
e-mail nd241@cam.ac.uk