

# ENGAGING WITH PUPILS: LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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## INTRODUCTION

Engaging with pupils involves listening to pupils about issues that matter to them and that affect their experiences in school. This unit focuses on outlining ways in which adults in schools can engage with pupils, and the benefits of this for both teachers and pupils. Within the unit, we start by considering the terms used when referring to pupil engagement work, we consider the importance of building mutually respectful teacher-pupil relationship, and identify ways in which teachers can engage with those they teach. We draw attention to how implementing strategies focused on engaging with pupils can make learning more meaningful for pupils and, as a result, improve the learning and experiences of children and young people in schools.

## OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit you should:

- understand the terms 'pupil engagement', 'pupil voice' and 'pupil participation';
- be familiar with school practices that promote engaging with pupils;
- be aware of the benefits of engaging with pupils for both teachers and pupils;
- understand how to engage with pupils within your school, with a view to making lessons more meaningful and enhancing pupils' enjoyment of lessons.

## **PUPIL VOICE, PUPIL PARTICIPATION, AND PUPIL ENGAGEMENT: WHAT DO THESE TERMS MEAN?**

You are likely to come across the terms 'pupil engagement', 'student engagement' and 'learner engagement', as well as pupil, student, and learner 'voice' and 'participation'. Each of these terms broadly relates to the move to consult pupils and provide opportunities for pupils to voice their opinions about matters which concern them and that affect their learning and other school experiences.

The term 'pupil voice', often used synonymously with the terms 'student voice' and 'learner voice' (Robinson and Taylor, 2007) refers to working with pupils to elicit their perspectives on matters relating to any aspect of school life. It is about teachers and other adults in schools wanting to learn from pupils about their experiences, and providing opportunities for pupils to express their views. In extreme cases, if schools were to fully embrace pupil voice work, this would result in schools being run in a democratic way with pupils' voices holding equal weight to those of the adults in the school. In such cases, staff and pupils would have a shared responsibility for the development of all practices and policies within their school.

According to Flutter and Rudduck (2004), 'pupil participation' implies the inclusion of pupils within a community in which they are respected contributors and have an active and direct involvement in school matters. The notion of participation suggests that pupils are invited to contribute to decision making processes, often as part of an institution-driven agenda, but they are not active participants in all school decision making arenas. Other definitions of pupil participation, strongly resonate with the above definition of pupil voice. For example, the Welsh Government's Good Practice Guide to Pupil Participation defines pupil participation as 'developing a culture in schools where all children and young people have a voice and have the opportunity to play an active role in decisions that affect their learning and well-being' (Welsh Government, 2011, 7).

The term 'pupil engagement' commonly has two meanings attributed to it. It can refer to the excitement and investment a pupil feels towards an aspect or issue that is of interest to them (Cheminais, 2008). However, it can also relate to pupils being active partners in shaping their experiences of school. Similar to the notion of pupil voice work, pupil engagement in this latter sense is concerned with developing positive teacher-pupil relationships and with listening to individual and collective perspectives about matters which relate to their experiences of school, including issues of teaching and learning - this work may be the outcome of institution-driven or pupil-driven agendas (Robinson, 2012).

For the purpose of our work in this unit, the term 'pupil engagement' will be used to relate to measures taken by teachers to develop positive teacher-pupil relationships; to increase awareness of the types of work and ways of working which interests, motivates and challenges pupils; and to encourage pupils to voice their opinions and become involved in school decision-making processes. We will focus in particular on the importance of engaging with pupils in relation to their experiences of learning and teaching in school.

## **LEGISLATION PROMPTING PUPIL ENGAGEMENT WORK IN SCHOOLS**

The increasing importance placed on engaging with and listening to the voices of children and young people has stemmed from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989). In particular, Part 1 of Article 12 of the UNCRC which states:

State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely on all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Part 1 of Article 12, therefore, comprises two key elements - the right for children and young people

to i) express their views, and ii) have their views be given due weight (Lundy, 2007, 927). It gives children the right to freedom of opinion and the right to be heard and take part in decisions that affect them; this was a major factor which contributed to the positive recognition of practices which support listening to and engaging with pupils in schools.

Following the UNCRC, in 1991 Fullan posed the question 'What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered?' (Fullan, 1991, 170). At this time, the notion of taking pupils' opinions into account was relatively new for most teachers, however, this idea, coupled with the implications of the UNCRC, served to open up spaces for consideration to be given to how the whole school community might benefit through listening to the voices of the pupils within them.

