

Encouraging ‘pupil participation’; exploring school practices, benefits and challenges.

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Abstract

The requirement for schools to listen to pupils’ views on their education is now endorsed in both government policy and law. Researchers have found that young people have useful things to say about their education, and yet pupil participatory practices are not embedded in schools. Throughout this essay, Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation is used as a framework to consider the different levels of effective participation. School councils are a popular participatory practice in schools but are not always seen as an effective method of eliciting pupils’ views. Studies suggest that appropriate planning and a change of school ethos is key to their success. Research has also been conducted into how teachers engage pupils in giving feedback on teaching and learning. Findings indicate that individual differences amongst teachers can impact on their engagement in participation, and resulting practices can vary in the degree to which they would be considered participatory. The limited research into democratic schools highlights promising outcomes for their pupils but the prospect of similar approaches working in mainstream schools raises a number of challenges. This essay concludes that engaging in effective pupil participatory practices in schools has the potential to result in a range of positive outcomes. Policy makers and schools need to consider the degree of decision-making or influence they want to give to pupils. They may also require more training and guidance to make participatory practices effective. Educational Psychologists are well placed to support this process both at a whole school and policy level.

Encouraging ‘pupil participation’; exploring school practices, benefits and challenges.

The idea that pupils have a right to participate in decisions about their education was raised in the 1960s and 1970s by the ‘student power’ movement (Levin, 2000), however it has only been more widely considered and researched for a little under two decades. In 1989 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) formally acknowledged a child’s right to be heard. It states that any child who is capable of forming their views has the right to express those views in all matters affecting them (Unicef, 1989). Although it has been argued

that the UK was slow in its implementation of this principle, particularly in relation to education (Bahou, 2011, p. 3; Flutter, 2007, p. 345; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004), it has now been endorsed in both law and government policy.

Section 176 of the Education Act 2002 indicates that local authorities and schools should consult with pupils when taking decisions that affect them. Similarly, the Education and Skills Act 2008 requires school governing bodies to invite pupils to give their views on prescribed matters. The Department for Education (2014) has also produced guidelines on “listening to and involving children and young people.” This short document indicates that pupil voice relates to “listening to the views of pupils and/or involving them in decision-making” (Department For Education, 2014, p.2). It notes that this can support pupils to become active participants in a democratic society, and can contribute to their achievement and attainment (Department For Education, 2014). Bahou (2011, p.2) describes challenging the notion that “education is something that happens to people” and this view is echoed in government guidance (Department for children schools and families, 2008) which advocates pupils contributing to, and ultimately co-producing, decisions and services that affect them. Endorsements of pupil participation vary in their motivation; the UNCRC advocates it as a right, whereas government policy indicates the importance of active involvement in democracy, potential to impact on pupils’ attainment and to improve schools.

Although pupil participation is mandated, it is often observed that encouraging pupils to actively participate in schools and classrooms is far from engrained in the UK education system (McIntyre, Pedder, & Rudduck, 2005). Education policies and procedures, and subsequently demands on schools, are frequently updated and adjusted to suit the priorities of policy makers and politicians (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Whether a school is “high performing” is judged chiefly on the basis of exam results and those that fail to perform are criticised (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). With this in mind it can be hard to envisage where listening to pupils fits in.

The research community has embraced exploring young peoples’ views and there is now a wide breath of “pupil voice” studies, including those based on education. Although these can offer insights and guidance for schools and teachers, this essay will be primarily focussed on pupils’ day to day involvement in decision making processes in the school environment.

In this essay I will discuss what is meant by the term ‘pupil participation’ and explore a range of methods by which participatory practices can be embedded in schools including: school councils, teacher and learning feedback and democratic schooling. The potential benefits and challenges related to achieving effective pupil participation will be considered throughout, and I will conclude by examining implications for Educational Psychologists.

What is participation?

