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# Children's Voices:

Pupil leadership in primary schools

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INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATE PERSPECTIVES

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# Introduction

From 1 September - 24 October 2003 I conducted an investigation into 'Leading school change in partnership with pupils'. This research was sponsored by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and supported by Professor Pat Thomson from the University of Nottingham. During my time in the UK, I explored ways of enabling primary school children to become co-researchers and co-participants in transforming schools.

The Associateship allowed me to conduct a review of relevant literature, especially those working documents which had not been available to me in Australia. Further, it allowed me to meet with their authors; to clarify issues with researchers in Edinburgh, Cambridge, Dublin, Birmingham and Nottingham; to attend BERA; to interview headteachers from Hertfordshire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Bedfordshire; to participate in conferences to promote pupil participation; and to visit several primary schools in England.

To guide this enquiry, I posed the following research questions:

- What is understood by 'pupil participation'? How is this enacted in schools?
- What abilities, attitudes and dispositions enable pupil participation? What factors impede the creation of a culture of working in partnership with pupils?
- What are some of the practical considerations in promoting sustainable pupil participation practices?

From my reading, interviews, observations and interactions, I have been able to reflect on innovative ways of working in partnership with children and to identify some guiding principles for school leaders seeking to promote pupil participation in their primary schools. I present the following report:

1. Background to pupil participation: definitions and purposes of pupil participation
2. Insights and implications
3. Conclusions and recommendations

In the final section of this report, I have also provided illustrations of some of the new ways in which schools are working in partnership with children.

# Background to pupil participation

## What is pupil participation?

Pupil participation can be defined in a range of ways, each of which assumes and extends the previous explanation.

Quite simply, it can mean the pupils attending school. Alternatively, it can imply that pupils attending school have access to and engage with relevant learning programmes. Or, the term 'pupil participation' may be used to describe the role of pupils in decision-making within the school once they are attending school and engaged in learning. In this sense, pupil participation usually refers to an elected group of pupils who take part in formal decision-making.

Under its most emancipatory interpretation, 'pupil participation' extends active involvement in school-based decision-making and includes demonstrated leadership or activism within the wider community (Thomson and Holdsworth, 2003).

For this investigation, I have interpreted pupil participation as pupils being actively involved in decision-making within their schools. In particular, I have reflected on ways in which schools have transformed the representative model of formal decision-making in pupil councils to more creative and responsive models of involving a large number of pupils in the governance of their schools.

## Reasons for promoting pupil participation

Critical thinking about childhood is challenging both old constructions of childhood and the popular media portrayal of children as victims, villains or problems. Institutionalised practices that recognise and respect the rights of adults, while subjecting children to surveillance and control, are being contested (Hatch and Wiseniewski, 1995; James et al, 1998; Matthews, 1998).

Within the newly emerging international focus on children's competence are calls for children to become active participants in the operations and governance of their primary schools. Rather than simply being trendy, pupil participation has become an issue of significant interest to both policy-makers and practitioners. Calls to listen to children's voices in schools come from the following sources:

- advocates of children's rights (Alderson, 2003)
- proponents of school reform and school improvement (McBeath, 1999; Stewart, 2003)
- those who argue for distributed leadership (Gronn, 1999)
- promoters of civics and citizenship education (Thomson and Holdsworth, 2003)
- those who recognise that schools' current practices are based on outdated constructions of childhood (Rudduck and Flutter, 2000; Prout, 2001)

## **Children's rights**

Supporters of the principle that children and young people have the right to have some say in decisions that affect them call for greater pupil participation in schools. Both the Australian and English governments have expressed a commitment to enshrining in international agreements pupils' entitlement to participate in decisions affecting them at school. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) introduced new rights relating to children's participation in addition to the existing rights concerning the protection of, and provision for, children. The new participation rights require all social institutions, including schools, to ensure that children are included in decisions about their lives. Under the Convention, it is expected that children will be consulted; be taken account of; have access to information; have freedom of speech, and be able to challenge decisions made on their behalf (Article 12).

In the UK, this international framework has been more apparent in the legal, medical and social work fields than in education. Children in the UK, unlike those in several European countries, have no formal opportunity to be consulted regularly by the government about educational policy (Alderson, 2003). At local level, there are significant variations in the implementation of children's rights within education. In some Local Education Authorities (LEAs), children have not been consulted about educational practice and have even been prevented from participating in decisions about their own education. They have not been permitted to speak at meetings that determine whether they will be excluded from school. Other LEAs have provided professional development and support for schools focusing on pupil voice.

In South Australian (SA) schools, at both primary and secondary levels, there is evidence of long-standing practice enabling pupil participation. There are many examples of innovative ways in which SA schools have engaged pupils of all ages in decisions about governance, daily operations and curriculum (see Johnson, 1999 for examples of pupil participation at a primary school and Thomson and Holdsworth, 2003 for examples of pupil participation at the secondary level in South Australia). However, analysis of the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) documentation (eg the requirements for annual statements of schools' purposes and official policies about pupil behaviour management and local school governance) reveals that there is no explicit recognition of children's entitlement to participate. Furthermore, in more than a decade of attending meetings for principals, of membership of professional associations and of informal interaction with principal colleagues, I have not heard personally children's participation rights acknowledged or contested. The UNCRC moral and legal imperative, with its implicit acceptance of children's competence, appears to have had little impact on discussion at school and district levels about children's participation in schools in South Australia. Although the participation practices may be congruent with children's rights, they are not motivated by children's rights to have a say in matters that affect them.

## **School reform and school improvement**

Since the early 1990s, the school effectiveness movement has been dominant in England. Motivated by widespread concern about 'failing schools' (Bettle, Frederickson and Sharp, 2001), advocates of school reform have developed interventions that aim to improve the effectiveness of schools in achieving better learning outcomes. Unlike children's rights advocates, these reformers are pragmatic, in that their interest focuses on 'instrumental rationality (how to do things right) and not so much about substantive rationality (how to do the right things)' (Scheerens, Bosker and Creemers, 2000, p131). They seek children's perspectives to inform better the development and implementation

of change technologies in schools. Many schools in England, for example, include consultations with pupils in their post – Ofsted Inspection Action Plans (Ofsted, 1995) to justify directions in school improvement and to demonstrate that schools are identifying and meeting pupils' needs.

However, whether this has enabled children to make genuine comment on their experiences of schooling is contested (Borland et al, 2000; Morrow, 2002). Indeed, appearing to give children a say rather than actually enabling them to share their insights about their schools may lead to the development of cynicism (Alderson, 2000).

Children in South Australian schools, like their peers in other Australian states, participate in annual quality assurance reviews. They do this by completing surveys that seek their ratings on predetermined items. The children's information is then plotted on a graph and analysed to provide evidence about both the performance of the school and 'customer' satisfaction. However, there is growing awareness about the dangers of consulting children solely in response to utilitarian demands for accountability. Such data collection and analysis may be misused to encourage children to conform, to betray their interests and to be destructive of the transformative possibilities of children's participation (Fielding, 2001).