In recent years, although educational reforms within England have largely focused on raising pupils' measurable academic achievements and school performance, there have also been a number of acts and reforms that have recognised and promoted the importance of engaging with pupils. For example, the 2002 Education Act (DfES, 2002) required that schools consult with pupils; the 2003 Department for Education and Skills (DfES) document *Working Together: Giving Children and Young People a Say* provided guidance on pupil participation; and the 2004 *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* legislation (DfES, 2004) provided a national framework for ways in which public services could work together to bring about improved outcomes for children, young people and families; central to this was the view that all children should have a say in decisions affecting their lives.

In 2007, the voices and views of children and young people informed the government's *Children's Plan* (DCSF, 2007); and in 2008, *Working Together: Listening to the Voices of Children and Young People* (DCFS, 2008) made specific reference to the UNCRC and stated that schools should ensure the views of children and young people are 'heard and valued in the taking of decisions which affect them, and ... are supported in making a positive contribution to their school and local community' (DCFS, 2008, 5). More recently, statutory guidance *Listening to and involving children and young people* (DfE, 2014) asserted that schools are 'strongly encouraged to pay due regard to the convention' and that local authorities and maintained schools should have regard to the guidance when 'considering how best to provide opportunities for pupils to be consulted on matters affecting them or contribute to decision-making in the school'.

In addition to these legislative document, regulations relating to teachers' standards have implications for the extent to which teachers prioritise engaging with pupils. For example, teachers are more likely to engage with pupils if this is an aspect of their practice on which they are judged or graded. In September 2012, new *Teachers' Standards* (DfE, 2012) were introduced, these set a clear baseline of expectations for the professional practice and conduct of teachers from the point of qualification, and apply to the vast majority of teachers regardless of their career stage. These standards are used to assess all trainees working towards Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), teachers completing their statutory induction period, and the performance of all teachers, subject to the Education (School Teachers' Appraisal) (England) Regulations 2012.

Within these new *Teachers' Standards*, a teacher must 'Set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge pupils' (DfE, 2012, 7), and 'manage classes effectively, using approaches which are appropriate to pupils' needs in order to involve and motivate them' (DfE, 2012, 9). Therefore, implicit within these standards is the expectation that teachers will have built positive relationships with pupils, gained insights into individual pupils' interests, capabilities and preferred ways of learning, and be aware of, and understand, the sort of work and activities which are most likely to inspire, motivate and challenge pupils.

The recent Ofsted *Common Inspection Framework* (Ofsted, 2015) reinforces the requirement for teachers to understand the needs of pupils and, one of the areas on which school inspections now focus when evaluating the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, is the extent to which teachers, practitioners and other staff 'have a secure understanding of the age group they are

working with and have relevant subject knowledge that is detailed and communicated well to children and learners' (Ofsted, 2015, 13).

#### Task 7.1.1

#### **WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO ENGAGE WITH PUPILS?**

Imagine a classroom in which teachers teach only what they think learners ought to know, where there is no space for pupils to ask questions or voice opinions on areas of interest to them, where pupils are not encouraged to learn through discovery, where teacher-pupil relationships are not positive, and where pupils are simply passive recipients within a process. Alternatively, imagine a classroom in which teacher-pupil relationships are based on mutual respect, where pupils feel listened to and valued as individuals, where teachers want to know what interests and motivates the pupils, and where pupils feel confident about taking responsibility for aspects of their learning; – a school in which pupils are encouraged to participate in assessing their work and setting future goals and where they feel a sense of belonging to the classroom and the wider school.

Of the two situations described above, in which of these would you expect pupils to thrive? Why?

#### **HOW CAN ENGAGING WITH PUPILS BE OF BENEFIT TO THEM?**

Children tend to enjoy school more when they are listened to and their views are taken seriously, when they are treated with respect and when they feel valued and included. Findings from research reported in the Cambridge Primary Review Research Report (Robinson, 2014, 5-6) indicate that positive pupil-teacher relationships are a significant factor in contributing to primary pupils' enjoyment of school and, where such relationships dominate in schools, this contributes to pupils feeling a sense of security within the school. DfE statutory guidance for schools (DfE, 2014) also outlines that the involvement of children and young people in school decision-making encourages pupils to become active participants in a democratic society, contributes to the achievement and attainment of pupils, promotes increased confidence, self-respect, competence and an improved sense of responsibility in pupils, and increases motivation and engagement with learning.

