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Research Associate Full Report

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Resource

Hands up if you're really listening!

Identifying and removing the barriers to effective student consultation

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Abstract

This research report draws on relevant literature and the attitudes and beliefs of senior leaders, teachers and students from four secondary school settings in order to identify those barriers that might exist to limit or prevent effective student consultation from taking place. It established that concerns about the scope of student voice activities, the specific attitudes of some senior leaders, teachers and students, logistical difficulties including time and number of pupils and the dichotomy of government rhetoric and action when viewed in the light of some trade union opposition were all potentially significant factors.

Approaches and practical methods of overcoming these barriers identified that the attitude of the head and their unequivocal and vocal support is seen as being fundamental to establishing successful student voice in a secondary setting. Also important is ensuring that the implementation process is a joint partnership between leaders, teachers and the young people involved and that there is visible and meaningful evidence of the impact of the consultation. The role of leaderships teams and in particular their commitment to ensuring that any necessary time is provided, together with practical and financial support, has been demonstrated as effective in overcoming barriers as is external accreditation and recognition. Finally, this research report suggests that schools who have successfully overcome all or many of these barriers feel that working collaboratively enables a more efficient and effective approach for those schools seeking to introduce or to extend their student consultation activities.

Introduction

> "Don't waste our time or yours asking us questions about things that don't really matter ... or because you're being made to." (Year 11 student, 2009)

We live in market-driven times and it has become commonplace in recent years for service or product providers to ask their users or consumers for their thoughts and relevant experiences. This is a win-win situation for the service or product providers because it not only makes their users or consumers feel valued but it also provides a wealth of valuable data and information for both evaluation and developmental purposes. The world of education was thrust relatively recently, and hardly willingly, out of its comfort zone and into the more open and transparent 'marketplace', with the introduction of published data such as league tables and Ofsted inspection reports. The successes they achieve and the service that schools, colleges and universities provide are now scrutinised, analysed, discussed and debated by a range of interested parties.

Running parallel to this has been the slow yet steady development of student (or pupil, as is often the case for primary children) voice. An ill-defined term, student voice can be the participation in what goes on in a school such as a role, responsibility, membership of a council, the completion of a questionnaire or casting of a vote, or it can extend in scope and range to become a dialogue or consultation, a 'joint endeavour' (Flutter & Rudduck 2004: 13) aimed at exploring and improving teaching and learning.

In 1989, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child had called for all children to have the same global right to express their views freely in all matters that affect them, and by 2002 the UK Education Act finally caught up with this by legislating that schools consult with pupils. Ofsted subsequently introduced the self-evaluation form (SEF) that requires educators to detail how they have gathered the views of our learners, what this has told them, the feedback process and to provide examples of how this has improved provision. Policy agendas such as *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003) and the introduction of 'citizenship' as a statutory element of the secondary curriculum have firmly established the requirement to involve children and young people and to develop their ability to shape their own world.

But to what extent is there a genuine desire in many settings to actively involve pupils, for them to be 'active respondents rather than passive data sources' (McGregor 2007: 88), perhaps as a means to school improvement, to foster greater inclusion or as a result of the personal value and belief system of the school leader? Is this a true reflection on how schools approach the idea of allowing children and young people a voice? Or are schools going through the motions, with the boxes on SEF being filled in through 'insistent imperatives of accountability rather than enduring commitments to democratic agency' (Fielding 2001: 2)?

In a 2008 DCSF/Ofsted Tellus3 report involving 150,000 young people aged 10–15, findings were not encouraging. When asked the question 'how much do you feel children and young people's views are listened to in the running of your school?' 27% responded 'not very much' and 7% 'not at all'.

One head interviewed for this research voiced concerns:

> "I am highly sceptical when people talk of pupil or student voice. In educational circles it has come to have lots of different meanings. For me it is about the

> opportunities that young people have to influence how a school, a class or a group functions – it is the consequences that are important but I don't believe this is the case for everyone."

Whatever the stimulus the fact remains that schools are required to consult with learners and to provide some evidence of the subsequent impact. So how extensive and effective is this? Are there stumbling blocks that are shared across settings? How and why are some schools judged to be outstanding at this? What can other schools learn from them? This research project aimed to investigate:

- What barriers might exist to prevent or to limit effective student consultation?
- How have some schools overcome these barriers?
- What benefits has this brought?
- How do leaders, teachers and pupils feel about pupil voice in these settings?

The project was designed to consult separately with senior leaders, teachers and pupils in a variety of secondary school settings in order to gain views on the four aspects of the investigation that were as representative of each whole school community as was possible given the small-scale scope of the research.

Literature review

In order for this project to consider potential barriers to effective pupil voice and to identify constructive methods of overcoming these it is useful to assess the situation that schools currently find themselves in as this indicates where some of these barriers lie.

In a review of a 1975 special issue of the *Educational Review* focusing on pupil perspective, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) had found no evidence of schools themselves being committed to this process beyond allowing the researchers access. In 1996 a British Psychological Society (BPS) study concluded that the UK educational system required 'compliance, focused concentration and the willingness to listen and reflect' (BPS 1996: 13) in children from the age of five. If this was a true reflection of the state of schools at the time, then they had clearly seen little evidence to indicate active pupil voice some 20 years later.

