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<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5067-1978> (2011) 'Closer to the ground': issues of pupil 'voice' and the development of knowledge about schools. Turkish online journal of qualitative inquiry (TOJQI)., 2 (1). p. 1.

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'Closer to the Ground': Pupil 'voice' and the Development of Knowledge about Schools

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Abstract

Most pupils, if asked, might be expected to have a view about their school and increasingly the value and significance of including pupils' perspectives in matters and decisions which affect them and their lives appears to be gaining recognition. The rationale for, and importance of, including the views and perceptions of those we have described as 'closer to the ground', namely the pupils, are asserted in this paper. The argument is advanced that pupils have an important role in helping to develop the knowledge base in schools about learning and the development of the school community. This is based on a belief that pupils have unique perspectives to offer and they deserve to be listened to when constructing our knowledge about schools. Drawing on metaphors from the literature of 'bird's eye' and 'worm's eye' perspectives on schools, the paper argues that knowledge has been traditionally constructed from the adult 'bird's eye' view and that the view from closer to the ground, the 'worm's eye view' must neither be overlooked nor constructed from an adult standpoint. A model for engaging 'pupils as partners', devised by a primary school in the City of York in England is examined. It is analysed and critiqued in the light of some of the issues surrounding pupil voice which are synthesised from the literature. The substantive argument made in this paper is that whilst the discourse about pupil 'voice' may often sound progressive, the language can be vague and imprecise and the practical applications varied. A case is therefore made for more rigour to infuse policy and planning in this field and in particular more clarity and precision in the application of concepts and use of terminology.

Keywords: Pupil; voice; partners; personalisation; learning

Introduction

This article examines some of the benefits and challenges of approaches to pupil voice, with reference to the literature. It also draws on the experiences of one primary school which has developed its own particular scheme for engaging pupils in the school community. Whilst the role and importance of pupils' voices and perspectives to inform school development seem to be gaining recognition, this article argues for greater critical scrutiny and rigour in terms of some of the rhetoric used and just how it relates to practice.

Literature review

'Voice' is much talked about in schooling as a means of engaging children and young people as important 'influencers' of policy and decision-making with a genuine and legitimate right to be heard.

The development of the concept of pupil consultation and pupil voice stems principally from the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12, which stated that:

"... the child who is capable of forming his or her own views (shall be assured of) the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child." (para. 1)

Lansdown (2001) notes that this fundamentally challenges some long-established attitudes based on the idea that children should be "seen and not heard" (p.2). There have been attempts to define the concept of 'pupil voice' and that by Whitty and Wisby (2007) is concise and focused:

"Pupil voice can be understood as pupils having the opportunity to have a say in decisions in school that affect them. It entails pupils playing an active role in their education and schooling as a result of schools becoming more attentive and responsive, in sustained and routine ways, to pupils' views" (p.5).

The focus on pupil voice can be linked to research within the fields of cognitive science and sociology as well as children's rights advocates, promoters of civics and citizenship education and child development experts (Johnson, 2004). Fullan (2001) has drawn attention to the benefits of bringing such insights together:

"We must combine the ideas of cognitive scientists, who are working on the problem of how to engage all learners, with the insights of sociologists, who show how power relations in the school must be altered if we are to make substantial progress on this agenda" (p.153).

Mitra (2006) has pointed to the need for acceptance of the concept of student voice in school decision-making among powerful stakeholders in the school before students themselves can be accepted as key players in school reform, noting that "Student voice advocates must convince others of their views and garner support for their efforts" (p.315). There is a good rationale for this, for as Lansdown (2001) makes clear, listening to children leads to better decisions: "Children have a body of experience and knowledge that is unique to their situation. They have views and ideas as a result of that experience" (p.4).

Rudduck and Flutter (2004) have drawn attention to the importance of adults understanding the pupil perspective and they talked of 'the power of pupil commentary' to inform school improvement:

"Pupil commentaries on teaching and learning in school provide a practical agenda for change that can help fine-tune or, more fundamentally, identify and shape improvement strategies. The insights from their world can help us to 'see' things that we do not normally pay attention to but that matter to them" (p.29).

It is important that pupils' voices are heard because "they are key stakeholders in education, and the key targets of policy changes" (Wood, 2003, p.365). The Central Advisory Council for Education (England) (CACE) 'Plowden Report' said that: "At the heart of the educational process lies the child. No advances in policy, no acquisitions of new equipment have their desired effect unless they are in harmony with the nature of the child, unless they are fundamentally acceptable to him" (p.7).

