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pupil participation in improving a sense of  
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Phil Stringer, Maria Traill and Lee Culhane<sup>1</sup>

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The reports were completed between September 2009 and February 2010 and apply a wide range of research methodologies. They are not intended to be longitudinal research reports but they provide a snapshot of the views and opinions of the groups consulted as part of the studies. As these projects were time limited, the evidence base can be used to inform planning but should not be generalised across the wider population.

These reports reflect the views of the practitioners that undertook the research. The views and opinions of the authors should not be taken as representative of CWDC.

A new UK Government took office on 11 May. As a result the content in this report may not reflect current Government policy.

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# Using Participatory Action Research to Support Pupil Participation in Improving a Sense of Community in a Secondary School

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## Abstract

In 2007 specific guidance was issued to schools about the duty of staff to promote community cohesion (DCSF, 2007). An aspect of this concerns the extent to which pupils experience a sense of belonging to their school. 'Belonging' can be understood through the construct of a psychological sense of community. Research by McMillan and Chavis (1986) has identified four major components of sense of community, along with an index that can be used to survey this. This index, the Sense of Community Index- 2 (Chavis *et al.* 2008), was revised and administered to pupils in a large secondary school.

*Aims-* The research described in this report and supported by the Children's Workforce Development Council, identified a representative group of volunteer pupils to investigate the outcomes of a survey about the sense of community in the school. Data were collected using participatory action research (PAR). The research aimed to learn about the use of PAR itself.

*Method-* Following an initial recruitment meeting, eight data collection meetings were held, with the number of pupils attending ranging from zero to 14, with a typical attendance of four pupils. Recognising that pupils might need support to become action researchers, materials were prepared outlining the steps involved in action research. The co-researchers were also supported by discussion and a variety of forms to assist with their planning and record keeping. The intention was that the pupil co-researchers would gather information and ideas from their own tutor groups and return to a weekly research group that the lead researchers would facilitate. The group would use the tools its members brought to make an action plan to improve the sense of community in the school.

*Findings-* The research group demonstrated a good understanding of sense of community and a commitment to investigating it further, in particular identifying how to improve aspects of 'influence', 'membership', and 'fulfilment of needs'. At the same time, difficulties were encountered trying to maintain momentum with the pupils, leading to a decision to terminate this stage of the research and to refocus it. Ultimately, a significant outcome of this research concerns the circumstances that might allow PAR to flourish.

## Introduction

This report describes the work that was undertaken to develop a participatory action research (PAR) approach in a Hampshire secondary school. A full explanation of PAR will follow later but in essence, it involves an intention to change practice through researchers participating in a collaborative cycle of learning and action. This work forms one stage in a project that aims to investigate our pupil's sense of community.

It is significant to note that the senior author initiated the project and although the head teacher and staff in the school formally agreed to and supported the project, they did not commission it in response to a need that they had perceived. That said, the work reported here was initiated following a request from pupils. Taking the initiative in identifying a need that warrants researching is not unusual (McIntyre, 2008, p.8) but, as will be discussed later, in itself it may not guarantee commitment from participants, particularly with PAR.

The project had four stages, summarised in Appendix One and outlined here.

Stage one involved working with a focus group of pupils to develop an already existing Sense of Community Index (Sense of Community Index 2, [SCI-2] Chavis, *et al.* 2008). The members of the focus group, representing the five year groups in the school, were selected by an assistant head of year, and facilitated by the senior author. The group met on two occasions to review the SCI-2 and adapt it for use in an English secondary school.

The second stage consisted of trialling with one tutor group, and then administering the revised SCI-2 to just over one third of the school, producing a report for the school and discussing the findings of the report with senior staff.

The third stage involved participatory action research with a group of volunteer pupils, drawing upon the findings from the survey.

The fourth stage, which is currently in progress, arose from lessons learnt during the third stage and involves PAR with a small group of pupils who are using the work to fulfil the requirements of their GCSE Citizenship course.

The Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) practitioner-led research grant has supported the third and fourth stages but because of time scales and unforeseen developments such as changes in senior staff in the school, the work described in this report mainly concerns the third stage and, in particular, the use of PAR in a school.