## **Distributed leadership**

Recent leadership theory recognises that effective leadership is dispersed throughout groups and organisations (Gron, 1999). In schools, this has led to a greater emphasis on the contributions of parents as decision-makers, as evaluators of the performance of schools and as change agents (Berger, 1995). Furthermore, the role of teachers as leaders has been acknowledged with teachers assuming key roles in curriculum design, school development and decision-making. Leadership is no longer unquestioningly accepted as a characteristic confined to an individual, ie the principal but rather it results from the collaborative endeavour of staff members who both initiate and support change action (Leithwood et al, 1999).

However, there has been less recognition of the possibilities of involving pupils and children in leading school change. Leadership of schools has not been shared widely with pupils and children (Levin, 2000). Even where pupils have been included as partners in the school change process, for example at Sharnbrook School in Bedford, it has been older pupils rather than primary school aged children who have led aspects of school change. Extending models of dispersed leadership to include pupils of all ages will ensure that children's perspectives are heard.

## **Civics and citizenship**

Renewed political commitment to civics and citizenship education provides another imperative for schools to ensure the involvement of their pupils. In England and Wales, education for citizenship is compulsory in secondary schools and the Electoral Commission provides citizenship education materials and outreach activities.

Research, including that commissioned by the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), provides support for the idea that children's participation in decision-making about aspects of school life enables them to learn and apply the skills they need to be active citizens in the wider community. Most commonly, the establishment of school councils is seen as creating opportunities for children to develop a sense of belonging to

a community and to accepting responsibility for making decisions on behalf of that community (Hart, 1997).

In Australia, successive federal governments have identified the need for the conscious development of future citizens and have documented this in the National Goals for Schooling. The South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability framework (SACSA) incorporates the teaching of civics and citizenship for children from Reception to Year 10 in the strand 'social systems' within the learning area of Society and Environment. The knowledge of forms of government and democratic decision-making processes are mandated in the outcomes for each standard (level).

The conviction that these standards can be achieved and, indeed, that citizenship can be learned best through participation in governance at the school level has widespread currency in Australia. In 2003, the Australian Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson, commissioned a national study of values education programmes that promote citizenship. The stated purposes of this study included the identification and documentation of those programmes that develop children's commitment to community well-being and civic participation. Participating schools were required to adopt action research processes that included consultations with children as well as with their teachers and parents (Values Education Study, Curriculum Corporation, 2002). This emphasis on involving children in the research reinforced the expectation that more participation by children in their schools is integral to the preparation of future citizens. For this reason, the democratic processes of this study were purported to be as significant as the information it would generate.

With some notable exceptions in both the UK and Australia (see Thomson and Holdsworth, 2003; Flutter, 2003), citizenship has been confined to forms of political participation that do not contest existing systems and structures. The emphasis has been on teaching about formal democratic structures within school contexts where undemocratic practices abound and tokenistic school councils operate. Most often, participation in school governance has been restricted to children electing their representatives to existing decision-making structures, which have limited terms of reference (Hart, 1997; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Wyse 2001, Alderson 2003). School citizenship education programmes have portrayed citizens as rational, discerning consumers who value individual development and participate in democratic activity by voting thoughtfully in regular elections (Gill and Reid, 1999). If citizens were defined more broadly as activists who are advocates for the common or public good, the civics curriculum imperative would compete with and be contradictory to the daily operations of schools as well as their social and economic reproductive functions.

## **Constructions of childhood**

In recent years, a number of factors have led to the development of new conceptions of what it means to be a child. These have included:

- the declining percentage of children in the world's population
- the growing differentiation of the life circumstances of children
- the transnationalisation of children
- the increased levels of institutional control over them and the trend towards individualisation (Prout, 2001)

Rather than a developmental stage, childhood has more commonly come to be seen as 'a cultural, political and social configuration' (Wyness, 2000, p28). Indeed, there has been an emerging trend to clarify the distinction between the study of children as active agents and the study of childhood as a social form (Corsaro, 1997).

Once considered passive and incompetent spectators in life events, children are increasingly recognised as active players who influence their daily lives (James et al, 1998). Because children were assumed to be poor informants who were unable to fully understand many of the issues impacting on their lives (Matthews, 1998), research relating to them was, in fact, research 'about' or 'on' children. Such research sought information exclusively from the adults who cared for, educated or worked with children (Hatch and Wiseniewski, 1995). There has been growing interest in understanding children's experiences from their own perspectives and corresponding less emphasis on mediating children's information with that provided by adults (Mayall, 1994).

The call to increase children's participation in their schools accompanied the growing consensus that children's views can, and ought, to be taken seriously (Mahon and Glendinning, 1996). This call acknowledges children as competent agents who can, and should, help frame the institutions in which they live, play and learn. Recent educational research demonstrates the positive contribution of pupils in the creation of improved teaching and learning (Rudduck and Flutter, 2003); pupil engagement and discipline (Soo Hoo, 1993); and effective relationships (Fielding and Bragg, 2003).

While much of this research has been conducted with pupils at secondary schools, there is evidence to suggest that processes that are inclusive of younger pupils (children in primary schools) may further assist in the development of new ways of working in schools. Younger children have tended to be excluded as age has traditionally been regarded as the significant factor in determining their competence. Recent research conducted with children on social and medical issues has found that it is experience, not age, which is an essential precondition in personal decision-making and agency (Alderson, 2003).

While these calls for the inclusion of children's perspectives may not be mutually exclusive, the reasons for inviting children to work in partnership to lead school change are central to **what** children are asked, **which children** are asked, **how** they are asked and **what is done** with what they say (Fielding, 2003).

## **Why I advocate greater pupil participation in schools**

These competing and at times contradictory rationales for promoting greater pupil participation in schools can be confusing. However, I am clear about my motives for greater pupil participation in the schools I have led. My thinking draws heavily on the emerging body of literature that re-positions even young children as competent, active agents who demonstrate considerable insight into, and control over, their daily lives. In reconceptualising children as thinking, feeling and active participants in life, I also draw on moral arguments that recognise the entitlements of children to a fair say in their own affairs. This 'children's rights' perspective is consistent with a broader humanistic commitment to notions of 'universal' human rights and sits in opposition to the cynical and opportunistic utilitarian motives represented in calls to involve children further in school improvement projects to ensure they are more 'effective'.



In undertaking my research into pupil involvement in UK schools, I actively sought examples of innovations in the area that were motivated by philosophical commitments to children's rights and new conceptions of children and childhood. As noted above, educational debate in the UK about the roles of pupils in schools has been seen mainly as an issue for older pupils, while research conducted into pupils' experiences of schools has focused on older pupils (James et al, 1998; Fielding, 2001). Although there are a number of significant exceptions such as the Bedfordshire School Improvement Project (BSIP) and the NCSL Networked Learning Groups (NLG), which both held conferences (2003) to explore the ways younger pupils could participate in their schools, there has been considerable ambivalence about the value of allowing younger pupils to 'have a say'.

# Pupil participation in practice

In this section I have reflected on schools' attempts to create sustainable pupil participation practices.

## Strategies for change

Even when there are widely accepted reasons for working toward change, it can be difficult to determine where to start and with whom. Sachs quotes Shaw in suggesting that the starting point is:

...to engage in proactive and strategic planning...develop an agenda and then focus resources on realizing it (Shaw, 2001 in Sachs, 2003)

Through this investigation, I identified a range of change strategies varying from reframing of the school's directions, professional development and curriculum innovation to research-focused approaches. However, the importance of strategic planning was evident in all examples of sustainable change.