To what extent there has been movement away from that and towards encouraging and valuing pupil consultation is open to debate, as in April 2009 NASUWT (National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers) declared that 'the job of being a student is to learn and not to teach or to manage the school' (2009: 4). So do schools in the 21st century still contain 'an odd collection of rules and practices', as Thomas and Loxley (2004: 37) believed, or are they now, as Barton and Slee urged in 1999 (cited in Shearman 2004: 357), 'listening to unfamiliar voices, being open, empowering all'?

In recent years there has certainly been some evidence of what Jean Rudduck described as a 'zeitgeist commitment to student voice' (2006: 133). Some, although not extensive examples of researchers and practitioners debating its impact on school improvement, behaviour and achievement can be found; Ofsted requires schools to report on what they do, how they do it and why and, although none of the many children or young people I spoke to as part of this project could name him, there is even a children's commissioner to champion the cause.

The situation facing school leaders

> Most schools are having to "self start" and, for many headteachers this is both personally and professionally challenging. (Leitch & Mitchell 2007: 69)

That pupil voice work can be nothing more than tokenistic and that schools are often 'listening to the articulate and able … and to those who agree with what the school wants to hear' (Robinson & Taylor 2007: 10) is clearly a concern shared by 87% of the adults interviewed for this project who all independently voiced some form of 'ticking a box' or 'going through the motions' comment when discussing generalised attitudes of many schools towards pupil voice.

That this may be through the logistical and organisational complexities of listening to a 'cacophony of competing voices' (Robinson & Taylor 2007: 13) is a compelling argument that many of our school leaders could put forward as they produce data on the gender, ability, disability, social class, ethnicity and English language proficiency mix of their respective cohorts. As Leitch and Mitchell pointed out, there is 'no simple prototype to follow' (2007: 68) to enable schools to address this and Rudduck and McIntyre's verdict that the government could be accused of being 'strong on rhetoric but less forthcoming in terms of practical support' (2007: 7) may well find favour with many.

Yet finding ways to do so is the task of school leaders – if only so that they have something to put into the boxes on the SEF. What implications does this have for them? Is it 'essentially a process of democratization', as Leitch and Mitchell (2007: 68) claimed, which involves 're-culturing schools and classrooms, adults and students'? Furthermore, is it, as they believed, a 'tall order' for heads to do this and, as they suspected, a challenge, which school leaders do not have the time, the ability or the inclination to meet? Are they confident and comfortable enough to contemplate the cultural change in their school that anything other than a tokenistic approach to effective pupil voice would require and, even if they were, would they want to?

Rudduck and McIntyre's 2007 studies found that in some schools, as with government, rhetoric from senior management teams called for greater pupil involvement yet the practical commitment towards pupil voice was low. This, in turn, impacted on both the attitude and approach demonstrated by teaching staff who may well already be experiencing 'personal and interpersonal insecurities' (2007: 13) about being required to participate in pupil voice activities.

Fielding went further in talking of teachers having 'fear and the attendant desire to control' (2001: 4) those they teach, while Rudduck and McIntyre found that many teachers voiced understandable concerns about existing pressures on time, curriculum coverage and examination results and also of 'possible criticism of their professional skills and/or personal qualities' (2007: 160).

In seeking to implement meaningful and effective pupil involvement that is "more than just whingeing about toilets", as one deputy head interviewed described it, school leaders face a situation which can 'unless carefully handled, prove divisive' (Rudduck & McIntyre 2007: 6). Involving pupils in interview panels and in lesson observations and feedback can be perceived to be threatening by teachers on a number of counts, a view which is supported by NASUWT who stated that such practice 'undermines, disempowers and deprofessionalises teachers' (2009: 9).

Yet the government is currently all in favour and therefore at odds with this. Vernon Coaker, Schools Minister, writing in the *Times Educational Supplement* (*TES*) in August 2009, outlined details of a new government white paper, and stated:

> I hope the voice of pupils and parents is better heard, and that these initiatives create lasting and useful opportunities that will only aid teachers and schools staff in improving the life chances of all our young people.

The literature review highlighted a number of areas of conflict or difficulty and therefore where barriers might very likely exist in schools to limit or prevent effective student consultation, and this project aimed to examine and detail those barriers in order to see if and how they could and were being overcome.

Methodology

This research project was undertaken between autumn 2008 and summer 2009 and included both qualitative and quantitative data collected from four secondary schools in England. These schools were approached on the basis of Ofsted reporting their provision for consulting with pupils to be an outstanding feature and/or their participation in innovative research or practice relating to pupil voice and all agreed to participate. The schools were also approached because as a whole they represented a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and of ability and examination achievement levels. The specific characteristics of these schools are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of the schools involved in the project

School	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**
Type	11–16 comprehensive/ mixed gender	11–16 comprehensive/ mixed gender	11–18 comprehensive/ mixed gender	11–16 special/ mixed gender
Number on roll	600	1,300	1,250	90
Location	Outer London	Northern city suburb	Midlands town	Midlands city suburb

Questionnaires were distributed to each school for a sample group of senior leaders, teachers and students to complete with 14 senior leaders, 42 teachers, and 48 students participating. These questionnaires were designed to gather personal attitudes and beliefs towards pupil voice and questions were informed by the literature review. Areas explored were:

- perceptions of staff attitudes
- government imperatives and external factors (including trade union views)
- the scope and range of pupil consultation
- management of the school
- the balance of power

Each school was subsequently visited and semi-structured interviews were carried out with a member of the senior leadership team and focus groups of teachers and of students (approximately four in each). Questions relating to personal opinions, procedures in their school, their own views of potential barriers and their estimation of how and why their school had successfully overcome these were asked.