As outlined above there is some agreement that listening to children’s views regarding education is of value but there is disparity between the terms used to describe this process. Previously the favoured term was ‘pupil voice’, however a number of researchers have noted the limitations implied by such a term. As Fielding (2007, p. 306) notes “voice has too much

about it that smacks of singularity, of presumed homogeneity” and he argues for a move to “a more participatory form of engagement”. Concerns such as these have led researchers to opt for alternative terms such as “pupil consultation” and “pupil participation” to reflect a more active role on the part of the pupil (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). It is beyond the remit of this essay to offer any in depth analysis of these terms, and so the terms “pupil consultation” and “pupil participation” will be used interchangeably throughout, and will be taken to mean a range of interactions by which schools or teachers seek pupils’ perspectives. Concerns regarding the nature of pupil engagement are not new and a number of theorists have put forward typologies of participation (Fielding, 2001; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Shier, 2001) in order to explore the varying levels in which children can participate and the degree to which decision-making power is shared with them (Mager & Nowak, 2012). A popular model, and one that subsequent models are often based on, is Hart’s (1992) “Ladder of Participation”.

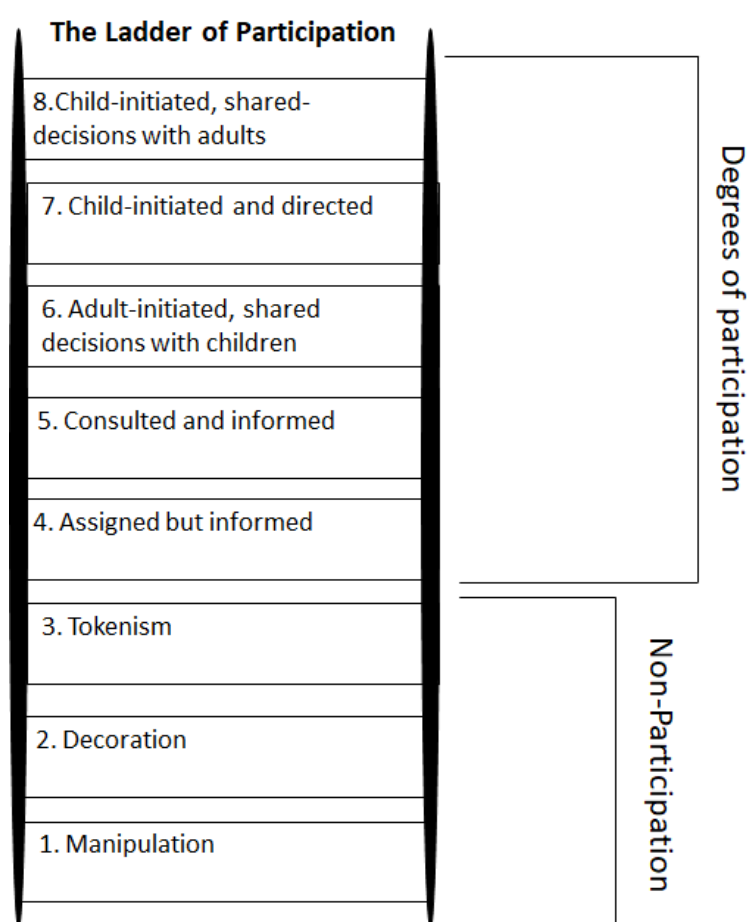


Figure 1. Illustration of Hart’s (1992) “Ladder of Participation”.

The bottom three rungs of the ladder identify when children’s views are sought and yet the methods are considered non-participatory. These levels can be used by practitioners to identify when attempts to involve pupils have been limited (Shier, 2001). Manipulation is at the lowest point of the ladder; Hart notes this includes situations where children’s views are sought but they receive no feedback and their views are ultimately judged, and evaluated, by adults. Decoration describes where children are used to support a cause they know nothing about, adults do not pretend that the children advocate or understand the reason for their

involvement but allow them to indirectly promote the cause. A tokenism approach is where children are seen to be given a voice but in reality have little choice over the subject matter and aren't really given opportunities to voice their own opinions (Hart, 1992).