The project was led by an educational psychologist (PS) with support from a psychology research associate (MT; based in Hampshire Educational Psychology Service's Research Unit) and, for stage three, a pupil participation officer (LC; employed by Hampshire County Council) and, of course, has relied upon the pupils and staff of the school concerned. Ethical approval for the project was received through Hampshire Children's Services research ethics and governance process and formally approved by the head teacher of the school.

## **Aims of the Project**

The initial aims of this project were to;

- establish and evaluate a process of working with a group of pupils to understand the results of the SCI-2
- plan and implement actions designed to enhance sense of community, participation, and community cohesion
- develop pupil skills in participatory action research
- establish a participatory approach that could be continued within the school and that could also be adopted by other schools.

The aims were based on the first stage of the project, where a focus group adapted the SCI-2. One of the points made by members of this group was that they are frequently asked to complete questionnaires and never get any feedback about what difference it has made. They said that they would like positive action to follow from the SCI-2 results.

As it transpired, when an attempt was made to recruit volunteer pupils to participate in researching sense of community and develop an action plan, we were collectively faced with the complications that can arise when conducting action research in a complex institution, such as a secondary school. The pupils involved in stage three were subsequently asked to reflect on the difficulties they experienced in attempting to carry out this research. The factors arising from their accounts are outlined later in this report; these factors caused us to change the aims of the project and adapt the methods and scope.

Specifically, we realised that we had been too optimistic about generalising our experience with the stage one focus group to the school population as a whole, and that we would need much more time than allowed by the requirements of the Practitioner-Led Research Programme. We therefore decided to view stage three as a distinct phase of the project, and focus our research on the process of involving pupils in PAR; what they think worked well, what did not work quite so well and what the school and external researchers could do to improve the process in order for work of this type to be successful in the future.

In addition, we have made use of our reflections and learning from stage three to take a different approach, which led to the fourth stage.

## Context

Our context comprises three main strands: community cohesion, psychological sense of community, and participatory action research. We will briefly outline each.

### *Community cohesion*

The Department for Children, Families and Schools (2007) has actively promoted the role of schools to engage in community cohesion. The duty also takes in the 'sense of belonging' to a school community, defined in the guidance (DCSF, 2007, p.3) as 'there is a strong sense of an individual's rights and responsibilities when in living in a particular place – people know what everyone expects of them, and they can expect in turn'. It is this aspect of community cohesion that this project focuses upon.

Of relevance, both in terms of community cohesion and also in how the project has developed, is the requirement from 2002 that schools in England teach citizenship in secondary schools. Amongst other things, citizenship studies are seen as encouraging pupils 'to develop a full understanding of their roles as citizens in a modern democracy'. (DfEE and QCA, 1999, p.4) Pupils can elect to undertake a short course GCSE in their final year, a major component of which is a collaborative assessed assignment that must involve advocacy and representation through what is in all but name, an action research process.

### *Psychological sense of community*

The psychological aspect of community cohesion and being an effective citizen is of particular importance to this project. Sarason (1974) is a community psychologist who became interested in 'psychological sense of community'. Although he was not writing necessarily with a school community in mind, the "ingredients" of psychological sense of community that he suggests can be seen as applicable to a school community as much as to any other community:

"The perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure – these are some of the ingredients of the psychological sense of community."  
(Sarason, 1974, p.157)

McMillan and Chavis (1986) have drawn upon Sarason's work and that of other authors. In their definition, sense of community is 'a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together' (p.9). They elaborated this definition according to four interdependent dimensions: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection.

At the same time as providing a theoretical account, Chavis *et al.* (1996) published the Sense of Community Index, as a way of measuring sense of community. More recently, Chavis *et al.* (2008) produced a revised version of this, the SCI-2, and it was this that was further revised, with the permission of Chavis, in the first stage of our work.

So far as we are aware the SCI-2 has not been used in a school community and the only study using the original SCI with adolescents has been carried out by Chipuer and

Pretty (1999). They concluded that sense of community is of relevance in regard to any discussion on emotional wellbeing and positive engagement within a community, such as a school.