Each school was asked if, where possible, those teachers and students completing the questionnaires and in focus groups could be representative of the age, gender and ethnic mix of the school. It was also requested that these were not selected solely from those who had a 'known positive attitude' towards pupil involvement. Schools stated that they had achieved this to the best of their ability but it must be acknowledged, however, that this cannot be completely representative given the small-scale nature of this project.

Findings

The literature reviewed identified a number of potential barriers to effective pupil involvement in schools and the project questionnaire sought to establish if the schools involved in this project agreed with these and to identify any additional barriers. It also aimed to establish the extent to which the perceptions of these barriers differed, if at all, between the three distinctive groups of senior leaders, teachers and pupils.

Identifying the barriers

Given the choices 'yes', 'no' and 'to a certain extent', 100% of the senior leaders and 95% of pupils who completed the questionnaire felt that 'yes', pupil voice was a good thing, while the number of teachers who felt this was 68%, with 32% considering it to be a good thing 'to a certain extent', indicating that Rudduck and McIntyre's 2007 findings of 'attitudinal difficulties' among teachers still existed. This is further indicated by the fact that while 100% of leaders felt that 'yes', there was evidence to show that involving students in decisions is beneficial to schools, 78% of teachers also responded in the same way, indicating that despite acknowledging that there is evidence of benefits, some 10% still felt unable to lend clear support.

Questions were then asked about the scope of pupil voice in order to identify potential areas of opposition or difficulty.

Scope of student voice

The same response boxes were offered when asking if pupils should be included in decisions about the following:

- school uniform
- school meals
- school curriculum
- teaching
- design and layout of the school
- extra-curriculum activities
- how the school is run
- staff appointments
- other school matters (respondents were asked to specify)

The senior leaders involved responded similarly, with 100% agreeing 'yes' to meals, design and layout and extra-curriculum activities. This dipped slightly to 98% when considering uniform, curriculum, teaching, how the school is run and staff appointments, with 2% feeling that they agreed 'to a certain extent', and some added caveats to their responses:

> "Involving students in decisions or comments about teaching, lessons and the curriculum needs very careful handling indeed."

> "This has to be done in a very non-threatening way or could end up creating more problems than it solves."

The responses of teachers and pupils were markedly different to those of the senior leaders in many areas and both groups shared significant concerns. Table 2 details these responses although what the table does not illustrate, but which is an important factor, is that the trends were consistent across all four schools.

Table 2: Forty-two teacher (T) and 48 pupil (P) responses to the scope of pupil involvement

	Yes, I agree	No, I disagree	I agree to a certain extent
School uniform	T – 74% P – 97%	T – 1% P – 1%	T – 25% P – 2%
School meals	T – 91% P – 99%	T – 0% P – 0%	T – 9% P – 1%
School curriculum	T – 52% P – 62%	T – 11% P – 8%	T – 33% P – 30%
Teaching	T – 53% P – 64%	T – 9% P – 6%	T – 38% P – 30%
Design + layout of the school	T – 67% P – 69%	T – 2% P – 2%	T – 31% P – 29%
Extra-curriculum activities	T – 96% P – 95%	T – 2% P – 0%	T – 2% P – 5%
How the school is run	T – 53% P – 65%	T – 12% P – 4%	T – 35% P – 31%
Staff appointments	T – 43% P – 67%	T – 27% P – 6%	T – 30% P – 27%

It is clear from the data that the only areas where teachers and pupils felt strongly that pupil involvement was a good thing (90% +) were school meals and extra-curriculum activities. While a high percentage of pupils felt that they should have a say in their school uniform, only 74% of teachers agreed unequivocally. Teachers' comments on this included:

> "Who is to say what they might choose? They might all want to wear jeans and then standards might fall."

> "I do feel they need guidance on this. We could end up with something really unsuitable."

Attitudes to other areas of pupil involvement were mixed. That teachers did not share their leaders' wholehearted desire for active pupil involvement in how the school is run, in the curriculum, in teaching and in staff appointments lends support to staff attitudes and fears being a significant barrier, as discussed in the literature review. One teacher stated a concern that was echoed by others:

> "It's just something else to worry about. Senior management, parents, Ofsted, the government, the newspapers … everyone has an opinion on how we do our job and now pupils as well. Can we please everyone and meet all agendas? I'm not sure we can."

Yet, perhaps reassuringly for teachers, the young people who completed the questionnaire responded with similar caution.

> "It's worth asking us what we think about lessons, how we learn, the way that you do things in the classroom and around school because we might just add something that you haven't thought of – but you are supposed to be the experts at all of this and we kind of expect you to be good at it. We should really only be adding the little extra bits."