Alison Peacock, whose school is the subject of one of the case studies included in the appendix section, recalled adopting two deliberate and simultaneous strategies to promote change through pupil participation in her primary school (Peacock, 2003). The first strategy was to reframe the constraints of external requirements placed on the school by Ofsted to a more empowering model of initiating change at the local level. The second was to convey to staff her genuine confidence in their professional abilities. These strategies illustrate an activist response to the increased surveillance of the teaching profession, motivated by a call for greater accountability (Sachs, 2003).

In reflecting on my own primary school, I highlight the importance of time, the deliberate forming of partnerships and the development of a resourced agenda to promote change in how we worked with pupils (Johnson, appendix A). In my own work, I decided to focus initially on the staff and adopted three intertwined change strategies. These included:

- systematic staff professional development
- the restructuring of staff meetings to promote active staff participation in decision-making and a culture of collegiality
- the redirection of the school's focus onto pupils, ensuring that children's needs was central to everything that was done at Woodville

These strategies were planned to reassure staff that this increased focus on the needs of pupils would not be at the expense or to the exclusion of their needs (Fielding, 2001).

Strategic planning was also critical for the introduction of a pupil environment group aimed at increasing the engagement of secondary pupils and thus promoting school change (Thomson et al, in press). In response to expressed pupil interest in environmental issues and a concern for the 'naughty' girls, teachers applied for financial resources to enable pupils to change the physical geographies of their school. While the new group achieved unanticipated outcomes, the evidence of its success as a change strategy is that its formation enabled real improvements in the pupils' lives, gave them a sense of power and altered the existing power relations (Bobo in Sachs, 2003).

Involving pupils as researchers was the strategy adopted at Sharnbrook School in Bedford to bring about change in the school and in the relationships between teachers and pupils. The planning for this project was structured and systematic and included the establishment of partnerships with external critical friends. This project clearly demonstrates that strategic planning does not lead to inflexibility; rather it emphasises the importance of continuing to be open to new information and to negotiate further action with all partners (Raymond, 2001).

## **Promoting pupil participation**

My investigation revealed that school leaders and researchers most often refer to elected school councils as examples of pupil participation in their schools. Similarly, most of the projects they described focused on older pupils and many of them were mainstream or whole-school strategies. The previously cited examples from Sharnbrook (UK), Wroxham (UK), Woodville (SA) and Clifftop College (SA) illustrate other ways of promoting pupil participation.

Wroxham has adopted a structure that ensures a whole-school approach to pupil participation and includes all pupils from reception to Year 6. All classes have been rearranged into multi-aged groups and all meet at the same time each week. All teachers are responsible for facilitating these circle group meetings, which include the specific teaching of skills, as well as opportunities for pupils to comment on issues. Rather than leaving the participation to the elected few, this model promotes maximum involvement, skill development and engagement among all its young pupils.

Like Wroxham, Woodville has rejected a representative model of pupil participation. Instead, in 2003 the school tested four pupil action groups through which pupils initiated changes they wished to implement. These action groups:

- provided formal and visible structures of pupil participation
- enabled more pupils to participate
- enabled greater staff responsibility for the facilitation of these groups
- generated a range of topics to be acted on

Although different, the respective approaches of Wroxham and Woodville have allowed primary school-aged children to have a say in the daily organisation and functioning of their schools and to contribute to their school's vision. Through the adoption of models other than the election of representatives, both schools have increased pupil engagement while, at the same time, removing hierarchical structures that favour the involvement of older pupils (for instance, an executive of older children nominally elected by the whole school). The approaches further increased staff involvement and commitment to pupil participation. Both schools have worked to overcome restrictions on the topics pupils are encouraged to comment on, which in the past have been determined by what adults in the school have seen as appropriate areas for debate (Hart, 1997; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Wyse, 2001).

Newnham Middle School has also sought to extend the areas on which pupils could have a say. Year 8 pupils who had been on the school council for three years reported that, as well as more traditional activities (such as raising money for the purchase of bins and benches, and initiating a healthy eating tuckshop), they had participated in the

selection process for their new headteacher (BSIP conference, October 2003). Pupils who had been part of these selection process were articulate in their beliefs that pupil input into the selection of headteachers had been essential. They also understood and accepted that they had not had the final say but that their input had confirmed the decision made by the relevant adults. While the school council appeared to be fairly conventional in its formal meeting procedures, elected executive and small membership, the willingness to include secondary pupils in major decisions about their school's directions was quite radical.

Another quite radical structure enabling pupil participation was the environment project (YEA) at Clifftop College. Importantly YEA was not under the auspices of the Pupil Forum but instead had been developed by pupils who were critical of the way their school operated and dismissive of schools' formal decision-making structures and systems of recognition. However, like other members of school council, members of the YEA were keen to be associated with it, to be known for their work, to have a place to make their own and to determine how they would operate (Thomson et al, in press). With the support of their teachers, YEA was encouraged to link with the pupil forum so that it became part of the mainstream structure of the school.

## Insights and implications

My reflections on the experiences of others who are working in new ways with children suggests the importance of:

- adopting a whole-school approach
- providing systematic professional development for staff
- establishing democratic structures for staff, pupils and parents
- listening to what pupils say
- creating opportunities for critical reflection
- recognising and celebrating achievements

### **A whole-school approach to working in partnership with pupils**

While there are examples of successful pupil voice projects operating independently within school settings (Thomson and Holdsworth, 2003), identifying working in partnership with pupils as a school-wide priority will significantly increase the likelihood of achieving change.

Adopting a whole-school approach enables the more effective allocation of resources — human, financial and physical — to support this priority. It promotes initiative within the school community, and informs pupils and adults about the school's focus. Knowing about the priority is the first step towards engaging with it and entering discussion with other members of the school about how it is being realised. Making the priority public is congruent with the aims of working in partnership with children because it begins the process of shared ownership and invites contribution from those who are informed about it. Articulating the goal of working in partnership with pupils publicly elevates its importance and makes clear that this is an essential part of the school's work.

### **Systematic professional development for staff**

A whole-school approach to working in partnership with pupils cannot be achieved without a shared understanding of partnership that is complemented by knowledge of structures and strategies to promote partnership. Because staff members play a pivotal role in teaching pupils the specific skills that enable them to participate, they need to be aware of the range of required skills and effective methodologies. These may be new ways of working with children and many staff may not have the technical expertise to teach these skills explicitly and encourage their application.

Systematic professional development will ensure that all staff members develop understandings of partnership, knowledge about systemic ways of supporting partnerships with pupils and technical expertise in teaching required skills. It will further allow the staff to learn together and to initiate collaborative ways of working.

## **Democratic structures**

Systematic, relevant professional development for staff does not automatically result in establishing authentic partnerships with pupils, however. Acquiring greater understanding of ways of working in partnerships and developing expertise in engaging pupils in these processes has limited impact unless staff members have evidence that they, too, are valued as partners. Democratic structures that enable them to contribute to the long-term vision, shorter-term objectives and decisions about the daily operations of the school reflect the principles of partnership. Such structures show that everyone working in the school can influence priorities, practices and programmes. These structures demonstrate that active involvement by staff members in all aspects of the school's organisation and operation is a core component of the new ways of working.

Similarly, structures that enable parents to participate in the life of the school and which make visible their roles in decision-making and goal-setting show that parents are also working in partnership with children.