### *Participatory Action Research (PAR)*

Since the work described in this report was an attempt to respond to the request of pupils, to do something about the results of the SCI-2 survey, it seemed fitting to follow a participatory action research method. McTaggart (1989) defines PAR as, '*an approach to improving social practice by changing it and learning from the consequences of change*'. (p.2, italics in original) The 16 tenets of PAR that he outlines include the quality and collaborative nature of participation, the learning and political processes involved, and the importance of starting work on minor changes, in small cycles with small groups.

There are a number of accounts of PAR with young people (for example, Kirshner *et al.*, 2002; Cammarota and Fine, 2008). Clark (2004) reports on the strengths and challenges of researching *with* children and young people, in particular to ensure that their participation is not tokenistic. She refers to Flutter and Ruddock's (2004) 'ladder of pupil participation': five rungs of participation that move from 'pupils not consulted' to 'pupils as fully-active and co-researchers' (p.6), an intention of our project.

Turning to how PAR is conducted, we have been influenced by McIntyre (2008). She suggests that there is no formula for the design, practice or implementation of PAR projects. Further, that there is no underlying theory that regulates the process: 'Rather, there is malleability in how PAR processes are framed and carried out' (p. 3). McIntyre emphasises that, 'PAR is a recursive process that involves a spiral of adaptable steps that include' questioning, reflecting, investigating, planning and implementing (p.6).

## Methodology

As already noted, this report is principally concerned with the third stage of a larger project, and followed from the revision of the SCI-2, its use to survey views of just over one third of the pupils in the school, and a report of that survey, discussed with senior staff in the school.

Mindful of McTaggart's (1989) 'start small' tenet, the plan agreed with senior staff was for the researchers to attend a meeting of the school's House Council, specifically convened so that we could recruit a representative group of pupils. The school has three Houses, with a number of tutor groups in each year group each belonging to a House. We wanted three pupils from each year group and House, so forming a group of at least 15 pupils.

We would then work with the pupils as co-researchers in analysing the results of the survey and making an action plan. We recognised that apart from being introduced to notions of inquiry in their lessons, the pupils would have little if any research experience. Accordingly, we saw it as a significant responsibility to support the pupils to become action researchers. We prepared materials outlining the steps involved in action research, along with a variety of forms to assist with planning and record keeping. The intention was that our co-researchers would gather information and ideas from their own tutor groups and return to a weekly group that we would facilitate.

The group would use whatever its members brought back, to make an action plan to improve the sense of community in the school. A timetable of weekly, lunchtime meetings was arranged. Given reliance upon form tutors, one of the authors (MT) attended a form tutor meeting to brief them about the project and the role of pupils.

It was decided to end the third stage of the research after about two months as the recruitment of volunteers did not go to plan as well as other contributory factors including the difficulties experienced by the volunteers (discussed below). A key lesson learnt was that the scope of the work needed to reduce further.

Through discussions with the mentor from CWDC and senior staff in the school, it was decided that we would start a fourth stage working with a small group of GCSE Citizenship pupils. The group used their assignment within the course to concentrate on one aspect of sense of community: influence. At the time of writing this report, this stage of work is still in progress. The group designed two questionnaires, one for pupils and one for staff, designed to investigate views about the role of influence in the school. They are currently part way through interviewing a sample of staff and leading structured discussions with a sample of pupils, with the aim of developing and implementing an action plan.



## Findings

This section will outline three sets of findings including; what happened during stage three, themes that were identified by the pupil researchers, and reflections on PAR.

### *What happened during stage three?*

Following the House Council meeting in early September 2009, the House Council representatives were asked to consider volunteering themselves, to talk about the proposed project in their tutor group and to encourage other pupils to volunteer. A date for an initial meeting had been arranged for lunchtime in the following week. Fourteen pupils attended this meeting, representative of every year group except year seven. A drawback of a lunchtime meeting was its brevity (about 35 minutes) but on balance the pupils thought that was better than after school because most had commitments then. Accordingly we arranged weekly meetings, usually on Wednesdays through the rest of the autumn term.

The initial meeting reminded the pupils why we were meeting, what we were aiming to achieve and introduced them to the key principles of action research. As a result of group discussion in the first two meetings, it was agreed that pupils would take the key themes from the SCI-2 (membership, fulfilment of needs, influence, and shared emotional connection) each week and ask their form groups what their understanding of the term was, how it could be seen within their school community, and what could be done to improve it.