> "It's your job to know this stuff and make the big decisions. Ask us because it's like 'ask the audience' on 'Who Wants To Be A Millionaire' isn't it, you're more likely to get the right answer if you ask lots of people but you have all been trained and everything so you should know what you're doing."

As the literature review demonstrated, the attitudes and fears of teachers has been identified as a significant barrier to pupil voice by a number of studies, yet what became apparent in this research was that the attitudes and fears of pupils exists as a barrier and this has been largely overlooked.

Attitudes towards pupils

A large number of the young people who completed the questionnaire and those who were interviewed voiced a number of concerns about the ability and the levels of interest of some of their peers.

> "Some of us will take this kind of thing seriously and will see it as important but some just won't."

> "Not everyone can be good at making decisions can they? Not everyone wants to anyway … it's the same with adults though isn't it?"

> "You need to ask all of us but remember that you'll get some bad answers and stupid ideas as well as good ones."

There was anxiety among some of the young people who participated and a concern that as senior leaders and teachers we might not truly appreciate the levels of apathy and disinterest that many of their fellow students might have towards being involved. Again this was evident and shared in all settings and across all year groups.

This is further illustrated by the fact that 45% of young people felt that pupils only wanted to be involved in decisions 'to a certain extent', whereas 92% felt that 'yes', they were old enough to be involved and 83% felt that 'yes', they had the skills to be involved. Being able and equipped to be involved was seen to be outweighed by a potential disinclination to do so and this was discussed further during the interviews.

> "The trouble is that you ask everyone everything and they just lose interest. Why ask us about the food if we don't all have it? You ask us stuff that we're really not interested in and you ask us stuff about things that don't change anyway so we stop caring. Some people will say anything because they think you don't take any notice."

> "We really don't all care about the same things as you. If the school is good and we do well out of it then that's enough. The other stuff doesn't matter that much if the school is good."

Their concerns about adults not realising the reality of student apathy are confirmed by the teachers' responses. Almost half felt that 'yes', young people had the skills and were mature enough while half felt that they did 'to a certain extent'. Yet only 3% believed that young people only wanted to be involved 'to a certain extent', with 97% stating that 'yes', they definitely did – markedly different from the pupils'

opinions and confirming that 'things often look different from the perspectives of pupils' (Rudduck & McIntyre 2007: 55). Senior leaders were split 50/50 between 'yes' and 'to a certain extent' in the 'maturity', 'skills' and 'wanting involvement' questions, which may demonstrate their understanding of the apathy barrier but may also indicate some reservations that they have about how well equipped their students are for active involvement.

Teachers as barriers

The literature review considered teacher insecurity as a potential barrier and 67% of teachers who responded agreed that teachers felt threatened 'to a certain extent', while 31% felt that it wasn't an issue. The responses of the young people who took part were divided almost equally between the three options and their comments about teacher attitudes reflected this mixed reaction:

> "Some teachers are great and you know that they really want to do it but some seem scared or angry about it and will tell you that they are only doing it because they have to."

> "You can always tell the ones that hate having to do it … the ones you like, the good ones, they're always OK with it."

Ninety-nine per cent of senior leaders felt that this was an issue to a 'certain extent' and several commented that this did very much vary from teacher to teacher. One head felt that this was understandable:

> "If we, as senior leaders, don't manage it appropriately then teachers may well feel threatened and understandably so. Teachers need lots of support – it is human nature to feel threatened by others making evaluations."

Another went further:

> "Most teachers (and support staff) need to have a certain love of control to do their job and engaging with students in a format when you don't know what they are going to do or say is a big issue for many and this leads to resistance."

This insecurity could be attributed in part to teachers not being confident about how to involve pupils, with 69% of teachers and 75% of young people agreeing that it was 'to a certain extent'. Less senior leaders felt this, with only 54% making this response and 46% feeling that teachers were completely confident.

> "I'm not sure it is a matter of confidence with some teachers but more an ideological viewpoint – they just think it is wrong. They believe, and I think this is a minority although a fairly significant minority, that teachers have a right not to be questioned by anyone and certainly not by those they are teaching."

It is difficult to fully establish from this small-scale project the complexities of teacher opposition or insecurity yet there is clear evidence from the responses gathered that teachers can be viewed as a barrier to effective pupil voice to some extent, and that senior leaders, young people and teachers themselves are very aware of this.

Senior leaders as barriers

The literature review raised questions about school leaders' commitment or ability to fully engage with effective pupil consultation in their schools, a view reflected by Mick Brookes, General Secretary of NAHT (National Association of Headteachers), who stated in the organisation's *Leadership Focus* magazine that 'pupil power can

either be seen as a threat or an opportunity' (2008: 37). This is further supported by the questionnaire responses as 20% of leaders felt that 'yes', school leaders did feel threatened by involving pupils in the decision-making process and an additional 20% felt that yes, they did 'to a certain extent'. One deputy head commented:

> "Involving pupils creates openness around decision making and not all leaders are comfortable with this."