The challenge for schools wanting to learn to work in new ways with pupils is to ensure the congruence of all school operations, relationships and the treatment of pupils with the commitment to working in partnership. This means that all current policies and practices require examination through a lens of partnership. Critical reflection on issues such as teaching pupils to manage their behaviour/discipline, classroom organisational routines, or school spaces that children access may reveal inconsistencies between espoused commitments and actual experience.

Some of these discrepancies may be revealed by the establishment of formal structures for pupils to raise issues and initiate action. These pupil forums may identify contradictory practices and propose changes. To be effective, these forums need well-publicised purposes, well-known protocols and to be accessible for all pupils. Creating new democratic structures that enable maximum pupil participation allows the voices of many pupils to be heard. However, this presents a further challenge for schools accustomed to adopting representative models of pupil participation.

## **Listening to what pupils say**

The establishment of school-wide pupil participation structures does not routinely result in pupils becoming authentic partners with adults in the school. Enabling many pupils to initiate topics through the creation of both formal and informal fora may not result in adults hearing what pupils have to say. Similarly, allowing pupils to talk about factors that help or hinder their learning and inviting pupils to voice their opinions on the daily organisation and operation of the school may not lead to school change. The effectiveness of these pupil participation structures and processes is dependent on adults in the school listening to what is being said by the children.

Many barriers can prevent teachers from really listening to the children in their classes. These include:

- the business of the classroom
- a focus on 'delivering' curriculum
- an emphasis on assessment to demonstrate that children are achieving the desired outcomes

- the ways children express their thoughts and feelings may appear to be inappropriate (Bragg, 2001)
- discounting pupil comments because they challenge current school or individual teacher practices
- limiting the ranges of topics on which children can comment (Wyse, 2001) and
- teachers' personal beliefs that children are passive and incompetent spectators in life events (James et al, 1998) who are unable to fully understand many of the issues impacting on their lives (Matthews, 1998).

Recognising these barriers and working with colleagues to address them may help teachers to hear what pupils have to say and to respond to the challenges pupil perceptions present. Finding new ways of enabling pupils to identify issues of importance and to express their thoughts and feelings may also help adults to hear what pupils have to say about their schools.

In many primary schools, the presentation of children's learning through visual art forms is common. This practice is more inclusive for children as it enables them to convey their understandings and feelings in forms other than written text. Researchers exploring aspects of children's lives have urged others conducting research with children to make use of children's visual arts abilities and experiences. For instance, James suggests that children's art, (which is a routine part of most young children's daily experience) has been underutilised as a means of producing data with children (James et al, 1998). Acknowledging the visual nature of primary school children's cultures and creating opportunities for them to communicate through images as well as words may enable adults to really listen to what children say about their schools.

## **Critical reflection on processes and protocols**

In many schools, staff members are familiar with evaluation processes that invite them to provide evidence about the effectiveness of particular programs or processes. However, they may have limited experience with deliberate and structured reflection on the type of action, reasons for the action and congruence of that action with the school's stated philosophy. Pupils too may have had opportunities to provide information which is used to evaluate the success of initiatives. Yet they may not have been included in critical reflection on the value of such initiatives.

Critical reflection is not summative but rather occurs throughout the implementation of change and informs the thinking and planning of each stage of the change process (Zeni, 1998). Critical reflection goes further than just reviewing the practical and technical management of change by introducing an ethical element. It challenges the assumptions on which the change is based and examines the costs and benefits for all stakeholders.

While critical reflection may contribute to the development of a cohesive group with a deeper commitment to the change initiative, it has a number of inherent problems. The lack of experience with this form of reflective practice may require an external facilitator. Similarly in instances where participants are not familiar with the purpose and practice of critical reflection, guiding questions may assist in the development of rigorous reflection processes. A sequence of questions may enable participants to examine the change, its

impact on all involved at the local level as well as its contribution to the wider community. One such questioning framework is:

- *WHAT?* (what are we doing, describe it)
- *SO WHAT?* (so what does this mean/what does this say about what we believe and value? Is this what we want?)
- *NOW WHAT?* (now what would be appropriate? In whose interests would such action be? Who would be disadvantaged? What contribution would this make to more democratic schools?) (Johnson, 1999)

Critical reflection is a demanding process and requires participants to confront both the unintended consequences of change strategies as well as desired outcomes. Participants will have differing interpretations of what has happened and its implications for different members of the school. Dialogue about these consequences and differences in interpretation may assist children and adults to work in partnership in their schools.

## **Recognising and celebrating the outcomes of working in partnership with pupils**

Implementing new ways for adults and children to learn to work in partnership will question long-held personal and professional beliefs. There will be times of challenge, confrontation, confusion and concern. However, there are many exciting opportunities associated with seeking new ways of working with children in their schools. Staff, pupils and parents can commence a journey towards changing the ways their school operates. They can share their hopes, support each other in working towards them and celebrate their successes.

When participants are immersed in living the changes they are endeavouring to create, they may be unaware of the significance of aspects of their work. When they are focused on achieving their longer-term goals, they may not recognise significant short-term milestones. Two strategies can support schools to acknowledge their achievements. The first, critical reflection can assist in the identification of successes throughout the change process. The second — working with critical friends from outside the school — can contribute to the promotion of rigorous reflection and the recognition of significant attainments. Critical friends can be single colleagues in other institutions or members of a network of schools. The benefits of working with individual critical friends or belonging to a network of schools include the reciprocal learning and the encouragement to share school stories with the wider educational community. The preparation for, as well as the act of, sharing school achievements with an audience outside of the school can be seen as a celebration of successes.



## Conclusions and recommendations

This NCSL-sponsored investigation allowed me to identify and reflect on innovative ways of working in partnership with children to lead school change.

My investigation was based on new constructions of childhood, which recognise that children are not simply citizens of the future but capable persons willing and able to be involved in their schools. There is growing acceptance of children as competent, active contributors who have a right to have a say in matters which affect them. This has resulted in many schools initiating new kinds of pupil participation and actively creating opportunities to work in partnership with children.

My examination of the literature and my conversations with those who are including children as co-participants in transforming schools demonstrate the potential of pupil perspectives in creating more responsive and more engaging schools. Initiatives undertaken by networks of schools (eg BSIP and NLC) as well as those introduced by individual schools (eg Wroxham) show that pupil participation can connect in productive ways with the improvement of teaching and learning. Further, research projects (such as Consulting Pupils and Pupils as Researchers) suggest that working in partnership with children enables the exploration of new relationships between, and responsibilities for, both pupils and teachers.

For the exciting possibilities for working in partnership with pupils to be realised, I recommend that schools, as individual sites, networks and systems, adopt action frameworks which take into account the following three issues.

1. **Recognise the impediments to working in partnership with pupils.** This allows schools to explore and respond to difficulties that their current context may present in relation to pupils' work. Further, it also allows staff to examine the impact of power on relationships between pupils and teachers.
2. **Acknowledge that young children are competent contributors.** This enables pupils to be accepted as valued partners in transforming schools. As well as teaching pupils to speak for themselves, it also alerts teachers to forms of unintentional disempowerment and disadvantages of speaking for pupils. It enables the exploration of alternative models, which allow many pupil voices to be heard. Finally, it raises awareness of the dilemmas of discounting or giving value or priority to pupil comment.
3. **Create opportunities for primary school-aged children to initiate topics for review.** The key here is for schools to initiate pupils' involvement in the review process, rather than simply providing information in response to requests. This encourages new ways of enabling pupils to propose changes to their schools. It also assists teachers to question current practices, to challenge long-held beliefs and to engage actively in partnership with pupils.