It is hard to think how this can be achieved without consulting and listening to children's narratives. Furthermore, it can be argued that in a society increasingly ridden with media-driven pressures for young people to be passive consumers of fashion and to need the latest 'must haves', the engagement of young people in decisions which influence their lives is an important means of developing active, informed participation in society as citizens.

Lansdown (2001) reminds us of the incongruity of a concern, which most countries of the world share in common, to raise standards and improve educational opportunities *for* children and yet few take the trouble to find out *from* children what works in terms of developing their strategies for teaching, learning and positive behaviour. This is surely a missed opportunity because: "Evidence indicates that schools involving children and introducing more democratic structures are likely to be more harmonious, have better staff/pupil relationships and a more effective learning environment" (p.5).

As Leren (2006) notes, this makes sense because "Students know which methods and models work for them, what they see as interesting, and what they do not profit from" (p.367). Brighthouse & Woods (1999, p.150) remind us of the importance of pupils' views, as key stakeholders in the success of the school. Pupils' perspectives can provide powerful and important data to inform school self-evaluation. One example from the secondary school sector is George Mitchell High School, a school where students acting as learning consultants are trained to observe lessons and feedback to staff on two fundamental issues: did all class members enjoy the lesson and did learning happen? (Savage & Wood, 2006). Here students contribute to shared knowledge creation about the effectiveness of learning and teaching and how to make learning better. As Savage and Wood (2006, p.3) state:

"Making Learning Better is, largely, a question of demystifying the learning process and excising it from detachment in the adult world. It would be hard to find any student, in any school, of any age, ability or background, who does not hold strong opinions about what makes them want to engage with a lesson and what makes them switch off"(p.3).

Fullan (2001) notes how adults have often thought of students as the beneficiaries of educational change, but rarely as participants in a process of change and organisational life. Fullan sees children's views as an under-utilised resource and yet they are key players with a vital role in developing the knowledge base about what is working and what isn't. Fullan tells us that:

"Unless they have some meaningful (to them) role in the enterprise, most educational change, indeed most education, will fail. I ask the reader not to think of students as running the school, but to entertain the following question: What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered in the introduction and implementation of reform in schools?"(p.151)

Wyness (2000) discusses at some length the lack of control that children have traditionally had over any aspect of their education and life within the school, with the curriculum decided for them and "behaviour, dress and speech codes limit[ing] what pupils can do..." (p.90). As he points out, this can have the effect of stifling children's growing social competence.

Whitty and Whisby (2007) suggest four principal arguments in favour of pupil voice: a 'children's rights' driver, something recently reinforced by the Every Child Matters agenda; an 'active citizenship' driver, through which children gain knowledge and social skills through participation, allowing them to become more effective members of society; a 'school improvement' driver, by which a school may increase attainment levels or gain a strong ethos; and a 'personalisation' driver, which allows schools to demonstrate that they are acting in the interests of each individual child.

Taking the 'personalisation' driver concept further, Hargreaves (2004) considers student voice to be possibly the most powerful of his nine gateways towards the concept of Personalising Learning. As he says:

"For many years, those who have researched student perspectives on school and learning have been astonished at the mature and serious way the vast majority of students, even the most disengaged and alienated, talk about their experience of learning and schooling."(p.9)

Fullan (2001) laments that adults “rarely think of students as participants in a process of change and organizational life” (p.151). In fact he suggests that progress has been slow: “While research of the 1980s began to look at students as active participants in their own education, and it has become clearer what should be done, too little has actually happened to enhance the role of students as members of the school as an organization.” (p.151)

Rather than decisions being made by pupils, traditionally decision-making has been done for them by adults with minimal pupil involvement. This may be linked to views of childhood which have seen children as being incapable. Ruddock and Flutter (2004) suggest that such exclusion from decision-making is based on this kind of outdated view of childhood which “fails to acknowledge young people’s capacity to take initiatives and to reflect on issues affecting their lives” (p.1).