While another stated:

> "I can think of a number of heads that I know, and a number of people I have worked with on leadership teams, who would not entertain the idea of truly involving their students in decision making. There is a huge difference between finding something to put in the SEF boxes and actually doing it for real. It is not difficult to show that you have asked them but what is really important is the extent to which they believe they have affected the outcome."

When teachers were asked if they felt that senior leaders provided them with enough support to enable them to involve pupils in decisions, responses were largely equally divided three ways. As one teacher explained:

> "The support in this school is good but I've worked in other schools where it was non-existent. It depends so much on what the head feels about it – either they are fully committed or they aren't. In my experience there isn't any middle ground."

This verdict was reflected somewhat in the responses of the leaders themselves, with 39% believing that 'yes', leaders did provide enough support and 38% stating that they did 'to a certain extent'.

Again, this project does not seek to understand why certain value and belief systems exist or to explore the complexities of barriers but to identify if indeed a barrier might exist. The responses given do support the questions raised in the literature review, indicating that some senior leaders may be considered to be a potential barrier to effective pupil voice, either through lack of will or because of perceived difficulties implementing the process. As Leitch and Mitchell concluded:

> There is no simple prototype to follow. There is no one size fits all model when it comes to re-culturing and developing structures and processes for truly democratic student involvement. (2007: 68)

They further questioned whether heads had the 'necessary vision, reflexivity, commitment, time, energy, skills and flexibility' to overcome this, a viewpoint which was shared by the leaders involved here.

> "Some of us believe in it [student voice] and some of us don't. That's the bottom line."

> "As leaders we have different priorities and areas we feel strongly about. We have to decide what they are and how much commitment we give them."

> "Even if we believe very strongly about something we have to choose our battles and this won't be one that everyone chooses."

Logistical difficulties

The question of time constraints and pressures split all three groups largely equally across the three choice options, as did a question about the difficulties of consulting with large numbers of pupils, indicating that time and student numbers cannot be dismissed as potential barriers to effective pupil voice. As two teachers commented:

> "As head of a department I am asking my colleagues to raise standards, attain targets etc but at the same time I am asking them to take time out for questionnaires, consultation sessions ... even devote whole lessons to discussions about learning, resources and so on. I believe that we have to get the balance right but I can understand why some colleagues struggle with this."
>
> "Collating the data from so many students and then actually acting on that is a big ask."

Clearly, for management teams, these issues need to be addressed and resolved in order for progress to be made and to ensure that unnecessary burdens are not placed on staff, many of whom already feel under immense pressure to carry out daily duties.

External pressures

Only a small minority (less than 15%) of each group questioned felt that pressure to do well in exams was a barrier to effective pupil consultation with the great majority believing that 'no', it wasn't.

The government fared less well, with only 11% of teachers and 14% of leaders believing that it provides enough support to schools to enable them to involve pupils effectively, although no one provided any additional comments as to how this support might be provided and in what form. This is also interesting as one of the complaints often aired by teachers and school leaders is that government interferes too often in school matters. Clearly, teachers and leaders consider this to be a barrier, despite Vernon Coaker, Schools Minister, stating in *TES* (14 August 2009) that:

> It's therefore right for pupils to be encouraged to take increasing responsibility for their learning through participation in decision making and for schools to consult pupils on a range of issues.

His reference in this article to the government white paper *Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future* (June 2009) guarantees that every child will have the right to comment on the standards of behaviour in their school, on how well their school is doing and how it can be improved.

Coaker's comments formed part of a debate with Chris Keates, General Secretary of NASUWT, who took the opposing stance that:

> Pupil voice has gone too far in those schools which have and continue to distort and abuse the concept.

The 2009 *Student Voice: A guide to supporting and promoting good practice in schools*, published by NASUWT for its members, states quite clearly that pupils should not be involved in staff interviews or lesson observations, re-iterated by Keates in the *TES* article:

> They [staff interviews and lesson observations] are neither a natural extension of the concept of student voice nor an appropriate interpretation of it.

She concluded:

> Therefore, although teachers and students must have a voice, the last word must remain with the teacher.

This is clearly a viewpoint that is somewhat at odds with the government white paper's aims and which therefore poses a dilemma for school leaders, who would appear to be caught in the middle of opposing views, thus creating a significant barrier which may prove difficult to resolve, particularly for those schools who are committed and who may risk entering into conflict with an active trade union.

Yet leaders and teachers were divided between all three response options when asked if trade unions supported pupil involvement in decision making in schools, with a large number of teachers opting instead to comment 'don't know' rather than selecting a response, perhaps also indicating that not all of the unions are currently as vocal on the subject as NASUWT. This may well be a barrier which becomes more significant over the coming months or one which is more substantial in some settings than others, depending on the relative strengths of each trade union.

Overcoming the barriers

Despite clear evidence that a number of barriers exist which may restrict or substantially limit effective pupil participation in the decision-making process in schools, many schools remain committed to the process. The experiences of those interviewed for this research project highlight a number of approaches and insights which should prove informative to leaders who face personal or practical difficulties in their setting.

Leading from the top down

> "There must be a catalyst for change for things to happen – we had a new head and that did it for us. It won't happen without someone making that initial decision or opening the debate and that has to come from the top in my experience."