Flutter and Rudduck (2004, 7–8), report on findings from Jelly *et al.* (2000), who consulted pupils in a special needs school and found clear evidence that consulting pupils about their learning enhanced self-esteem and confidence, promoted stronger engagement and motivation to learn and encouraged pupils to become more active members of the school community. Similarly, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007, 152) found that pupil consultation tends to enhance pupils' commitment to, and capacity for, learning through strengthening self-esteem, enhancing attitudes towards school and learning, developing a strong sense of membership and developing new skills for learning. Furthermore, where pupils are actively involved in contributing to discussions and decisions about teaching and learning, the leads to them developing a deeper understanding of learning processes and promotes the development in higher order thinking skills (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004).

#### **ENGAGING WITH PUPILS: VIGNETTE 1**

An experienced year 4 class teacher in a primary school in the south west of England worked with a group of five pupils who she had identified as struggling with some aspects of learning in mathematics. The teacher invited these pupils to meet with her for 20-30 minutes over two lunch times and, rather than going over the aspects of mathematics these pupils found challenging and trying to reinforce learning, she engaged them in conversations which focused on their perspectives of what they considered would help their learning in mathematics. Pupils identified that, for them, learning was least likely to take place when teachers stood at the front of the class and described

mathematical processes – ‘It just doesn’t sink in, I need someone to sit with me when I do it and show me how to do the bits I don’t understand’ (year 4 pupil). Pupils also indicated that they were too embarrassed to say in front of the whole class that they didn’t understand something, and that learning took place more readily when they had opportunities to work on a one-to-one basis with a teaching assistant or with competent older pupils. As a result of listening to pupils’ views, the class teacher introduced a weekly lunch time mathematics club. An open invitation was given to pupils in years 5 and 6 to act as ‘maths buddies’, and those who volunteered tended to be some of the stronger mathematicians within these classes. The outcome was that the year 4 pupils struggling with some aspects of mathematics made significant improvements in their confidence and achievement in mathematics. These pupils also commented that they felt valued by their teacher as their suggestion about what would help their learning had been listened to and implemented.

## **HOW CAN ENGAGING WITH PUPILS BENEFIT TEACHERS?**

Listening to pupils’ views, considering their needs and interests, and involving them as active participants in their learning and other school activities can help schools to become learning communities, rather than knowledge factories, that serve the needs of the majority of the pupils within them (Busher, 2012).

Bragg and Fielding (2005) found that pupils can give valuable feedback to teachers in relation to their learning and this in turn can inform teachers’ future practice. Where pupils’ views are heard on teaching and learning issues, teachers can gain an insight into pupils’ perspectives on what helps and what hinders their learning. Finding out about pupils’ perspectives of their school experiences, including learning, may take you outside of your comfort zone in terms of the sort of dialogue you want to engage in with pupils. The outcomes, however, can be hugely beneficial through increasing your awareness of the learning needs of those you teach, and this can be of great help when analysing and reflecting on your own practices (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004). Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) found that consultations with pupils can lead to improved teacher awareness of pupils’ capacities for learning, and can help teachers gain new perspectives and a renewed excitement about their teaching.

A further benefit of engaging with pupils is that a more collaborative relationship between teachers and pupils tends to develop and, the better you are able to understand pupils, the more effective your teaching and their learning will be.

Creating listening classrooms can support teachers to identify factors that help pupils’ learning and enjoyment of learning, as well as to identify factors that create barriers to learning and that lead to negative school experiences. Practices that support pupil engagement, therefore, have the potential to transform teacher-pupil relationships and lead to improvements in teachers’ practices through teachers learning from pupils about how they can make learning and other school experiences more meaningful for pupils.

### **ENGAGING WITH PUPILS: VIGNETTE 2**

A year six teacher from a primary school in the north of England shared her experience of how listening to comments from one pupil in her class changed the way she approached question and answer sessions with the class. This teacher quoted one year six pupil to illustrate her point:

‘Miss, when you ask us questions, like what the answer to something is in maths science, you ask different people until you get the right answer, and then you go on to the next question. But that doesn’t really help us - just because someone has said the right answer that doesn’t mean that the rest of us understand why it’s the right answer, so we never actually learn that’.

This simple comment by one pupil prompted this teacher to reflect on her teaching and to include more in-depth explanations in future lessons during question and answer activities.

## **WAYS OF ENGAGING WITH PUPILS IN SCHOOL**

If schools are to develop an ethos in which it is the norm for staff to engage with pupils, and for staff and pupils to work together in a mutually respectful way, this requires staff to listen to pupils as part of their everyday practice. It involves teachers working with pupils to develop insights into pupils' needs, interests, likes, dislikes, and factors which motivate and demotivate pupils. Engaging with pupils also involves encouraging pupils to voice their opinions, and providing opportunities for pupils to be active participants in their learning and in decision-making process in school.