Pupils as Partners in the Scarcroft Primary School Community – A Cameo

The following is offered as a ‘cameo’ to illustrate the experiences of a primary school in the City of York, in England, UK, to encourage children to be active agents of their own learning through its very own ‘Pupils as Partners’ (PaP) scheme. The cameo is used as a device to set out the story of this school’s experience as a means of stimulating thinking relevant to the themes and purposes of this article. The PaP scheme at this school can be seen as an attempt to formulate a framework for bringing together and evaluating the school’s partnership working with its pupils. This scheme has been created by the school itself to demonstrate and account for how well it ‘engages pupils as partners’. The Pupils as Partners scheme is set out in the Pupils as Partners Handbook which has seven sections. Each section identifies the evidence required for PaP recognition. The seven sections deal with health and fitness, self-esteem, enrichment, learning, pupil voice, teamwork and the wider world. The section on learning has three parts: what teachers should do, what pupils should do and curricular targets. Included in these sections, alongside other indicators, are the drawing up of a teacher’s contract (following class discussion this is drawn up by pupils and teacher), a pupils’ contract (again drawn up by pupils and teacher following class discussion) and pupils’ involvement in setting their curricular targets. Each section specifies ways in which the pupils are to be actively involved as partners in their learning whether it is by engaging them in talking about their strengths and talents, selecting their targets from their teacher’s feedback, setting class teamwork targets or taking on responsible roles, to name just some indicators selected from those in the scheme handbook.

Methodology

The cameo is a short case study of a setting which was selected because of its intrinsic interest to this field of study in providing us with an example of a school which is: aiming to bring together a number of pupil voice strategies under the unifying concept of Pupils as Partners and created by the school itself; and planning into this from the outset the standards against which to judge how well these pupil voice strategies are being met. These were the principal reasons for selection of this ‘case’ and the aim was to explore some of the more general issues to do with pupil voice as raised in the literature through an examination of this particular setting. This appears to reflect Denscombe’s (2007) view of case study that:

“The logic behind concentrating efforts on one case rather than many is that there may be insights to be gained from looking at the individual case that can have wider implications and, importantly, that would not have come to light through a research strategy that tried to cover a large number of instances... The aim is to illuminate the general by looking at the particular.” (p.36)

The researcher acknowledges how she is situated ontologically and epistemologically in relation to this study. She is mindful that her commitment to the importance of the pupils' perspectives and her belief that pupils should be listened to and valued as having an important contribution to the construction of our knowledge base about schools and learning.

A qualitative research strategy was designed because the main concern of the investigation was to understand the perspectives of those in this setting of the experience of designing and implementing the Pupils as Partners scheme. According to Bell (1987, p.4) a qualitative perspective reflects more of a concern to explore and understand individuals' perceptions of the world and was therefore the approach best aligned to the purposes of this study. Descriptive data was gathered through visits to the school, which included semi-structured interviews with the headteacher, followed by additional written reflections from the headteacher on particular aspects of the scheme. Semi-structured interviews were chosen in order to allow the respondent to provide flexibility within a structure. As Thomas (2009) notes "The semi-structured interview provides the best of both worlds as far as interviewing is concerned, combining the structure of a list of issues to be covered together with the freedom to follow up points as necessary" (p.164).

The headteacher's written reflections on the scheme were designed to explore in more depth some of the data collected from initial interviews with the headteacher (See Appendix for schedule of questions for written reflections). The data from the written reflections were collected following the first analysis of the interview data as a means of gaining additional insights for further exploration. This was also a means, too, of triangulating the initial data by checking and confirming the accuracy of the interview data and also allowing a more detailed and in-depth understanding to be built up. Data was also collected from observation of a Year 4 (8 – 9 year olds) lesson including some informal discussion with the pupils, and from documentary evidence about Pupils as Partners provided by the school. The lesson was one in which some the principles of the PaP scheme could be observed as the children were involved in setting their own learning targets and also agreeing class targets. This related in particular to the 'Learning' and 'Teamwork' sections of the scheme. Thus a number of data sources were drawn on with the aim of providing methodological triangulation and developing a fuller picture and more accurate understanding of the phenomenon studied. Methodological triangulation is described by Wellington (2000) as using a variety of methods to study the same issue. Denscombe (2007) has suggested that by viewing something from multiple viewpoints a better knowledge can be gained, giving added confidence in the research. The aim of this study is to provide insights rather than generalisations (Thomas 2009). The study is not intended to be able to be generalised and, drawing on ideas discussed by Opie (2004), it is the 'reliability' of the study rather than its generalisability which the researcher sees as important. It is therefore hoped that other primary school settings may recognise aspects of this experience in relation to their own settings and practice and may find value for them in reflection on learning from this study. In terms of how the concept of reliability has been considered, drawing on Scaife (2004) this is thought of as a property of the data-gathering process:

"In a carefully controlled scientific experiment, for instance, conditions are tightly specified so that, in principle, any researcher in the field could replicate a particular data gathering process and expect to obtain the same data as any other researcher." (p.66)

However, this is not the nature of this research study and it is argued that it is neither appropriate nor useful to apply such ideas to the methods used here. In terms of validity, this has been considered in terms of the claims made and the process of data gathering to provide the grounds of these (Scaife, 2004, p.69).

The research design showed regard for ethical considerations and so as part of gaining informed consent to participate in the research, the purposes of the research, confidentiality and the right of the setting to anonymity were explained at the outset. However, the school opted to be identified by name to enable others with an interest in this work and wishing to find out more about Pupils as Partners to do so. The school setting and headteacher are therefore identified with permission having been granted for this in order to enable readers to make contact with the setting if they so wish, to follow-up their interest in the Pupils as Partners work and learn further from this school's experience. Permission for the classroom observation and discussion with the pupils was obtained through the headteacher and no child is identified in this study.

Findings and Discussion

Having collected the data this was analysed for themes that emerged from the ways in which those in the research setting understood, implemented and reflected on the scheme. This involved reading and re-reading all the sources of data collected in order to become thoroughly 'immersed' in the data in order to uncover deeper layers of meaning. This was aided by the use of memos to capture and record the ongoing thoughts and ideas of the researcher about the data during this process. A number of strands emerged and these are discussed below.

The Philosophy and Purposes of the Scheme

Pupils as Partners was a development from the school's involvement in the Investors in Pupils (IiP) award. Motivated by a desire to develop an initiative which it felt could be better adapted to the school and its pupils, the Pupils as Partners scheme was devised because:

"We felt that there were some aspects of IiP that really benefitted us, but it was very prescriptive. We wanted to keep some of the best aspects of the process, but adapt it to suit our school and our pupils. The idea for Pupils as Partners came from our Headteacher and was developed by the Senior Leadership Team. The aim was to create a whole-school approach which brought together the main national initiatives we were engaging with (Every Child Matters; Excellence and Enjoyment; Healthy Schools; Assessment for Learning; Investors in Pupils) and tailor-make one focus..." (Headteacher)

Whilst PaP thus represents an attempt to link to current policy agendas, it is not seen as an exercise in 'ticking the boxes'. It came from a desire to provide some validation and accountability for how well the professed commitment to partnership with pupils was working. Although the school is housed in a traditional Victorian building, the approach is in contrast to the Victorian idea of children being 'seen and not heard'. Rather, it is built on children's agency as learners and important members of the school community. It is important to the school that a scheme to provide a validation of its commitment to pupil partnership should embody its philosophy and values. These stem from a commitment to the school community working as a team.

Partnership and the Development of the School as a Community

The school believes it is stronger for this team approach and that it achieves more through partnership with all stakeholders, including the pupils:

"... this fits with our whole school ethos which places a very strong emphasis on team spirit. Assemblies and training days make frequent reference to 'T.E.A.M.' which stands for 'Together Everyone Achieves More'" (Headteacher).

In order to put TEAM into practice, the staff prioritise the importance of talking to children about 'who does what' in the school community and what each group contributes to the school. Part of the idea behind this is to develop a stronger sense of all partners and their contributions to the school community working together as a team. Partnership is built on engagement within the life of the school and this starts from an awareness of all the partners, their roles and contributions. Pupils as Partners therefore aims to give pupils a voice through engagement in the school community as partners with other stakeholders. The Pupils as Partners Handbook for example requires that 'pupils should demonstrate an understanding of the roles adults play in providing and supporting their learning throughout the school' (Scarcroft Primary School, n.d.).