The top five rungs of the ladder describe the different degrees to which pupils can be active participants. The "ladder" analogy is somewhat misleading and it is important to note that Hart does not subscribe to the view that all pupil involvement should fall on the highest rung of the ladder. Rather, he acknowledges that a number of factors, including the pupils' ages, abilities and nature of the initiative, will all have an impact on the degree to which pupils are able to participate. As we move through the top five rungs the degree to which pupils make decisions over, and ultimately initiate ideas varies. At these levels pupils' views are more valued and respected. Participation can vary from projects which are designed by adults, but informed by children, all the way to the top of the ladder where ideas are child-initiated. At the highest rung, traditional roles are almost reversed, pupils have the idea and lead on the project and invite adults to engage in the decision making process.

School councils

Although schools have a responsibility to ensure that pupils are consulted in decisions affecting them the methods they use to consult them is discretionary. A popular method is having a school council. In 2007, it was estimated that 95% of schools had a school council, with a slightly higher percentage of these being present in secondary schools (Whitty & Wisby, 2007a). Baginsky and Hannam (as cited in Burnitt & Gunter, 2013, p.56) define a school council as "a body which draws together pupils/students to discuss what is happening in their school and, to a varying degree, consider their views on these matters". This definition indicates how easily school councils can fall on the non-participatory rungs of Hart's ladder if pupils are encouraged to develop views but these are not then considered by adults.

A number of studies have noted that school councils do not always equate to enhanced rights for pupils (Burnitt & Gunter, 2013; Wyse, 2001). In 2001, Wyse produced case studies of two secondary schools, he found that school councils in these schools sat on the tokenistic rung of Hart's ladder. School councillors did not feel listened to, the issues they raised were not acted on upon and there was no evidence of effective lines of communication with other pupils or school staff. As this study only concerns two schools these findings cannot be considered to be generalisable.

Whitty and Wisby's 2007 study (Whitty & Wisby, 2007b) also identified factors associated with ineffective school councils. These included: lack of clear rationale for the school council, not considering whether the school was ready for a school council and not addressing staff reservations regarding pupil voice. They indicated that in order to be effective, pupils may require training about the role of council members. Researchers have raised concerns that if school councils offer pupils purely tokenistic opportunities to share views this can lead to a sceptical view of democracy, and ultimately, do more harm than good (Alderson, 2000; Burnitt & Gunter, 2013).

In order for school councils to be effective, it is useful for them to have a defined role, to work within boundaries which are understood by both pupils and staff and to occupy a distinctive position in the school (Cotmore, 2004). It is also important to consider how best to engage pupils. In the case of younger pupils, traditional 'adult' methods of eliciting views may be inappropriate due to pupils' age and experiences, and may inhibit pupils from giving their views. Cox and Robinson-Pant (2005) found that using visual communication strategies were particularly suitable for primary school children.

A concern regarding the demographic of school councils was also raised by Whitty and Wisby (2007b), who indicated that school councils may disproportionately attract pupils from more advantaged backgrounds, leaving the views of a proportion of the pupil population under-represented. This opinion was mirrored by some of the students consulted by Morgan (2009) who felt people "like them" weren't always represented by council members. The potential for bias may be exacerbated by certain selection processes for electing council members, for example Iliasov, Thompson, & Gwanzura-Ottmoller (2010) found that, in Scotland, most school council members were self-nominated.

Whilst studies highlight some potential pitfalls of school councils, there is an indication that, if embedded in the school, councils can be empowering. Research has indicated that school councils should be regarded as just one component of overall provision for pupil voice (Whitty & Wisby, 2007a), and a wider ethos of pupil participation should be encouraged (Davies, Williams, & Yamashita, 2005).

Harber and Trafford (1999) researched two schools which had undergone the process of moving to a 'democratic approach', one of which was an English grammar school. They note that while there was a general change of school ethos, the biggest structural change was the introduction of a school council. Pupils' views were seen to be considered and respected by adults and this move had left pupils feeling empowered and valued. They also noted an improvement in exam results and, although unable to confirm causation, felt the increased motivation of the pupils was a likely contributory factor. However, this research was conducted by the headteacher of the said school and therefore findings need to be considered with this potential bias in mind.