Difficulties arose with pupils not attending the scheduled weekly meetings to feedback their findings and also with them not being given the time during tutor group time to speak with their peers, meaning that they had no information to share with the group. As a result, pupils became de-motivated and less inclined to attend the group. Reflections about attendance are further discussed below.

Overall eight meetings took place, with attendance of the original group of 14 ranging from none to seven, with a core regular attendance of four. By mid-November, it was clear that we were making little progress in terms of the original project aims and after discussion with the core group, with the deputy head teacher and CWDC mentor it was decided to end this stage of the work and refocus. This refocusing led to stage four and a continuation of the project with four pupils.

### *Themes that were identified during the PAR process*

Irrespective of difficulties in obtaining and representing the views of peers, those who attended the weekly meetings were forthcoming in what they understood about sense of community. What was important to them included identifying how to improve aspects of 'influence' (for example, more effective communication), 'membership' (for example, greater consistency between staff and pupils in following rules and 'reinforcement of needs' (for example, how pupil behaviour is rewarded). These findings have provided background for the Citizenship group.

### *Reflections on PAR*

In effect, we were unable to move beyond the PAR phase of questioning and reflecting upon sense of community and so the focus of the findings from this research will concentrate on the process of involving pupils in PAR; what they think worked well,

what did not work quite so well and what the school and external practitioners could do to improve the process in order for work of this type to be successful in the future.

A group discussion was conducted by MT in February 2010 with three of the pupils, girls in Year 8, who had been most consistent in attending project meetings. They were asked two stimulus questions and ensuring discussion led on to related topics that were important when considering how PAR could work in the future. The discussion was audio recorded and transcribed. Only single example quotes are provided here; supplementary quotes are provided in Appendix two.

The first question asked of the three girls was, 'What would you have liked to have done differently?' This generated a range of responses including;

- smaller tasks,
- more time to do the tasks,
- more meetings,
- more tasks covering different things, and
- a better understanding of what's happening in the school before starting a project like this.<sup>2</sup>

*I think that we should have had a bit more of a smaller task to do. Task one was okay, but when we moved on to task two barely anyone was able to do it, and I think they should have made it a bit smaller and cut it down into different tasks.*

Two of the pupils commented that they found it hard to complete the tasks that were agreed in the project meeting due to form tutors not giving them enough time to carry out the research. This led on to a discussion about teachers being present at the research meetings and how the pupils thought this worked. The consensus was that school staff should not be involved in the actual research meetings but that it was good to have external adults within the meetings.

*I don't think that the teachers should have come to the meetings because then we would have had more freedom of speech. I quite like [external adults] coming because we have greater freedom of speech and we're getting more confident in speaking out about what we think with you all there.*

During the discussions about teachers attending the meetings, issues were also raised about other pupils' attendance or lack of attendance at the group. Suggestions were put forward as to why attendance may have decreased and also how this could be prevented in the future.

*Well, like there's three of us here today from one form, so one of us will remember and we can remind the others, or if the teacher was reminded on the day of the meeting and then they could pass the reminder on to those who should be going, that would really help us.*

This led naturally into the next question that we wanted to ask the group, 'What could we have done differently to help you with the project?' All three pupils had suggestions about this, including;

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<sup>2</sup> All italics are direct quotes

- how the researchers could have initiated the project to ensure that a larger audience was reached,
- how the researchers could have broken the project up – making it easier to understand for all involved, and
- how the researchers could ensure better attendance at meetings.

*Putting the project forward, like I said, you could have come to assembly with simpler language and for putting it forward in the forms, well there's not a lot you could do about it, I mean you could come to each form but that would take a lot of work...you could have done that and come to the form and put it forward yourself so that all the information got through.*

There was also a discussion about the timing of the research meetings. These pupils thought that lunchtime was the best time although other options were raised, including break times, after school and extended tutor time. The general consensus from this was that form time/extended tutor time might have been a better option as pupils wanted to use break and lunch times to catch up with their friends.