The words of this deputy head, while flying somewhat in the face of the current emphasis on collective or distributed leadership, reflect the views of many who were interviewed, that removing the barriers to effective student voice depends to a very great extent on the ability of the person at the top to ensure that it happens. This is not to advocate a didactic approach because, as Maitles and Deuchar contend, there is:

> ... the thorny issue [for schools] of whether democracy can be developed in authoritarian structures. (2006: 251)

Indeed, none of those interviewed called for such an approach but they did believe that without the unequivocal support of the head there was unlikely to be a successful and meaningful outcome.

The students supported this premise. One group spent some time discussing their head between themselves before concluding:

> "She's scary – well just scary enough – and that makes it work in our school. She makes it happen and we all know that but everyone trusts her to do the right thing because she's made us into a good school. Some staff think it is good and some don't (and tell you that) but they all say that it's going to happen anyway because it has to."

A deputy head with responsibility for implementing student voice agreed:

> "It is crucial to lead from the top on this. I couldn't do what I do and we couldn't have achieved what we have achieved without my head being 100% committed and vocal about it."

All of the leaders and teachers interviewed agreed that they did not believe it would happen in a school without strong and often outspoken support from the head and that this person had to be comfortable with the process and the implications of fully engaging with and responding to students. It is a very real possibility that the personal values and belief system of the head as a potential barrier will remain, but one head felt that there were signs of optimism:

> "As new leaders come through the system these negative attitudes and fears will change hopefully. There needs to be a sense of collaboration and openness around trying new things ... being unafraid to try radical approaches ... big changes can happen. While there remains a government imperative for us to do it then we might just see changes happen because it has made it topical."

Yet what about those heads and senior teams who remain unconvinced or who are insecure about fully engaging with their students in this way? What might the way forward be for them?

Joint partnership

Teacher and student attitudes were a key concern for many who were interviewed. There was an overriding sense that it was imperative for effective student involvement to be viewed as a three-way partnership between leaders, teachers and students, adding weight to Mitra's 2005 claim that student participation in school reform can be viewed as extending the concept of 'distributed leadership' to include students as well as teachers. This is a radical concept for some, perhaps, but a concept supported by the unanimous majority interviewed.

Viewed from a sociocultural perspective this approach finds support with theorists such as Abraham Maslow (1988) who believed that the feeling of belonging and acceptance was a basic human need, and with Barbara Rogoff (1990), Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) who encouraged a consideration of schools as *communities of practice*, where the interactions of all who attend and participate are viewed as vital to learning, development and progress. Involvement in the decision-making processes and the resulting impact is regarded as hugely influential, both on self-esteem and on commitment towards institutions (in this case schools and therefore learning). One student interviewed voiced a sentiment which was echoed by all of the students:

> "It makes you feel more important ... it's knowing that this is your school and you matter to it. That's such a good feeling and that's the same whether you are clever or not. Why have a canteen that no one likes when you can have one that they do? We get asked about how we like to be taught, about grouping, after school sessions, lunchtime sessions and trips. Everyone really likes it because these things matter so much. We don't want to be miserable at school ... we want it to be good."

One group spoke of how much they enjoyed working with teachers to reach a common goal:

> "They start in Year 7 ... teaching us how to do it, how to be involved and give our opinions and stuff and it carries on as we get older. We get better at it and they give us more chances to say and do even more. It's good to feel trusted and to work with teachers like that. It makes us more responsible ... well most of us ... but at least it gives us the chance to be responsible. Not all schools do that do they?"

For the senior leaders interviewed this approach was invaluable. One spoke of an 'alliance' between staffing groups and students, another of a 'complete group', while a third felt convinced that:

> "... it has brought immense benefits to the school ethos and the attitude of everyone involved. There is a dynamic sense of ownership, of belonging and a sense of pride that has its own rewards. In a school like ours and considering where this school was a few years ago that cannot be underestimated."

Yet how is this cohesion acquired? If staff attitudes are a realistic and potentially substantial barrier, how do some schools manage to overcome them?

> "It doesn't happen overnight and anyone starting has to be very aware of that. For us it was maybe a four to five year process and it is important to embed everything into the running of the school ... so that it isn't just another passing fad."

All of the senior leaders repeated that it could not be viewed as a quick fix or an overnight implementation, and a timescale of five years was considered to be realistic to have the majority of staff and students on board.

> "We realised very quickly that our staff were completely out of their comfort zone with the notion of consulting with our students on anything and that they had no idea how to do it anyway. We went back to the beginning during training days, discussed the theory behind why it should happen, individual values and beliefs systems and played around with different ways of doing it. It was softly, softly at first and then it gathered momentum once confidence levels grew."

One head adopted a firm yet pragmatic approach to student voice:

> "Staff need to understand that it is a fundamental part of working in this school and the leadership team has to give a strong lead on this ... staff can then decide if they subscribe to this culture or not. But we have to be creative as leaders and look at it from different angles. Observations are contentious and so don't have students doing formal observations, sitting at the back with clipboards, as this is alien to them and alien for the teacher. You can often get the same results but come at it differently. You can't have big battles with your staff and the unions."