Davies et al. (2005) compiled case studies from seven schools across England as part of a project commissioned by two trusts with interests in pupil participation. Schools encouraged pupil participation in a variety of ways. For each of them this included, but was not limited to, a school council. In these case studies, school councils were given opportunities to directly influence school policies and they also had methods to elicit the views of the wider school population. Pupils and teachers across the schools provided anecdotal evidence regarding their perceived impact of pupil participation. Pupils said they felt the experience of participation projects gave them confidence and increased their self-esteem. They also improved pupils' relationships with teachers and led to improved teaching practices. One school conducted a small piece of in-house research and found a link between pupils' involvement in decision making and academic achievement. This finding needs to be interpreted with caution as no details regarding methodology have been published.

Studies indicate that school councils can have an empowering effect on pupils (Harber & Trafford, 1999) and may have the potential to impact on self-esteem, motivation and attainment whilst offering opportunities for school improvement (Davies et al., 2005). However, they also provide words of caution and urge schools to appropriately plan for school councils, Whitty and Wisby (2007a, p. 100) note that schools “need to see pupil voice as integral to the success of their work, rather than an unwelcome or superfluous ‘add on’”.

Feedback on teachers and learning

Another, less common, method of pupil participation involves engaging pupils in decisions or feedback regarding teaching and learning and the curriculum. Whitty and Wisby (2007a) found that only 7% of the 2,417 pupils who completed the 2007 MORI School Omnibus Survey had been involved in decisions around teaching and learning and the curriculum.

McIntyre, Pedder and Rudduck (2005) worked with six teachers across three secondary schools. Researchers invited six pupils per teacher to give their feedback on more and less helpful learning opportunities. Transcripts of these interviews were fed back to teachers who were asked to give initial feedback on the process and delayed feedback was sought after a six month period to gauge any lasting impact on their practices. Teachers were generally very positive about the pupils’ feedback and found they had constructive and sensible ideas. It was found that teachers were somewhat selective regarding the attention they gave pupils’ suggestions and, perhaps understandably, they were more inclined to respond to suggestions which were consistent with their existing repertoire of skills. Although unexplored by the authors, there is a concern that, without appropriate feedback to pupils, this may have a negative impact on pupils’ views of how their opinions are used.

Teachers varied in their long term responses to feedback. Despite initial enthusiasm, two junior teachers found that competing priorities limited their ability to act upon pupils’ suggestions. Other teachers embraced the experience and began to use pupil consultation practices independently, finding great benefit in doing so and planning to embed these practices in their teaching. Interestingly, when one teacher tried to undertake a whole-class consultation, this was unsuccessful and researchers noted the emphasis was on pupils to plan and manage this activity. As Hart (1992) cautions, pupils may lack experience of how to manage participatory opportunities at the highest rungs of the ladder, and teachers need to ensure consultation is pitched at a level appropriate for the age and experiences of their pupils.

Thompson (2009) conducted a similar study with twenty secondary school teachers. Teachers were encouraged to develop methods of receiving written feedback from their pupils and researchers followed-up on their progress one year later. In line with the findings of McIntyre et al., Thompson also found that teachers varied in their responses to this opportunity. They similarly found that three relatively new teachers, although recognising value in obtaining pupils’ views, did not necessarily feel pupils’ feedback would be reliable and felt that their ability to respond to pupil feedback was restricted by time, energy or other competing priorities. Again, consistent with McIntyre et al., some teachers encouraged a wide range of

feedback from pupils and responded by proactively amending their practice in line with these views. Teachers in this category expressed a desire to work in partnership with pupils. Their methods sought to empower pupils, and in return, pupils felt changes had had positive impacts on their learning. In comparison, other teachers felt the process of asking pupils' views was more important than actively responding to them, and on this basis the feedback they sought was structured and left little room for pupil initiated ideas. It is worth noting that the teachers in this study taught a range of subjects and there was little discussion regarding how opportunities to participate may differ depending on the nature of the subject e.g. between artistic subjects such as drama and expressive arts and subjects less open to interpretation such as maths and science.