# Comparative case studies

## Illustrations of new ways of working in partnership with pupils

While many of the schools I visited were doing great work in the area of pupil participation in school life, I have chosen to showcase the work of one particularly impressive school outside of London, and to compare and contrast its work with my own school in Australia. What follows are two case studies of the challenges faced by two headteachers – Alison Peacock at Wroxham School, Potters Bar, England, and me at Woodville Primary School, Adelaide, South Australia – as we tried to implement new ways of involving children in the governance of their schools.

Although these examples are set in differing contexts, Alison and I share a number of relevant similarities in the language, beliefs and theorising, which enable comparison of the stated philosophies and practices of our schools:

- Both of us bring to our work strong personal conviction and professional commitment to listen to and learn from the children in our schools .
- Both Alison and I had previously implemented successful school-wide practices that enabled pupils to actively participate in decision-making about their own learning and about the way their schools operated.
- Both Alison and I consciously sought to be informed by current research and thinking about pupil participation as we reflected on our schools' practices in, and developed theory about, pupil voice.
- Our experiences and reflections on pupil voice in our immediate past settings had been shared with the wider professional and educational community. Alison's pupils from Wheatcroft School had their views published in FORUM vol 43 no 2, 2001. My reflections on action research in partnership with pupils at Riverdale R-7 school were published in CHANGE Transformations in Education vol 2 no 1, 1999.
- Both Alison and I had expressed commitment to working collaboratively with staff in our new settings to bring about change in the way primary school pupils are positioned in the pupil participation debate.

## Pupil voice at Wroxham Gardens School, Potters Bar, UK

I gathered the material which informed this case study by reading about Alison's work, talking with her, visiting her school, observing 'circle group' meetings and maintaining an ongoing email conversation.

### ***Need for change***

Alison Peacock took up the position of headteacher of Wroxham School in January, 2003. Already charged with the responsibility of reforming the school because of poor Ofsted inspection reports, Alison recalled that she became acutely aware of the impact of these reports on the self-belief of the people associated with the school. In the first weeks of her interaction with parents, staff and pupils, she observed concern about the school's direction from school governors, low staff morale and the lack of enthusiasm from the 217 pupils about their school and their learning. Although this was her first appointment as headteacher, Alison brought with her successful experience in leading

school change in her previous position as deputy head and a conviction that pupils should be actively involved in decision-making about their schools.

To illustrate her motivation for promoting pupil participation, Alison talked of her experience in teaching Claudia, a pupil with special needs, and what she had learned from working with her. Alison remembered her initial concerns about her limited knowledge of special needs like Claudia's and her own lack of experience in supporting such pupils. Gradually, by creating opportunities for Claudia to convey her feelings and hopes and by listening closely to Claudia's reactions, Alison learned to trust Claudia, and to encourage her to realise her aims to walk, read and extend her abilities. Alison attributed her commitment to pupil participation to this experience of teaching Claudia eight years ago. She believed it demonstrates that:

All children can achieve great things and need to be enabled to do this. (Peacock, 2003)

### ***Strategies for creating change***

The school context provided Alison with factors that both helped and hindered change processes. The Ofsted reports and consequent placement of the school on 'special measures' signalled clearly to parents, staff and pupils that their school needed to change to meet Ofsted standards. Rather than taking time to discover and demonstrate that the school should reform certain of its practices and structures, Alison entered an environment where the need for change was recognised. However, this recognition was accompanied by the staff's fear of further failure; lack of confidence in their abilities to improve pupil performance; and little opportunity to determine the specific changes and how they should be implemented.

Alison adopted two deliberate and simultaneous strategies. The first was to reframe the external requirements placed on the school by Ofsted to a more empowering model of initiating change at the local level. The second was to convey to staff her genuine confidence in their professional abilities.

Instead of adopting a deficit approach to change by emphasising those aspects of the school identified by Ofsted as unsuccessful, Alison refocused attention on the school as a place of children's learning. This enabled staff to work with her to create a challenging and supportive learning environment rather than to react to negative feedback. She concentrated on the physical environment, working with teachers to display attractively children's work in the office, foyer and walkways as well as inside classrooms. Children were obviously proud that their work was displayed as evidenced by Alice, a seven-year-old, asking me to accompany her to see her painting that had been framed and placed in the office. On my visit I saw clearly labelled displays in child-friendly language summarising values about children, their learning and the school. As she took me on a tour of the school, Alison explained that rooms had been reorganised and furniture had been altered to ensure children were comfortable and able to access equipment and resources. Alison considered this to be a critical component of an "education which is both excellent and enjoyable".

While attending to the pupils' physical environment, Alison simultaneously created opportunities to promote staff self-efficacy. Alison aimed to be a 'friendly face' and to demonstrate her readiness to 'work alongside staff' on a wide range of tasks. She cited an example of assisting a first-year teacher to rearrange the classroom so that children could move around without disrupting others. She also worked with a group of teachers to clear part of the dining hall to make a library.

To help to reduce concerns of some individual teachers that they were under constant external surveillance, Alison mediated the access of external advisors, only inviting them into the school for specific whole-school purposes. Another successful tactic used by Alison was the release of teachers at the end of the term to write reports. This made teachers' workload visible and the extra effort they had put into their school publicly valued.

In reflecting on her early weeks, Alison acknowledged that while she was prepared to go very slowly and ensure that staff were ready for change, she also seized every opportunity to work towards pupil participation. Alison cited two significant whole-school events that assisted her in drip-feeding possibilities for increased pupil involvement. These were the whole-school special arts week and the fundraising for library books. Both of these events were strategic in that they:

- allowed Alison to work alongside the staff
- created opportunities for collective endeavour and pupil involvement
- made explicit to governors, parents, staff and pupils the importance of a broad, balanced curriculum that was more than a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy
- enabled the restructuring of classes into multi-aged groupings and the chance to work with different people
- established the foundation for working together on future longer term projects.

### ***Promoting pupil participation***

Within two school terms of her appointment, Alison had worked with her staff to introduce formal structures to enable pupils to participate in decision-making at Wroxham. Rather than setting up a school council involving a limited number of pupils, she initiated a structure that ensured a whole-school approach including all pupils from reception to Year 6. Pupils have been divided into multi-aged groups, which all meet at the same time each week. All teachers are responsible for facilitating the circle group meetings which include specific teaching of skills as well as opportunities for pupils to comment on issues. Initially, Alison assumed responsibility for co-ordinating the circle group meeting agenda, agreeing with teachers the processes to be used and collating pupil feedback.

Although Alison and the teachers now expect the Year 6 pupils to lead the circles with the teacher as a participant, in its early stages, the focus was on the adult modelling behaviours, which enable all pupils to be included. There is no voting or censoring of ideas, instead all contributions are recorded and considered. This is part of a deliberate plan to allow all children to develop the confidence and abilities to participate. Similarly, the emphasis is on immediate implementation of pupils' ideas to reinforce that they will be listened to and that their proposals will be acted on. Alison believes that

Children are inspired by the belief that their ideas count and will make a difference. (FORUM 43, 2, 2001, p53)

Because of this, and the pupil's inexperience in participation, topics for decision have so far have been limited to the playground and establishing a tuck shop. Alison hopes that, as pupils' confidence and experience develop, the circle group meetings will discuss aspects of teaching and learning.