Achieving Pupils as Partners status

Pupils as Partners status is achieved when the standards developed by the school have been met. There are key pieces of evidence required to demonstrate the kinds of activity relevant to each aspect of the scheme. Assessment of the effectiveness of the school in engaging pupils as active participants in the school community, and in their own learning, is made on the basis of the data collected. So, for example, pupils' views are canvassed about their attitudes to school, their understanding of roles and responsibilities of pupils and their understanding of those of adults in the school, and a schedule of questions has been developed for this purpose. Data is also gathered from the collection of other evidence such as samples of children's work and classroom visits. Convinced of the benefits of PaP, Scarcroft Primary school is keen to extend these by sharing the initiative with other schools. So far one other York primary school has engaged with the scheme and has been assessed by Scarcroft staff, who spent a whole day at the school to carry out this assessment, before awarding the school PaP status. The hope is that other local schools may also wish to engage with the scheme.

The meaning of 'partnership' with pupils

The concept of 'partnership' is the cornerstone of the PaP scheme and yet how exactly 'partnership' working is interpreted and understood for this age group would perhaps benefit from some further clarification. The term 'partnership' is a 'slippery' and somewhat imprecise concept and, rather like 'community' it could be said to have a strong 'feel good factor'. 'Partnership' might be taken to imply a sharing of power and a way of operating which suggests a certain level of maturity, if engagement in 'full partnership' is meant. It could be argued however that the 'partnership' in this context is not an equal partnership, as adults and children in the school are in a particular power relationship. Vincent (1996) explored issues of partnership in the context of home-school relations and in doing so raised some points which may be relevant in this context too. In exploring how terms such as 'participation', 'partnership', 'community', 'citizenship', and 'empowerment' are used, Vincent said:

"All have positive connotations. Like 'participation', 'partnership' is a diffuse concept. It implies a broad spectrum of ideas embracing equality, consensus, harmony and joint endeavour. 'Community' is a term commonly used to give a positive flavour to other concepts with which it is linked, hence 'community care'..."

Edelman (1964) defines such terms as 'condensation symbols'. They 'condense' specific emotions into a particular word or phrase, so that its usage provokes those emotions. However the exact meaning of these condensation symbols is not clearly defined. Indeed they are often kept vague to attract maximum support. Over time, the words gain assumed meanings which are rarely critically scrutinised. Thus their usage may obscure more than it illuminates (p.3).

There is no suggestion here of deliberate vagueness to avoid scrutiny but what is important is that concepts such as 'partnership' and 'involvement' should be critically scrutinised and deconstructed.

Pupils as Partners is seen by the school as one manifestation of pupil voice and pupil involvement in school life:

We believe that there is an argument for pupil voice, but that in a primary school this is limited – in no way do we feel that we have exhausted all the ways in which pupils can be involved – this is simply one aspect of the PaP work ... (Headteacher).

The school certainly sees a role for pupil involvement in learning and this is an aspect of the PaP work, although perhaps the distinction between 'involvement' within the context of pupil 'partnership' would benefit from closer articulation. 'Pupil Partnership' has something of a progressive ring to it and perhaps a closer definition of partnership and just what type and extent of engagement this model is offering to pupils would be useful.

PaP appears to add another dimension to other aspects of pupil voice strategies at the school such as, for example, the annual Pupil Questionnaire. This is a tool for gathering pupils' views and the data are analysed by the senior leadership team (SLT) and the governors. However, this might be seen more as a means of finding out about issues and concerns the pupils have, such as for example safety concerns or their preferences for topics to be studied, to which the SLT and governors then respond. Pupil partnership though, suggests more than pupils simply feeding back views to which adults then respond, and PaP recognises this to some extent in aiming to give pupils an understanding and sense of 'ownership' of roles and processes within the school community. One example of this is the expectation in the PaP scheme that older pupils will have a basic understanding of the school's total annual budget and some grasp of how this breaks down into different costings and how it is used to provide resources for their learning. An aim here is to help pupils to develop a stronger sense of careful stewardship of the finite resources both from a budgetary and environmental perspective. It can be argued from this example that the scheme strives to engage pupils and to do more than canvas views because it seeks to develop their knowledge and understanding to help inform and develop their involvement. Whether it is 'involvement' or 'partnership' may be something for further debate, but PaP does seek to develop engagement rather than to merely canvas opinion.