Another school had found a similar approach had worked well for them and that rather than have students observe lessons, teachers could 'invite' trained students in to focus on and give feedback on a particular aspect of a lesson. A school who were very involved in the secondary SEAL (social and emotional aspects of learning) initiative had found that staff and students working collaboratively to investigate the social, emotional and physical environments of the school had brought enormous rewards, with no one group feeling threatened or intimidated by the other's views.

Leaders and teachers all advocated utilising those staff who were on board and happy to volunteer in the early stages as this allowed others to 'watch and observe' for a while to see what might happen. One deputy head commented:

> "It is radical and you have to be brave at first so you need some eager and willing conscripts in the early stages. If your job is to push this process forward then you have to be the first to be seen to be doing it yourself and letting others watch and comment."

Newly qualified staff and trainee teachers were also considered to be beneficial in the early stages as they were often more used to being observed. Two schools involved were government-funded training schools and therefore had a relatively large number of trainees in their school at any given time. Both were in no doubt that this factor had been enormously influential in enabling student consultation to become embedded in their settings, as it provided not only the expertise of initial teacher training (ITT) mentors and tutors to support and train students but also helped to create an climate of openness and co-construction within the school.

While remaining optimistic and believing that most staff could be won round, all felt that some opposition would inevitably remain. To mitigate the overall impact of this other measures were recommended.

The time factor

Demands on time had been identified as a potential barrier and all of the senior leaders felt that this needed to be addressed by leadership teams. One deputy head felt that they had changed a lot of staff attitudes by outsourcing some of the work involved:

> "We use outside agencies to prepare surveys and questionnaires for staff. They can be completed online by the students; the data is collated and turned around to us in 24 hours. Our education authority is funding this currently but we will continue when it doesn't because it has proven immensely beneficial."

All spoke of the leadership team ensuring that time was provided where needed. If students needed to come out of lessons then they did and if lessons occasionally needed to be dedicated to student voice activities then they were. Teachers and students could see that this was an inconvenience at times but felt that the benefits outweighed the disadvantages.
Others spoke of processes becoming less time consuming as staff and students became more comfortable with the processes. One head spoke of the experience in their school:

> "Once it is embedded it takes less time because everyone is receptive. Students learn to develop their opinions as they expect to be asked and they learn to have a more considered opinion as they know that we will do something about what they say. As heads we need to prioritise how, as a school, we will use our time and I would say to heads that it does take much less time as you progress."

This begs the question, is this not the point of schools after all, particularly with the new QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) secondary national curriculum's emphasis of the development of personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS)? As Maitles and Deuchar's consideration of the Scottish citizenship curriculum points out:

> Young people are citizens now, not citizens in waiting. (2006: 250)

Seeing the impact

The school leaders, teachers and students interviewed were in no doubt that the skills required by young people to take part in meaningful involvement developed over time and all could see this as a very real benefit. A group of teachers from one school felt that this had helped to win round some sceptical colleagues:

> "Once people started to see the changes and realised that they [the students] were respectful when they gave their opinions and that they could offer new insights then people really came on board and opposition sort of died away largely."

Leaders were in no doubt that being able to see the impact was invaluable on several fronts. In addition to staff being able to witness benefits in students, all felt that students needed to know the outcome of their involvement and the reasons for decisions. Assemblies and tutorial time were often used to provide rapid feedback and detailed explanations were given of why a certain path was chosen and changes needed to be seen in and around school so that students saw at first hand the validation of their input. The young people involved also recognised the importance of this in changing the attitudes of apathetic students or of those who might not take it seriously:

> "We've got a uniform with a stupid badge because when we were asked about it hardly anyone took it seriously and now we're probably stuck with that for ages. It's really embarrassing but it taught us a lesson and now we make sure we have our say!"

Others could see positive changes that had happened within the school and believed that this impacted on all students:

> "Some things might seem little like the type of sandwiches we can buy, the shoes we can wear or the bags we can bring but it makes a lot of difference to us just changing those little things. Even people who don't like school much like it that things like that change."

As student attitudes and discontent continues to be a growing concern, overcoming this barrier may well lead to greater gains. Linked with the importance of being able to view the impact of student consultation is the way in which external forces could also prove to help overcome staff and student reluctance, and at the same time bolster a sense of pride.

External accreditation and recognition

For two of the schools involved, being recognised and funded as specialist teacher training schools brought not only money and expertise but also a kudos to the school which leaders, teachers and students in both settings acknowledged and considered to be important for morale and for a collective self-esteem. The leaders in both settings could not value this highly enough and believed that the benefits and prestige that this had brought to the work with student voice were immense. Students also spoke of this:

> "People you know who don't come here ... they know about us and the stuff we do so they want to come here as well because it sounds better than other schools. That's a good feeling."

Similarly, one school who had received national and international media coverage for its pioneering work with student voice believed that this had helped both staff and students to overcome any boundaries which existed:

> "When they come to this school now, they know we are known for something and that brings real pride. How fantastic is that?"

One head felt strongly that outside credence had been very important in enabling the school to make the progress with student voice that it had:

> "We have taken up outside opportunities to verify its importance such as city-wide surveys and outside accreditation. It also helps that it has a higher profile in the education world now – Ofsted want to see evidence of it and governors, staff, parents and students know that. It means that people don't just see it as something that the madcap head bangs on about!"