### ***Problems and possible pitfalls***

It all sounds too easy. Alison's school had a demonstrated need to change. She brought to her new school a commitment to pupil participation, successful experience in its promotion, and considerable expertise in enabling pupils and their teachers to participate. In less than two terms, a whole school decision-making structure that enabled pupils to participate was in operation. The school is attractive, the children are engaged and lively, the staff members are friendly, and parents and children work together and are willing to try new things. Can this be sustained? What resistance did Alison face?

At our meeting, Alison reflected critically on the progress of pupil participation thus far. She cited the challenges of externally imposed change and the need to reframe constantly the Ofsted report, choosing to view it as an opportunity to be creative rather than to be constrained by the urgency to fulfil Ofsted requirements. In spite of this reinterpretation of external expectations, some staff, parents and pupils were reluctant to engage with new ways of working.

While all teachers had implemented the pupil participation structures and were enjoying their newly discovered chances to work together, Alison acknowledged that some staff had found the reframing of issues of pupil behaviour difficult. Where they had once blamed pupils for their inappropriate behaviour, they were now challenged to look at the causes of such behaviours. Further, they were now asked to suggest ways of changing aspects of the school to help pupils to manage their conduct more effectively. Some staff had been unable to accept this and had decided to leave.

While parents had not directly complained about the increased emphasis on pupil participation, a small number had concerns about teachers being released from classroom duties to write reports. These parents were concerned about disruption to their children's learning because of the change of teachers. However, as more opportunities arise in the future for the regrouping of pupils into multi-aged groups working with teachers other than their designated class teachers, concerns from parents are likely to become more common. Alison looked forward to this as an important opportunity to exercise educational leadership by explaining to all parents how important these processes were for the development of a community. She also indicated that such concerns gave her the opportunity to demonstrate a long-term vision for the school that was not reactive to parent complaints.

Alison noted that some of the pupils also found this stronger emphasis on engaging with their learning and the operations of their school challenging. Previously, they had been able to avoid accepting an active role in their school. Alison recalled examples of pupils who appeared withdrawn and who didn't seem to listen to what was happening around them, instead relying on the routine patterns of interaction to indicate when they should respond. For these pupils, the new ways of interacting were demanding and not entirely welcome.

Alison's vision is for pupils to participate in all aspects of the school and to this end she has begun to build a school where pupils are engaged in their learning and their contributions to decision-making are valued. The appointment of a deputy head who is also committed to pupil participation; the introduction of collaborative ways of working and the establishment of pupil voice processes is a significant and strategic first step towards this vision.

### ***Some future possibilities/questions from a critical friend***

Now that Ofsted has recognised improvement in the school's performance, pupils successfully meeting standards, the restoration of community confidence in the school and increased self-efficacy among staff, the future possibilities for pupil voice can be considered. Factors affecting the sustainability of pupil voice at Wroxham include resources (both financial and human); skill development (for both staff and pupils); and what the scope for pupil participation should be.

### ***Resourcing***

Alison had taken advantage of the additional resources the school had received during its time in "special measures" to help promote pupil voice in her school, as these had provided the impetus for the implementation of children's suggestions for change. However, now the school is out of "special measures," these additional resources are no longer available, which brings with it a new set of challenges for this area of activity.

Alison had chosen to allocate staff to ensure all teachers worked with a circle group meeting. Although Alison and her colleagues use a range of methods to promote active pupil engagement, the success of this decision-making model is dependent on creating groups small enough to allow each child to participate confidently. The sustainability of this approach will rely on the continued deployment of staff to similar roles. Conflicting systemic demands and expectations from within the school community may challenge the continued long-term deployment of staff to embed pupil participation into Wroxham's operations.

### ***Skill development***

By devoting significant whole-staff meeting time to the discussion of circle group meetings each week, Alison acknowledged that not all staff members have the experience or the required skills to encourage pupils to have their say about aspects of their school.

In these staff meetings, Alison has explicitly taught staff the collaborative skills needed for effective participation in groups. These abilities and understandings have been transferable to all groups within the school. The structure of each circle group meeting has been rehearsed with all staff to allow them to experience the processes they would use with the pupils. The process has seen staff participate in a warm-up game, consider the collated feedback from the previous week and join in the discussion of the week's topics, before concluding the 15-minute segment with another game. As well as modelling appropriate interactions and group leadership, this approach has ensured that staff have a shared understanding of the purpose and process of each meeting.

Alison has also invited external consultants to come to the school to work with staff and the pupils to model the skills of both participants and facilitators. This deliberate and systematic approach has helped to ensure that staff have the abilities necessary for the successful conduct of the circle meeting groups.

This approach has relied on Alison to prepare the agenda, collate the feedback from all the groups, organise the games to be used and share the model at the staff meeting. All of this has significant implications for the sustainability of this approach in the future. Not only is this a considerable workload, which the headteacher may not be able to manage in the long term, but also it has the added disadvantage of staff not accepting responsibility for the process and outcome of their circle group meeting. If this organisation was to be maintained, staff could simply continue to implement a prescribed

process without contributing to it or being committed to pupil voice. In many schools, the pupil council (England) or pupil representative Council (Australia) has become the responsibility of an individual staff member who is often a lone passionate advocate for pupil participation. To avoid this eventuality, Alison and her staff could reflect on the following questions.

- How can we ensure that the circle meeting groups are actively supported by all teachers?
- How can we share the responsibility for the planning, collation of feedback, selection of collaborative games, preparation of the agenda and sharing with the staff?
- How can we contribute ideas and initiate new ways of working with circle group meetings?

An even greater challenge may be to examine whether increased staff understanding and development of their own expertise has led to greater belief in the importance of pupil participation.

As the staff learned new skills, they taught these to the pupils. The simultaneous learning and teaching of skills ensured that pupils and teachers had similar experiences and may have produced an atmosphere of “we’re in this together”. As pupil voice is extended, staff may encounter dilemmas as they allow pupils to take more responsibility for the conduct of each circle group meeting. If teachers continue to act as facilitators, pupils will not own the pupil participation processes. Further, pupils will not develop the techniques and confidence to lead their peers. However, because of their lack of experience at Wroxham School in whole-school decision-making, both adults and children may find the transition from adult facilitation to pupil leadership uneasy. Concerns about creating opportunities for teachers to take greater and shared responsibility for the circle group meetings may apply equally to allowing pupils to contribute to the organisation and operation of the circle groups.

The composition of each circle as a multi-age group has many benefits, including allowing children to develop a sense of belonging to the whole school rather than just their own class. It further recognises that children of all ages have much to contribute and that they can work well with and learn from others of varied ages. Alison and her staff envisage that Grade 6 pupils who will assume leadership of the circle groups. The staff may choose to debate the inconsistencies between this assumption and the acknowledgement that age is not a barrier to contribution. They may identify individual younger children who display leadership qualities that would benefit their circle group and that Grade 6 pupils can contribute in other ways.