Partnership is perhaps best understood in this setting as starting from talking 'with' children rather than 'to' or 'at' them. Partnership with pupils at this school seems to prioritise taking time to explain to pupils and to engage pupils in their learning and more widely in life in and beyond the school. Pupils as Partners means talking about learning together and agreeing targets for the next steps in progress. This was seen in the observed lesson where a small group of pupils worked with the teacher to think and talk together about the purpose of setting targets for learning, how they could decide on what targets to set themselves, how they would know when they had achieved them and collective targets they could agree for themselves together as a class. The teacher engaged the children in a discussion about their views on the purposes of targets to begin with and engaged them in thinking through targets that would be meaningful to them. The children suggested that targets 'help you improve things' and that they are important 'so that we know what we have done. We can see what we have achieved' and 'you set your own target so you can improve things'. The class targets that the children had agreed were also on display for example a target to do with developing teamwork. This provided evidence of some of the key principles of pupils as active participants in their own learning and, by discussing and gathering the children's views on the reasons for targets, the teacher showed respect for the pupils and regard for the importance of a partnership approach to learning. This is similar to one of the principles for transforming learning and teaching set out by MacGilchrist and Buttress (2005) in their discussion of the importance of engaging pupils, parents and teachers in "talk about learning and next steps in learning" (p.185). The Pupils as Partners scheme at Scarcroft primary school could also perhaps make clearer links to how this articulates with the school policy on parental

partnership, thus encouraging PaP to be seen more holistically within its wider policy framework for partnerships with stakeholder groups.

There are many examples at the school of engaging pupils in their learning such as involvement in target-setting which is one aspect of PaP, but also in the ways in which staff take the time to talk to children about the learning they themselves engage in both professionally and for personal pleasure. For example, displays of ballroom dancing and tap dancing have been given to the children by staff taking lessons in these in their leisure time. Also, when returning to school after a staff development training event, teachers will sometimes discuss with children what they have learnt and share with them any new ideas for possible future implementation. This demonstrates by example that one key thing that binds all partners and strengthens the school community is a desire and commitment to learn and therefore one important aspect of PaP is dialogue between partners in learning. It could also be seen as contributing to the Pupils as Partners criterion of 'developing an understanding of life-long learning' (Scarcroft Primary school, n. d.).

Evaluation of Pupils as Partners

The model of evaluation of this work towards 'Pupils as Partners' recognition is an important aspect. If this is seen as having a developmental rather than judgemental role, then it might be useful for a School Improvement Partner, for example, to have an involvement here or an external 'critical friend', in order to provide a validation of the school's own self-review of its progress with PaP. The school has recognised that more rigorous evaluation, supported by systematic collection of evidence would support the development of PaP. According to the Headteacher:

"There is little hard data available, as there are no statistics to gather. Our evaluation has relied on gathering views of staff and pupils in the year after we implemented the scheme. We believe that pupils are still engaging with us in a more proactive way than previously and that this is reflected in the positive learning atmosphere found in lessons around school."

To 'square the circle' the school might now evaluate more systematically how well PaP is achieving its aims and how this can feed into school development.

Reflections

'Personalised learning' is high on the agenda of government policy reforms for education in England and therefore an essential part of government strategy for schools. It is described as central to a system "which fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit to the system" (DfES 2004, p.3) and according to a more recent Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, 2008) publication, it involves active engagement of stakeholders in a learning community:

Personalised learning is central to a school improvement agenda which has teaching and learning at its heart. The active engagement of staff and other stakeholders in the school's improvement agenda is equally crucial. In many ways, successful schools are those that have been able to personalise the school improvement process by engaging staff ... and other stakeholders (including governors, parents and children and young people) as part of a learning community. (p.6)

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 'Gilbert Report' (2007) saw personalised learning being built on engagement of pupils (and parents) as partners in learning. Pupils as active 'shapers' was one idea mentioned: "Reflective schools view 'pupil voice' as far more than establishing a pupil council. They are engaging pupils actively in shaping learning and teaching ..." (p.21)

Furthermore, putting pupil voice 'centre stage' is about engaging the pupil as "a partner in learning, not a passive recipient..." (DfES 2004, p.4). As mentioned previously, the terminology tends to be used without much discussion and can be rather imprecise. How are we hoping to 'engage' pupils as 'shapers', 'partners' and 'participants', what do these terms mean and how are they to be understood and interpreted for example in the school context?

In the secondary school context, the Making Learning Better scheme at the George Mitchell High School mentioned above, is rooted firmly in the belief that only by harnessing the views of the learner can truly personalised learning be guaranteed. How else can we personalise the learning if we don't learn from the person at its core? (Savage & Wood, 2006).