*Maybe our meetings could have been held during break time, because having it at lunch usually people want to hang out with their mates, but if it was at break then it would be better...MT: Wouldn't we have the same problem though in that people would still want to hang out with their friends?... Yeah, but they would only miss 15 minutes of hanging out with their friends... I think you could have had the meeting after school, but then again you'd have to fit it around other people, but again there's only a couple of us who have taken part.*

The previous topic triggered discussions about how communication works within the school and a general view that messages are not always passed on by school staff to the pupils. Again these pupils were able to come up with some solutions to this problem.

*Couriers should be registered and then go down and see if there are any notices that need to be given for people telling them about a meeting at lunchtime they could personally deliver that note to the person during form time so then the teachers wouldn't forget"*

A general discussion followed about the nature of the project and what these pupils thought was missing that may have helped other pupils continue to attend, how the project could have been generally more successful, and how the researchers could have aided this process.

*I think to bring in more people, we could have talked about what we were going to do and then maybe we could have done something like a poster to stick around the school to advertise the project and so maybe more people would have wanted to get involved.*

The main findings from this discussion group (bearing in mind it was only three pupils) suggest that in order to encourage more pupils to attend;

- there should be more time before beginning the project to advertise the research
- project ideas should be discussed with the pupils attending

- they should be given the freedom to generate ideas on how the project will be carried out within the school
- researchers should involve pupils more actively within the research meetings; and
- ensure better communication between the project and school staff so that pupils are aware of meetings and can also carry out tasks when necessary.

### **Implications for practice**

From our perspective a number of elements contributed to us being unable to fulfil our initial aims. Although senior school staff in the school supported the project they had not directly commissioned it as part of their improvement plan, and in the face of competing priorities it was inevitable that our work would not be the highest. To a certain extent this was compounded by the arrival of a new head teacher who, understandably, required senior staff to focus energies on pressing concerns. From the outset, our expectations of the level of pupil interest and motivation were too high. Our introduction of the project and attempt to recruit volunteers at the initial House Council meeting overestimated what pupils understood about the purposes of the project, their potential role in it, and how they would circulate information about it to their peers. Then, following the House Council, we never had enough time with enough pupils to facilitate their becoming 'pupils as researchers' let alone '... fully active and co-researchers' (Clarke, 2004, p.6). A critical issue, however, will always be trying to find adequate time without taking pupils out of lessons or away from other regular commitments.

Through discussion with pupils and staff, we also became aware of a paradox: a pupil who might be drawn to our project tended already to have a strong sense of belonging to the school and to be active within the school community, with little time for extra commitments, even if they saw the point of our project. At the same time, we knew that we had not managed to recruit a representative sample of pupils from every House and year group.

Some of the actions and implications that follow include:

- a written contract with school staff that clarifies the aims of the project and agrees mutual expectations
- establish a reference group of staff committed to the larger project and to this particular stage of it
- simpler messages about the nature and value of the project communicated to all pupils and staff in a variety of ways: through writing, House assemblies, tutor groups, and (but not exclusively) the House Council
- identify incentives for volunteering, particularly to attract pupils who might not see themselves as wanting to get involved
- allow an extended period of time to build motivation and develop research skill before engaging in the action research element of the project
- ensure that pupils are enabled to carry out the research tasks that they have identified, for example, though offering support and mentoring
- ensure sufficient time for the pupil researchers to meet.

## Conclusions

This report has described a project that attempted to employ participatory action research with pupils in a secondary school to investigate and improve a sense of community within the school. We have outlined a number of reasons that meant our original aims were not fully met, although the project is continuing with a smaller, sharper focus. By its nature PAR is a 'process of "opening" our own eyes and seeing the world through different eyes, coupled with a desire to open other's eyes' (Cahill *et al.*, 2008, p.90). As researchers we have learnt by taking action, and recognising, if initially underestimating, the difficulties that we encountered in trying to involve pupils as researchers, our commitment to PAR is undiminished. We continue to be convinced that involving pupils as researchers is an essential activity as a key element in how children and young people learn to participate effectively in a community and grow into being active citizens in a democratic society.