Schools vary in terms of the strategies they employ for listening to pupils, however, these may include setting up a School Council, or holding 'circle times' during which teachers listen to pupils' perspectives on particular issues. You, as the teacher, can pose simple questions to pupils during your day-to-day working with them in order to determine their perceptions of what motivates/demotivates them, what enhances/diminishes their enjoyment of lessons and what increases/reduces barriers to learners engaging in learning. For example, you might ask pupils: What activities help you to learn best? Why?; Which activities do you enjoy the most? Why?; What stops you from learning? Why?; What would your ideal lesson be like? Why?

Pupil engagement can also take the form of pupils taking on roles as pupil governors' and participating in management committees. As well as listening to pupils verbally, pupils can also 'voice' their opinions through non-verbal means. For example, pupils can be encouraged to:

- Draw, paint, take photos of, or role-play different situations, for example, situations which they either like or dislike in school;
- Post their opinions in a posting box - this way pupils can remain anonymous if they wish;
- Write a log about, for example, what aspects of lessons they enjoy and why;
- Complete questionnaires, sentence completion exercises or surveys on an aspect of their school experience. Pupils could be involved in the writing and administering of these;
- Take part in ballots and elections.

In order to build 'listening schools', the development of positive working relationships between teachers and pupils is crucial, however, it takes time and perseverance by the whole school community to build such relationships. Constructing respectful cultures within schools is one of the key features of the UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA); taking on board the ideas of the RRSA may help schools in their endeavor to work towards building an ethos of respectful cultures. The RRSA, which was developed in 2004, helps schools use the UNCRC as their values framework. Over 4000 primary, secondary and special schools in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are now registered for the award. A study involving schools registered on the RRSA found that, where schools adopted the principles of the RRSA, both adults and young people reported positive relationships between teachers and pupils based on mutual respect and collaboration (Sebba and Robinson, 2010).



## Task 7.1.2 ENGAGING WITH PUPILS IN YOUR CLASSROOM

- Define what you understand by the term 'engaging with pupils' Identify factors you consider reflect high levels of positive engagement with pupils.
- Reflect on your experiences of engaging with pupils in your classroom. With which pupils do you have particularly high levels of engagement? In what ways do you engage with these pupils? Are there any pupils with whom you have lower levels of engagement? How could you address this issue?  
Identify one area of your work in the classroom in which you would like to develop more positive ways of engaging with pupils (this could relate to either a curriculum area or an aspect of your practice, such as assessment). What do you hope to achieve by such engagement? What steps will you take to ensure you engage with all pupils?

### GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR ENGAGING WITH PUPILS

Thomson points out (2011, 25) that student representation is often tokenistic and seems more about students being *seen* to be involved in school processes, rather than being active partners of change. In order to avoid such tokenistic engagement with pupils, schools could develop a pupil engagement policy, taking into consideration the following principles:

- There should be a genuine desire by staff to want to engage with pupils.
- Pupils and staff should understand what is meant by 'pupil engagement', and staff should understand the benefits of this for individual pupils for staff and for the whole school community.
- Pupils and staff should work together in ways which enables pupils to influence their conditions for their own learning.
- Teacher-pupil relationships should be based on mutual respect and adults in the school should acknowledge that pupils have the right to express their views on matters affecting them.
- It should be acknowledged that there are as many voices as there are pupils, not just one unified voice.
- *All* pupils should be encouraged to have an active, rather than passive involvement in discussions decision-making.
- Pupils should feel confident that they can speak freely about what is on their mind, rather than feeling they ought to say what they think you or other adults want to hear, and alternative perspective which do not align with the generally accepted school ethos should be listened to.
- Pupils need to know that if they express their views they will be taken seriously and this won't be held against them, no matter how controversial their views are.
- It should be acknowledged that pupils may express their views through more than the spoken word.

### LEVELS OF ENGAGING WITH PUPILS

Levels of engaging with pupils can be viewed along a continuum with low levels of engagement at

one end, reflecting minimal teacher-pupil engagement where teachers have little interest in pupils' opinions, and high levels of engagement at the opposite end, representing situations where teachers actively develop practices that interest, inspire, motivate and challenge pupils, and where teachers and pupils have mutually respectful relationships.



### Task 7.1.3 **ENGAGING WITH PUPILS TO ENHANCE THE RELEVANCE OF THEIR LEARNING**

At what level on the continuum would you position yourself in relation to the class of pupils you most often teach?

Identify ways in which you could use your knowledge of pupils in your class to support and challenge them within one curriculum area throughout (a) next term and (b) next year.