As teachers and pupils develop greater confidence in their abilities to work together, they may decide to make formal and transparent the decision-making process. In the initial stages, the acceptance and the collation of all ideas generated many points of view and encouraged children to make suggestions without fear of rejection. However, this led to some a lack of clarity about how outcomes were reached. Were the ideas that were reported back to circle groups the most common? Were the ideas reported back those which teachers identified as achievable? How did pupils respond when their ideas were not included on the list for reporting back?

### ***Pupils' comments on teaching and learning***

Alison and her staff adopted a method of including pupils in decision-making, which allowed them to:

- develop a sense of belonging to a community
- learn the skills of participation and discussion of issues
- see that their ideas are valued
- enjoy the immediate results of their suggestions

This method has been gradual and systematic and has demonstrated to pupils, parents, and staff the importance of pupil voice. The topics for discussion thus far have been safe in that they have not threaten the power relationships between adults and children or privilege one set of voices over another. However, as the circle group meetings enter a new phase of seeking pupil input to debates about teaching and learning, they will allow children:

...the dignity of speaking for themselves (and) a place from which to begin transforming the often disempowering experience of childhood. (Boler, 2002, p.12)

### **Pupil participation at Woodville Primary School, South Australia**

#### ***Need for change; hindering factors***

Unlike Alison, my appointment as principal to another school was not accompanied by widespread acceptance of the need for change. My story relates a three-year journey of establishing structures to promote pupil participation.

I assumed the principalship following the retirement of a principal at the end of 2000, who was well respected by the parent community and very popular with both staff and pupils. Such was his status that the state's only daily newspaper 'The Advertiser' included a story and photograph of him to acknowledge his contribution to education. Woodville Primary School, which was more than 120 years old, had a long and proud history of outstanding academic, cultural and sporting achievement. Further, it was well known for its inclusive approach to education, having provided schooling for deaf and hearing impaired children for more than 45 years. The school's 2000 Annual Report boasted of its continued growth in enrolment because of its reputation for excellence in education. Woodville, the report claimed, was held in high esteem and considered by many members of the community as a private school.

Not only was the need for change not recognised, many parents and staff actively opposed anything which could be seen to undermine Woodville's traditional ways of operating. Parents feared that I would introduce innovations from my last school, such as pupils calling teachers by their first names, pupil committees, abandoning school uniform and abolishing school sirens. Within weeks of my arrival, and prior to any discussion of other ways of working, parents had circulated a petition demanding that current practices be maintained.



## **Helpful factors**

There were, however, significant factors which enabled critical reflection of the school's philosophies and practices. These included:

- the school's participation in the Learning to Learn network
- the appointment of an assistant principal with responsibility for children in their first years of schooling
- the system-wide changes to local school management, Partnerships 21 (P21)
- the introduction of a new curriculum, the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSA)

With the active support of the deputy principal, Woodville had been accepted as one of the participating schools in the Learning to Learn network in January 2000. This network, which was based on earlier DECS (Department of Education and Childhood Services) school reform initiatives, focused on implementing learning theories from current international research. Its core work was to enable staff from participating schools to access the most recent thinking about teaching and learning, and to examine their classroom practice on the basis of their new insights. Because of its obvious links with engaging pupils in the learning processes, this project was a solid foundation for commencing dialogue with staff at Woodville about the role of pupils in their school.

The appointment of an assistant principal in July 2000 highlighted the importance of each child's early years of schooling and provided the impetus for the analysis of current methodology. The acknowledgement of each child's prior learning, and the need to construct learning experiences that valued this, has explicit links to the participation of children in their schooling. The focus on the learning needs of young children was central to commencing the debate with staff and parents about ways of including children in decision-making about their learning and their school.

Although Woodville did not elect to enter the initial round of P21, DECS' state-wide introduction of local school management in 2000 challenged current understandings of the relationships between parents, staff and pupils. In describing pupils as partners in the management of their school and their learning, this model made pupil participation explicit and provided the basis for debate about the roles of pupils in schools.

The introduction of the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSA) in 2001 coincided with my appointment to Woodville and signalled to the community that DECS required curriculum change. The framework's organisation around five essential learnings (futures, identity, interdependence, thinking and communication) provided clear connections to pupils playing more active roles in their learning and democratic decision-making. SACSA built on staff professional development as a result of Learning to Learn, increased knowledge of the abilities of young children and new understandings of pupil-teacher relationships. It was also this framework that gave me permission to suggest changes to "the way we have always done it at Woodville".

I brought with me seven years of learning to work in partnership with children. My experience at my previous school had taught me that adults often underestimate children. I had many examples of children's perception, wisdom, ability to articulate their beliefs and commitment to following projects through. When questioned by staff or challenged by parents, I was able to share authentic stories of children's skills and sincerity. My learning with staff and pupils at my previous school gave me the assurance

that our experiments at Woodville to find new ways of working together would be successful.

### ***Strategies for creating change***

I adopted three intertwined strategies to begin the long process of change with staff at Woodville. The first was deliberately planned staff professional development. The second was the simultaneous restructuring of staff meetings to promote active staff participation in decision-making and the third was to redirect the school's focus onto pupils.

Because the school's agreed priority for 2001 was that all staff would become familiar with the SACSA framework, our resources (time, financial, and human) were allocated to support professional development activities. I was aware that the new framework would challenge many teachers to view curriculum as more than content to be delivered to pupils. I was further aware that the reorganisation of learning under the knowledge, skills, dispositions and abilities known as Essential Learnings within SACSA, rather than solely under traditional subjects, would question long-held practices. The processes used in all professional development activities were based on sound constructivist theories and could be adapted for implementation with younger learners. During weekly meetings staff explored the philosophy underlying the new framework; examined the documents; trialed aspects of them in their planning, teaching and evaluation and shared their experiences with their colleagues.

This emphasis on professional debate required a significant change to the school's culture and the ways in which staff contributed to staff meetings. Some of the tactics used to bring about a culture of collaboration included:

- establishing a group of staff to plan staff meetings and to publish agendas to inform staff of the processes and purposes prior to each meeting
- reaching agreement on the professional codes of conduct at staff meetings (eg attendance for the entire meeting, punctuality, participation in all aspects, demonstrating support for colleagues)
- specifically introducing co-operative activities and modelling teaching methodologies that could be used with children
- negotiating protocols to enable all staff to raise issues and participate in decision-making

While most staff readily contributed to these new ways of working, there some were reluctant to engage in any of the collaborative processes, did not wish to discuss professional issues in small groups with their colleagues and protested about changes being introduced to fulfil DECS requirements. During my first year at the school, several of those teachers resigned. However, after three years of refining staff participation in the daily operation of the school, as well as constructing the school's vision, and in goal setting, most staff are now highly skilled participants in their own learning and in sharing the educational leadership of the school.

The third tactic concurrent with professional development and developing a collegiate culture was ensuring that children's needs were central to everything that was done at Woodville. Each year a slogan has been adopted to make our focus visible to parents, staff and pupils as well as members of the wider community. With the implementation of

the new curriculum framework in 2001 our theme was “The Essential Learnings.....improving learning for all pupils”. The following year, as we focused on resilience and anti-bullying, the slogan was “Pupil welfare and learning”. In 2003, as we sought to link all the previous programs and professional development with our values, it was “Making the connections”.