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## Appendix One

**Table 1 Sense of Community Project in a Hampshire Secondary School**

Stage	Activity	Participants	Timescale	Outcome
One	Focus group to revise SCI-2	Representative group of pupils, deputy head teacher, Phil Stringer (PS), Maria Traill (MT)	February 2009	SCI-2 revised and piloted with one tutor group
Two	Use revised SCI-2 to survey a sample of the school population	537 out of 1542 pupils, form tutors, MT	May 2009	Survey completed, report written, feedback provided to school staff, discussion with deputy head teacher to plan follow-up, including bid for CWDC Practitioner-Led Research grant
Three (supported by the CWDC)	PAR to further investigate sense of community	Volunteer pupils as co-researchers with deputy head teacher, PS, MT, LC	September to November 2009	Revision of approach and scope
Four (supported by the CWDC)	PAR through GCSE Citizenship assessed assignment	Four Year 1 pupils, the school's head of PHSE, PS, MT	November 2009 to March 2010	Intended outcomes: completion of GCSE assignment; achieve aims of Practitioner-Led Research

## Appendix Two

### Supplementary findings from the discussion group, February 2010

<b><i>What would you have liked to have done differently?</i></b>
<i>It [task two] was too big to talk in one form time really, and if you tried to split up in different form times, you don't really get given that time by your form tutor, you only get given one form time and that's it, that's your time over.</i>
<i>Our form tutor kept on putting off what we had to do, so we weren't able to do the task so then we'd go back to the big meeting not having done what we should have done, so if we had more meetings then we might have got more done.</i>
<i>I think that we should have had more meetings and making the tasks shorter, but maybe that we could have had more tasks, different things we could have talked about like how the school runs, how the money in the system works so that we understood better what was already happening.</i>
<b><i>The role of teachers in the meetings</i></b>
<i>I think is like that when the teachers were there, you felt a bit under pressure to say what you needed to say, because if you said something wrong in front of the teachers...like the teachers will just be pushing you back saying no, no, no we're already doing this, but all we're doing is making a suggestion.</i>
<i>I think it's better if the other adults come along without the teachers because then we can say what we want and the teachers won't be there to take it the wrong way or anything like that.</i>
<b><i>Attendance at the meetings</i></b>
<i>I think that actually they're not really that bothered about the project, but also that a lot of the time people just forget about the meetings.</i>
<i>It made me feel that they weren't really bothered about the school...it was like they couldn't be bothered to come.</i>
<b><i>'What could we have done differently to help you with the project?'</i></b>
<i>When I first heard about it I didn't really understand what you were talking about because it took a while for me to get hold of what you were trying to say, so you should have put forward in a more simple way and made it easier for all ages.</i>
<i>Maybe instead of us taking notes [during the research meeting], like you printed the paper off and put bullet points down, but I think you should have done it on something that would fit in our planners, because having to remember to bring those big folders in every week is kind of hard...you could have had something that would fit in your planner, a clear envelope that you could put all your paper in that was A5 size to make it a bit easier.</i>
<b><i>The best time for meetings</i></b>
<i>I think that, like we're doing now, we do it during a registration period maybe once or twice a week, because then we'd get more people coming. (The discussion group took place during a registration period)</i>
<b><i>Difficulties over letting pupils know that a meeting is taking place</i></b>
<i>I think some teachers don't bother to read out notices so no one will get their note to say that there's a meeting going on.</i>
<b><i>Improvement suggestions</i></b>
<i>I think that half of the people don't come because they don't think it's cool and they think it's a bit boring and they want to hang out with their mates...but if they do come they could make the school better and maybe more people will come and help make the school better.</i>
<i>People don't really come because they don't think it's going to change anything, they think it's just like something that isn't really fun...I think they're not coming</i>



*because one person he said that to start with he was really into it, but now he's said that he just can't be bothered with it anymore, it's just boring sitting there talking the whole lunchtime.*

*I think that you should have made it more active...we were all sat and you were all writing on the board and we were just watching you...we could have gone into groups and made posters, made lists of what we think and work together as a small group before coming back as a big group, I think that would really help make it less boring.*

*The only reason that groups get boring is because we end up sitting and listening rather than doing stuff, so if we did more activities in the group more people would stay and take part.*

The Children's Workforce Development Council leads change so that the thousands of people and volunteers working with children and young people across England are able to do the best job they possibly can.

We want England's children and young people's workforce to be respected by peers and valued for the positive difference it makes to children, young people and their families.

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