- Which pupils or groups of pupils do you think will be the most difficult to reach? What can you do to help reach these groups?
- What resources/training would be of help to you in order to facilitate taking the needs of individual pupils into account?
- Identify ways in which you could make your teaching more relevant to the needs of individual pupils in your class within one curriculum area throughout (a) next term and (b) next year.
- Would you foresee any barriers to taking this work forward? If so, how might these be overcome?

As part of this work you might also want to consider whether school practices affect levels of engagement with different groups of pupils, and if so, what you could do to address any issues you identify.

### **SUMMARY**

This unit has provided an introduction to how you can engage with pupils within everyday classroom practices, and has outlined that engaging with pupils and building an awareness of ways of working that interest, motivate and challenge pupils, individually and collectively, will help to motivate pupils and improve their learning and experiences of school. Levels of engaging with pupils are not static, with teachers engaging in different ways and at different levels depending on the pupil and the situation. If teachers are to engage in genuine and meaningful ways with pupils, they need to develop appropriate ways of doing so, there needs to be a recognition that one size may not fit all, and that different approaches will be needed for different pupils. However, once high levels of engaging with pupils becomes the norm, and mutually respectful teacher-pupil relationships are built, teachers will benefit from developing a better understanding of pupils' needs and interests, and pupils will benefit from feeling an enhanced sense of motivation and engagement with learning.



## ANNOTATED FURTHER READING

John-Akinola, Y.O., Gavin, A., O'Higgins, S.E. and Gabhain, S.N. (2014) Taking part in school life: views of children, *Health Education* 1114:1 p20-42.

This paper reports findings from research relating to the views of children about participation in school. The study involved 248 primary school pupils aged nine-13 years.

Robinson, C. (2014) Children, their voices and their experiences of school: what does the evidence tell us? York: Cambridge Primary Review Trust.

This report draws on evidence from empirical studies in the United Kingdom which explore pupils' own perspectives of their primary school experiences.

Sebba, J. and Robinson, C. (2010) *Evaluation of UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award*, London: UNICEF UK.

UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award (RRSA) helps schools use the United Nations convention on the rights of the Child as their values framework. A major part of working towards the award involves schools listening to the voices of pupils within their schools and developing a culture of respect in all aspects of school life, as well as developing a culture of respect in pupils as they move outside of school.

## M Level annotated reading

Busher, H. (2012) Students as expert witnesses of teaching and learning, *Management in Education*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp113-119.

Within this article, the author advocates that student voice is a key component in constructing discourse, empowerment and citizenship in schools, and that listening to and acting upon the views of students can lead to improvements in pedagogical and organisational practices. The article takes the position that students are expert observers of school life and teachers' practices, and draws on research with students in primary and secondary schools to explore students' perspectives in relation to such practices.

Robinson, C. and Taylor, C. (2007) Theorising student voice: values and perspectives, *Improving Schools*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp5-17.

This article explores the core values which underpin and inform student voice work. The authors argue that student voice work is an inherently ethical and moral practice and that at the heart of student voice work are four core values: a conception of communication as dialogue; the requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity; the recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic; and the possibility for change and transformation. Throughout the article, complexities that arise in theorising student voice work are highlighted.

## RELEVANT WEBSITES

The Cambridge Primary Review Trust (CPRT)- <http://cprtrust.org.uk/> (accessed October 2016).

The CPRT works to build on the work of the Cambridge Primary Review and advance the cause of high quality primary education for all children. The CPRT has as one of its priorities, to develop a pedagogy for primary education of repertoire, rigour, evidence and principles,

with a particular emphasis on fostering the high quality classroom talk which children's development, learning and attainment require. The website provides details of the CPRT's mission, priorities, research evidence and publications.

Pupil Voice Wales - <http://www.pupilvoicewales.org.uk/> (accessed October 2016).

This site provides practical advice on how to involve children and young people within school activities and decision making processes. The advice given is based on the premise that professionals working with young children must realise that every child has a right to be involved, and that children and young people of all ages and backgrounds have a valuable contribution to make and suitable platforms should be provided to enable all children to contribute. The site gives separate advice for each of Nursery, Primary and Secondary settings.

Department for Education (DfE) (2011) Teachers' Standards

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards>  
(accessed October 2016).

These new Teachers' Standards set a clear baseline of expectations for the professional practice and conduct of teachers, from the point of qualification and will apply to the vast majority of teachers regardless of their career stage.

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Welsh Government (2011) Pupil Participation - Good Practice Guide (available at <http://www.pupilvoicewales.org.uk/uploads/publications/540.pdf> accessed October 2016)