

# Student Leadership and School Improvement

How can school leaders involve  
students in the school improvement  
process through developing students  
as researchers?

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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## Introduction

This paper describes action research undertaken to develop students as researchers, as part of a process of school improvement.

The key research questions were:

### How can school leaders:

- Develop approaches to student consultation, which support broader efforts at school improvement?
- Empower student to become leaders who influence school improvement?
- Ensure that all student voices are listened to.

## Research methods

Fifteen students received training on working as researchers, covering issues such as ethics, research methods and recording information.

To evaluate the effectiveness of this process, semi-structured interviews were conducted with these students before and after the action research was completed. Interviews were also conducted with senior leaders and other relevant staff to gain their views on the improvements secured through this work and the broader contribution that the student researchers made.

## Findings

### Impact on students

Students initially found conducting the research challenging, but soon settled into their role. All of the student researchers developed research skills as part of their involvement with the programme and this experience was valuable for their broader personal development. For instance, many students were more articulate and displayed greater confidence when relating their findings and recommendations to staff. The training and coaching received in support of their work as researchers was a major factor in this.

### Overcoming staff concerns

A staff working group was established to oversee this project and offer support to both staff and students. This group held a series of meetings to discuss the process and ultimately keep staff informed. Regular updates were also given to staff during briefings and via the staff newsletter.

Many staff had displayed unease over the project prior to its commencement, primarily because of doubts over the extent to which students would display objectivity in their judgements of staff performance.

However these concerns had quickly dissipated once the research began, largely as a result of the positive student behaviour. As one teacher commented:

*"I felt that the students were very professional in the way in which they conducted the research."*

This finding was consistent with work by MacBeath, (1999) who had observed the positive impact that increased responsibilities can have on student behaviour and the significant contribution students may make to school planning.

### Reflections on the quality of outputs from the research

The overwhelming response from staff was very positive. Staff responded positively to students sharing their findings, their learning and the skills they had developed through conducting the research. Many of the recommendations made by students on issues relating to the rewards presentation (which had formed the focus for the study) were accepted and a number of changes subsequently implemented. Students reported that this made them feel valued and empowered to conduct further research. Subsequent feedback confirmed that the reward presentation had indeed been enhanced by these changes, while a number of students went on to conduct further research into attitudes to learning and what enrichment activities would support learning.

## Key Issues which influenced the success of the Students as Researchers project

A number of factors emerged as significant in the overall success of the Students as Researchers project. These are summarised below.

### Student leadership

Student leadership lies at the heart of improving schools and enabling young people to realise their true potential. For instance Ruddock (2001) and Fielding (2002) have both noted how student participation can be a means through which students can support the school improvement process.

Student leadership can help to build essential skills such as motivation and confidence. A Students as Researchers project can also be used as a catalyst for students and staff to work alongside each other, which can be instrumental in establishing a true learning community, where staff and students learn together. This will enable trust to grow between staff and students, which helps to build effective relationships.

### Student representation

While many schools demonstrate a commitment to student representation, this often relies upon more 'traditional' mechanisms such as student councils, health, forum, peer mentors and peer counsellors. However, it may be argued that there is a danger that such approaches can establish a sub-set of 'chosen' students who may not necessarily represent the views and needs of all their peers and that some students effectively remain disenfranchised.

The findings indicate that schools may need to review the extent to which current formal mechanisms for student participation in decision-making encourage the participation of all students. The Students as Researchers programme represents one approach through which increased and enhanced student representation may be achieved.

### Sustainability

The extent to which schools are able to initiate a programme of students as leaders will of course depend upon its specific context. Therefore it is important for schools to firstly consider the capacity of staff and students to support this approach.

As with all such initiatives, the notion of students as researchers is likely to be most effective in instances where it is embedded into the wider school system rather than functioning as an 'add-on'.

Similarly this approach is likely to be most successful when it is initiated as part of a genuine drive to engage and understand student interests and not simply as a symbolic gesture. Many students will be quick to notice whether the school seems really interested in listening to their views, in which case this will often make them feel respected and help to raise their self-esteem, as well as providing valuable insight for the school.

## Recommendations for leaders implementing a Students as Researchers initiative

Based on the findings from this particular project, the following recommendations are made for leaders who wish to utilise the potential benefits of working in this way:

- Identify a clear champion for this work, ideally a senior leader in the school, who will actively manage and evaluate the process.
- Look to build this activity into the school's existing structures and processes rather than develop new mechanisms to support it.
- Allow adequate time for students to plan and conduct the research.
- Ensure students are adequately trained to undertake this work.

- Ensure that staff are aware of the motives for undertaking this work and any concerns they may have are addressed.
- Ensure that the focus for the work can make a positive impact on self-evaluation and the school improvement plan.

## References

Fielding, M, 2002, *Transformative approaches to student voice: Theoretical underpinnings, recalcitrant realities*, invited paper submitted to The McGill journal of education, special issue on 'Student engagement', Fall 2002

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