How does this relate to the primary school context though? The Pupils as Partners programme might be said to contribute to 'personalised learning' when linked to the concept of "personalisation through participation" (Leadbeater, 2004, p.8) in terms of giving children an opportunity to be consulted and involved in shaping the school policies and approaches to learning. For example, as has been previously mentioned, through the PaP programme it is hoped that children will gain a better understanding of how the budget is allocated, how school works, who is responsible for what and so on. It can be argued that this information and understanding are needed as prerequisite knowledge if children are really to be involved and consulted about how the school works as a community and how it can be developed. Students know what works for them (Leren, 2006, p.367) and therefore their knowledge should be used to inform school reforms.

Whilst this view appears to be gaining currency and becoming more accepted, it is the view of McNeish (1999) cited in Clark and Moss (2006, p.1) that the rhetoric outpaces the practice. What is interesting about PaP at Scarcoft Primary school is that here we have a genuine desire to work out a model and accompanying indicators for how well a school is listening to and engaging its pupils as partners. If the indicators are met, good practice is validated. This has the potential to inform the knowledge about school which is developed not from the views of policy makers or other adults' views but from the unique perspectives of the pupils. As discussed earlier, it also makes profound sense to give pupils, who have a clear stake in school success, more of a real personal connection with the attainment of that goal by drawing on their knowledge and distinctive perspectives grounded in their own experience.

This issue of how we construct the knowledge base from which schools can develop is an important one. There are many different experiences which need to be drawn on to construct this knowledge base and each stakeholder group may have a different perspective to contribute, based on their own understandings. What is important is that children should be allowed to 'speak for themselves' rather than having their views interpreted through the filter of adult experience. We are reminded by MacBeath et al. (1995), that in important ways, school is viewed and experienced differently by different people:

"For teachers the school is their place of work. They have expectations about their working environment and about the attitudes of others towards them as 'teachers'. They have their own places ..."

Pupils use the school's buildings and resources in different ways from their teachers. They have few, if any, places that are theirs... They live much of the day in a different culture – the pupil culture. (p.22)

To draw on MacBeath et al's (1995) metaphor, our knowledge base about school must include a 'worm's eye view': If management and teachers can be said to have a bird's eye view of the school

then pupils have a worm's eye view, and the younger they are the closer to the ground that view is. They see the school from the bottom up.

To return briefly to the Plowden Report (1967), we might argue that if the school is "a community in which children learn to live first and foremost as children and not as future adults" (p.187) then the important and unique contribution from children themselves, based on the value of their experiences and perceptions as key members of the school community, in developing our knowledge and understanding about schools must be acknowledged.

Challenges

However, all this is not without its challenges when seeking out pupil voice. The literature suggests that the challenges facing the pupil voice movement come from at least two factions; there may be those who feel cynical about or threatened by the idea of children gaining more of a voice. Then, on the other hand, there may be those who feel that it is vitally important but have concerns over current practice.

Flutter (2007, p.343) expresses one of the principal worries for many about pupil voice in saying that while there has been official endorsement of the notions that pupils have a right to voice their opinions and should have some involvement in decision-making affecting their lives, the implications of these arguments for day-to-day practice are less clear and sometimes contentious.

So it is often the practical applications of pupil voice that cause concern, leading to cynicism about the value it may offer. Worries over how many pupils actually have their voices heard are significant as pupils' contributions vary tremendously. If a school council is the only outlet for pupil voice this might include a small minority of pupils (May, 2005, p.31). Equally, there may be pupils who prefer not to be involved and keep a low profile and yet if pupil voice is to be meaningful as representing all 'voices', educators should strive to ensure that all children have their opinions heard and that those who are disengaged should be specifically targeted. This means not just the most articulate or those most involved in school life and therefore whose voices are easier to access, but also others who may experience difficulties in articulating their views (Teaching and Learning Research Programme, 2003).

This raises a further challenge of how teachers access the views of children for Wyse (2001) found in his research that children found it difficult to express their opinions honestly for fear of hurting their teachers. Given that relationships in schools are based on the teachers being in positions of authority, how might this curtail the freedom which pupils feel they have to express an opinion frankly and honestly?

Wyse (2001) also observed much that contradicted what he had been told in his interviews in certain schools and so felt a tension regarding how much credence to give to views expressed by some of the children he worked with. Again, this raises a further potential challenge when attempting to access the 'true' voices of children who when asked may offer a particular view but observational evidence may appear to contradict this.