Collaboration

Looking beyond the school was also seen as pivotal and the notion of collaboration and working in partnership with other schools was also suggested by senior leaders as a potentially important way forward, supporting McGregor's view stated as a result of her consideration of the National College's Networked Learning Communities project:

> Collaboration between schools can provide a space for different, and possibly less threatening, opportunities for dialogue. (2007: 98)

One head urged colleagues to talk to other schools:

> "Ask about it, discuss fears and barriers and get practical tips. For example, I was worried about having student interview panels when we started because I wondered what would happen if we had drastically different opinions. Funny thing is that I needn't have worried at all because the students are always insightful and on the button – and we don't just select able students."

Another leader agreed:

> "Schools starting out or wanting to step up a gear really should look at other settings and ask questions. I think we can offer reassurance and advice that might save a lot of time and effort."

Conclusion

> "If you do not believe you can do it then you have no chance at all." (Arsene Wenger)

The research suggested that there are a number of identifiable barriers which can potentially exist within schools which may limit or reduce the extent of effective student consultation:

- Scope of student voice: senior leaders strongly believed that students should be actively involved in a wide range of school matters whereas many teachers and one trade union considered school management, the curriculum, classroom teaching and staff appointments as contentious.
- Attitudes of senior leaders: this was viewed as pivotal to the success and effectiveness of student voice activities and the head was seen as the key figure in this. Lack of belief in or a commitment to genuine student consultation was viewed as a barrier which was unlikely to be overcome.
- Attitudes of teachers: the values and beliefs held by teachers were considered to potentially be a significant barrier as was teacher insecurity and lack of expertise at working in consultation with students.
- Logistical difficulties: time, the number of students and the range of ability were identified as potentially posing difficulties.
- External pressures: lack of support from the government, although what support was required was unspecified, together with the current opposition of one union towards some aspects of student involvement were also highlighted as possible barriers.

What needs to be done?

The attitudes of the leaders, teachers and young people involved in this research were positive and encouraging while acknowledging the difficulties that they and others faced. All who contributed spoke with great enthusiasm about the benefits that they believed genuine student consultation had brought to their setting and urged others to seek to overcome any barriers which they encountered.

The role of the leadership team, and in particular, the head, was viewed as all-important. Providing the initial impetus, any necessary time, resources, financial commitment, training opportunities and both vocal and practical support were considered to be the given requirements without which success was unlikely.

Viewing genuine student involvement as a joint partnership between all parties involved was seen as an inclusive and positive step towards reducing the possible anxieties and concerns of teachers and overcoming potential student apathy or disinterest. Linked to this is the need for everyone to be able to witness the impact of the involvement and to experience the effects that their input has had. Outside recognition, perhaps in the form of accreditation, was viewed as helpful.

Finally, there was a belief that this was a great opportunity for collaboration between schools and that there was knowledge, skills and experience in some settings which could readily be shared with others to effect real and positive change for staff and students alike.

> As many teachers have found, it is not until you invite pupils to talk about their experiences of teaching and learning that you can understand how insightful their comments are. (Rudduck & McIntyre 2007: 13)

Recommendations

It seems clear from the literature review and from the evidence gathered as part of this research that the values and beliefs systems of the head, leadership team and of classroom teachers plays an immense role in determining whether student consultation is genuine and a force for real change or if it merely provides enough data to fill boxes on the school SEF. While recognising that it is unlikely to change the views and practice of a head or a teacher who has been in post a long time, who meets many of the requirements detailed in their job description but who is strongly opposed to any genuine student voice activity, there does seem to be some measures that could be introduced to effect change in the longer term.

Action for schools

It would seem most time efficient and productive for schools to identify the barriers which exist within their organisations and then to plan a strategy for overcoming them, although paradoxically one of the most effective ways of achieving this may well be through a variety of pupil voice and active research activities. The schools involved here felt that for them, student voice had evolved over time, and that as they had encountered barriers along the journey they then found ways of dealing with them. The barriers identified here and advice on how to overcome them should enable schools to identify their own potential barriers at an earlier stage and to design a systematic approach to meet them.

The overriding message was that there was a wealth of potential to be harnessed from genuine and effective consultation and involvement with the young people in our schools. Those schools who participated here, whose student population represented a range of geographical locations, ability levels and socioeconomic backgrounds, were in no doubt about the benefits that they had experienced and which they continued to experience, and they urged other schools to follow suit.

Initial teacher training (ITT)

Outlining the theory behind student consultation, developing the skills of trainee teachers and ensuring that it is embedded into the ITT programme and forms part of the qualification standards would help to create future schools where the attitudes of teachers and leaders are more receptive and able to involve students in their learning and in the running of their school.

National accreditation

Although some regional accreditation exists, usually organised with a local authority, there is currently no national award (such as the Healthy Schools or Investors in People) which schools can work towards and which might help to create standardisation beyond Ofsted scrutiny of the school SEF. National accreditation would help with the sharing of good practice and should provide opportunities for collaboration between schools that the leaders involved with this research called for. If this has government backing then it may also help to solve the potentially difficult situation which school leaders face when balancing opposing government and trade union rhetoric.

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