Both McIntyre et al and Thompson's studies explore a number of barriers to pupil consultation. Competing pressures and perhaps lack of confidence on the part of teachers may lead to teachers not engaging in consultation but can also heighten the risk of activities becoming non-participatory.

In both McIntyre et al and Thompson's studies, teachers engaged in pupil consultation with the encouragement or support of the researchers. Morgan's (2011) study investigated four teachers' methods for consulting pupils at a school that had already made a commitment to pupil consultation at a whole-school level. Results were surprising, as they indicated that for three out of the four teachers, pupil consultation was "low in priority"; a commitment at whole school level did not appear to have translated into classroom practices. In line with previous research (McIntyre et al., 2005; Thompson, 2009), Morgan (2011) also identified a number of factors which impacted on teachers' ability to consult with pupils, these included: amount of time available to plan, implement and complete the consultation, level of support given by heads of department and competing priorities and responsibilities, such as examinations and curriculum issues.

She did however also identify key factors which helped enable one teacher to consult with pupils. This teacher was more open to suggestions, she identified a key focus which elicited specific feedback and the pupils were willing to cooperate with the activities. She timed her consultation so as to enable appropriate analysis of ideas, as well as time for feedback to the pupils and follow-up consultations. Interestingly, Morgan (2011) also considered wider factors that might impact on teachers' practices. She felt the role the Senior Management Team played was important and suggested it would be beneficial for them to set out a system for teacher-pupil consultation. Morgan concludes that although the government advocates pupil consultation, the competing demands on teachers and schools can make it difficult for them to implement these ideas in practice.

Through these studies, it was observed that pupils are enthusiastic about consultation (Morgan, 2009) and they tend to offer consistent and constructive feedback with a focus on learning (McIntyre et al., 2005). Pupils appreciate being consulted and small steps taken by teachers to listen to pupils' views can have a big impact on pupils (Morgan, 2009).

It is worth noting that the degree to which pupils could articulate their views was identified as

a potential barrier (McIntyre et al., 2005) and schools would need to consider how to ensure methods of eliciting pupils views are accessible by all pupils.

The studies explored offer interesting insights into the benefits and barriers experienced by teachers engaging in pupil consultation but given the small-scale nature of the studies, it is difficult to generalise these findings. They do however indicate that individual differences appear to account for some of the teachers' differences in their perceived ability and their willingness to respond to pupils' feedback. For teachers within the same school, or even the same department, responses to opportunities for pupil participation can vary greatly. For some, this became a natural part of the teaching process, whereas for others, barriers resulted in limited or no pupil consultation. It is likely that participants volunteered to be part of the study due to an interest in pupil participation and less motivated teachers may face additional barriers. It would be interesting for research to further explore internal and external factors which help to enable engagement in pupil consultation. Research could investigate what kind of support, e.g. external training or supervision sessions, is most beneficial to teachers who wish to develop their pupil consultation skills. Longitudinal research, whereby teachers views of pupil participation and the methods they use to gather pupil's views are sought at points throughout the school year would help to establish what factors may impact on the maintenance of pupil participatory practices.

Democratic schools

There is a view that pupil participation and consultation should not just form part of an approach to schooling but rather be *the* approach to schooling and this has led to the development of aptly named "democratic schools". A general internet search suggests there are fewer than 10 such schools currently active in the UK, but that democratic schools are somewhat more popular across the USA, Canada and Australia, although an absence of official data means that these estimates are speculative. One UK example is "Summerhill" a school founded on the belief that children can guide their own development and should have equal rights of say with adults (Cassebaum, 2003). Cassebaum visited the school in 2003 and observed a "real sense of community" and responsibility in its pupils. The most recent Ofsted report (2011) mirrors these feelings and found that pupils had exceptionally positive attitudes to their school life. They assessed the school as good or outstanding in all areas. However, Summerhill has been the subject of much controversy. For example, in 1999, the government sought its closure due to concerns about pupils not attending lessons. Although the government was ultimately overruled in court, there are ongoing concerns about the impact of giving pupils so much freedom. For example, in 2016 only 18% of pupils achieved grade C or better in GCSE English and Maths, compared to the national average of 59.3%.