Might it not also be the case that children do not simply want to be invited to give their thoughts on topics that they do not think are important or when they don't think that any action will result from expressing their opinions? Harland et al. (2004) argue that: pupil voice should not be limited to their views on lockers, lunchtime provision and the general social life of schools - important as these are - but about the core of education, namely, teaching and learning and the curriculum as experienced in schools. (p.4)

Another concern that is expressed is that allowing children a voice may “undermine teachers’ authority and [...] fundamentally change the power relationships that exist within schools” (Flutter, 2007, p.350). It is true too that what pupils say may also “clash with dominant discourses about effective practice” (Wood, 2003, p.368).

A further issue raised by Rudduck and Flutter (2004) is that as pupil consultation has risen to prominence, so observable results are expected. Building an effective programme of pupil consultation is likely to be a slow process, which is a concern if the enthusiasm for it wanes in the meantime. As Flutter (2007, p.351) suggests:

the most serious risk for pupil voice is that it could become the latest in a long line of educational chart-toppers - ideas that come into favour for a few years and then fade away as a new hot topic comes along. (p.351)

In conclusion, agreeing with Kellett (2005), when she suggests that “better ways to seek out child perspective and unlock child voice must be sought” (p.2), a concern of this article has been that children and young people are heard in decision-making in schools and the benefits of this for all. The point was made for example that not only is this legitimate in terms of children and young people being important stakeholders in schooling, but also that this will promote more informed decisions by including the student knowledge base. Drawing on MacBeath et al. (1995) we have referred to this as a ‘worms-eye view’, which conveys the idea of the importance of the views of those who are ‘closer to the ground’ and experience school from that perspective. We have examined some of the terminology used in describing approaches to pupil voice, noting that this is sometimes uncritical, rather loose and fuzzy. For example, in our brief examination of a selection of literature the terminology has included children as ‘influencers’, ‘shapers’, ‘agents’, ‘partners’, ‘participants’, who are ‘consulted’, ‘engaged’ ‘involved’ and ‘empowered’. Agreeing with the general point made by Vincent (1996, p.3), these sorts of terms may sound progressive and appealing and thus may gain some measure of support, but the meanings are sometimes assumed and implied rather than rigorously analysed and this can result in the vagueness referred to above.

There are many strategies used by schools to engage pupil voice but as has been examined in this article, these are not unproblematic. The Pupils as Partners scheme has been drawn on as an illustration of one school’s attempt to engage pupils in meaningful ways and the originality and benefits of this scheme have been considered. We have also suggested that it may be under-theorised in terms of ‘partnership’ and that as PaP evolves the school might usefully interrogate the concept of ‘partnership’ with pupils further in the context of the range of its partnership activity. One clear issue is how the data from a more rigorous evaluation of PaP might feed more systematically into school self-evaluation. Further clarity about the key ‘drivers’ (Whitty & Whisby, 2007) for this scheme would aid this evaluation, for example whether it is primarily an accountability ‘driver’ in terms of demonstrating and validating its work in this field i.e. ‘proving’ or whether it is more about ‘improving’ what the school does by drawing on the pupil narratives to develop an understanding of what works.

Appendix

Schedule of questions for headteacher's written reflections

Pupils as Partners (PaP) Schedule of Questions and Prompts
Background to the scheme What was 'Investors in Pupils'? How did PaP follow on from this? Were the pupils involved in developing PaP? Have any other schools joined the scheme? What stage of development has PaP reached? How do you see it evolving in the future?
Benefits What are the benefits of PaP: For this school and other schools? For the children?
Issues and critical reflections What issues have been raised by the scheme about pupil partnership and participation? What lessons have been learnt to take forward in the future? Any other critical reflections on the experience of PaP?
Making a difference How is the school using PaP data? How is PaP contributing to school improvement? How do pupils know that PaP is informing school policy and practice? How has PaP been reviewed and evaluated? How well is it working? Is it meeting its aims? How do you know?
Pupil Voice Is PaP a vehicle to bring together pupil voice strategies in the school? Could you explain what the philosophy of PaP is in terms of partnership with pupils? Can pupils be full partners in a primary school? How much power is given to pupils through pupil voice strategies such as PaP?

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