Gray & Chanoff (1986) explored the career outcomes for pupils who attended Sudbury Valley School, a democratic school in America. They found no negative effects on pupils' life outcomes and pupils went on to attend a range of colleges and work in a range of professions.

There are significant issues generalising findings relating to democratic schooling, not least because the number of research studies is extremely limited. Student populations at both

Summerhill and Sudbury Valley are small, with less than 100 pupils on roll, and both schools are privately funded, thus attracting a certain sub-section of the national populations. This leaves a number of unaddressed variables which may be contributing to students' views and outcomes.

Democratic approaches to schooling, perhaps uniquely, offer opportunities for pupils to participate on the highest rungs of Hart's ladder and the limited body of research indicates potential positive effects on pupils. However, limits on the research make it difficult to establish any firm links between democratic schooling and the potential impact on later-life outcomes, and the opportunities for further research remain slim.

It is difficult to establish how democratic schooling could, or would, work in large mainstream schools and the essence of an approach which advocates pupils choosing whether to attend lessons is at odds with the fundamental values of the UK education system. The desirability of democratic schools is also debatable, and it could be argued that pupil participation should be conducted in moderation and that "pupils shouldn't dictate how schools are run" (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004, p. 16).

Conclusion and implications for Educational Psychologists (EPs).

There is evidence that pupils enjoy being consulted (Davies et al., 2005; Morgan, 2009) and beyond that, have useful things to say (McIntyre et al., 2005). Therefore at the most rudimentary level, EPs have a role to play in allaying schools' reservations towards pupil participation by providing those in education with insights into children's capacity and ability to participate in decisions that affect them (Lundy, 2007).

From exploring different practices, it is argued that no one method is best-placed to support pupil participation, and each comes with potential pitfalls. Arguably "the key issue is how schools can embed pupil voice in their culture and ethos" (Whitty & Wisby, 2007a, p. 97). For pupil participation to be effective, schools need to consciously consider why they are introducing it and appropriately plan initiatives (Cotmore, 2004; Morgan, 2011). Both policy makers and schools also need to consider to what extent they want to allow pupils to make decisions about their schooling and design practices to match their positions appropriately. Pupil participatory practices at the highest end of Hart's (1992) ladder give pupils the potential to challenge dominant views and disrupt school practices, consequences that may not always be welcomed (Whitty & Wisby, 2007b). With these considerations in mind, teachers and schools may need further help and guidance to organise and structure the establishment of effective pupil participation (Whitty & Wisby, 2007b). With the move towards traded services, many schools have greater freedom over how to use EP time (Lee & Woods, 2017) and a project around establishing pupil participation in a school could be viable. EPs are well placed to help schools put in place structures to support increasing pupils' involvement in decisions. They can also act as an external check to ensure the quality of initiatives can enable true participatory opportunities.

As many researchers conclude, although the government advocates pupil consultation the

competing demands on teachers and schools make it hard to establish how they are meant to implement these ideals in practice (Morgan, 2011) and there is a concern that government attitudes towards education can create barriers to pupil participation. In order to firmly establish a precedent of participatory practices in schools, schools need clear guidance on what type of pupil participation to encourage, how to put this into place and any potential pitfalls to avoid. EPs could conduct further research to establish what level of pupil participation is most desirable. It is vital that schools know how best to balance giving pupils increased capacity for decision-making and autonomy over their learning with maintaining a level of control and oversight to ensure pupils can fulfil their academic potential.

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