### ***Strategies for promoting pupil participation***

In my first year at Woodville, I elected to work with staff members to ensure they all knew about participatory structures and had experienced the benefits of engaging with others in collaborative work. In the following year, I adopted a controversial strategy by allowing the existing pupil participation processes to fade.

When I arrived at Woodville, I discovered a pupil representative council (SRC) that was managed by one staff member. This teacher had accepted this responsibility for the past three years and was passionate about the importance of pupils having a say about aspects of the school. As well as the release time from other teaching duties, this teacher volunteered many of her lunchtimes to work with pupils. However, there were significant problems with the functioning of the SRC.

The first problem concerned the lack of support shown by the teachers. They had little connection with the SRC other than sending their class representative to weekly meetings. They did not provide their classes with time to discuss suggestions or to provide feedback to the SRC. Further, several staff regularly complained about the involvement of pupils during class time because they were “missing out on their learning”.

The second problem was the limitation of SRC business to subjects on which the adults believed that pupils should comment. Participation in school governance was restricted to electing pupil representatives to existing decision-making structures that had limited terms of reference (Hart, 1997; Morrow and Richards, 1996; Wyse 2001). They were able to plan for special days on which school uniform was not to be worn and to promote ways of reducing the litter in the schoolyard. There was little room for pupils to be innovative and to raise issues which were of importance to them.

The third problem, which was perhaps the most fundamental, was the lack of pupil engagement with the SRC. Although each class had a representative, the process for selecting these pupils determined the candidates. Younger pupils were threatened by the required formality of candidates presenting speeches prior to a secret ballot. Because of the resulting lack of candidates, many classes had their representative nominated by the teacher. Older pupils excluded themselves from the process knowing, from their previous experience, which of the more popular pupils was likely to be elected. Further, the organisation of SRC was hierarchical; it operated with an executive of older pupils under the nominal leadership of male and female presidents.

For these reasons, the SRC was counter-productive in enabling the majority of pupils to speak about their learning and their school. In spite of this, the decision to let the SRC lapse could have conveyed to pupils, staff and parents that pupil participation was not valued. This, of course, would have been contradictory to our espoused focus on pupil welfare and learning.

While allowing the previous pupil participation structures to fade, I gradually introduced new ways of allowing many pupils to share their comments about the school and to demonstrate their learning. This included inviting pupils in Years 4 and 5 to train to become school 'ambassadors'. The ambassadors welcomed visitors and took them on tours of the facilities during which they talked about their school. Pupils from each year level actively participated in talking about their learning by demonstrating aspects of their work to the parent community at the school's Annual General Meeting. All pupils acted as ambassadors for their parents on the school's Acquaintance Night. We introduced reporting processes that required active pupil involvement. Pupils contributed to interviews and also presented, in non-written form, an aspect of their learning to an authentic audience. Pupils also provided written comment about their academic and social progress as part of the reporting process.

At the same time as the trials of these initiatives, several staff members were released to visit other schools to talk with pupils and teachers about other ways of promoting pupil voice. Teachers reported back to their colleagues at whole staff meetings. Several staff professional development sessions took a critical look at these and other ways of increasing opportunities for pupils to play central roles in the daily operations of the school.

The replacement of the SRC with these alternatives allowed more pupils to share their experiences of schooling with a variety of audiences. The pupil participation initiatives also engaged all teachers working with their classes. However, the structures were largely adult-initiated and there were no formal and visible protocols for pupils to make suggestions or raise concerns. The winning of a Values Education Study grant from the federal government in 2003 enabled us to create new ways of working with pupils based on our school's values of respect, mutual trust, fairness and social cohesion.

We held a Kids' Conference week during which children were regrouped into smaller multi-aged groups working with different staff members to learn co-operative skills and ways of making the values explicit. The week culminated in a social cohesion day. Prior to the Conference Week, a small group of volunteer teachers was released to compile and "launch" a resource booklet of games and activities designed to teach specific behaviours. This acknowledged staff workload, supported staff members who did not have experience in working in these ways with pupils, encouraged congruence of expectations and promoted the importance of explicitly teaching the attitudes and skills to enable pupils to work well in groups.

An outcome of the Kids' Conference was the establishment of playground observations by volunteer staff and pupils. The observations indicated how far the values had been transferred from the classroom to the playground. As a result of feedback from pupils and staff reflection on this data, pupil action groups, known as Values in Action (VIA), were formed. The focus of these groups was to allow pupils to initiate changes they would like to see, rather than have them respond to problems. The emphasis was on creating rather than resolving issues. Pupils were selected, using a method agreed on by the children in their classes, to be members of VIA for the remainder of the year. Two volunteer staff members met with each group every fortnight. Initial reflections on VIA identified the benefits as:

- the provision of formal and visible structures of pupil participation
- an increase in the number of pupils meeting at VIA (there were 84 involved)
- the increased number of staff taking responsibility for the facilitation of these groups (there were 8)

- a range of topics generated by VIA (eg VIA Social Cohesion planned a whole school end of year ceremony and VIA Trust suggested changes to the time out room).

### ***Problems and possible pitfalls***

It has taken three years of strategic action to introduce a culture of staff collaboration and participation in decision-making; to redirect the school's focus onto pupil welfare and learning, and to initiate methods of enabling authentic pupil participation. However, the retelling of the tactics that have enabled us to progress this far has several inherent dangers.

The description of the underlying thinking and the change processes presents change merely as a managerial approach which, with adequate resourcing and appropriate professional development, results in the eventual achievement of the desired outcome. This brief overview of events at Woodville has not explored the human and emotional aspects of the changes. It has not conveyed the concerns or resistance of individual staff members and has only hinted at the anxieties of many parents. It has not acknowledged that one particular group of pupils was disenfranchised by, and therefore disenchanted with, the new pupil participation structures.

Children who currently received many rewards and much recognition under the existing ways of operation may be reluctant to pursue the recommendations proposed by some of their peers. (Howard and Johnson, 2002)

Pupils who were academically able, popular with their peers and in their last year of primary school had looked forward to becoming the executive members of the SRC. Many of them had ambitions of being the presidents of this exclusive group and felt that they were not valued in the new processes.

### ***Future possibilities for pupil participation at Woodville***

The introduction of pupil voice at Woodville has been systematic and sustained. For it to be extended so that working in partnership with pupils is an established way of operating, several inter-related factors need to be considered. These include the allocation of human, financial and physical resources, congruence of all the school's structures and systems; and staff commitment to pupil voice.

### **Resourcing**

The VES grant enabled four pairs of teachers to be released to support a structure that created greater staff and pupil involvement, and increased ownership of pupil voice structures. With the conclusion of the funded project, the additional resourcing for teacher release has ceased, posing significant questions about the sustainability of this approach to school change.

- How important is it to have more than one staff member leading this aspect of the school's work?
- How important is it for staff to continue to work in pairs (or small teams) with pupils in this way?
- How would pupils interpret the reduction of this approach?
- How could the involvement of several teachers be maintained?

If pupil voice is to be authentic, another financial consideration is submissions by the pupils through the school's budget for funding to enact some of their proposals. This raises the more specific and highly significant question about the extent to which the school's complex budgeting processes should be shared with pupils. It further raises a larger issue about the transparency of the budget process for adults, how well informed staff members are about the financial operations of the school and how confident they would be in teaching this to pupils.

The continued regular meeting of four VIA groups will necessitate designated spaces in which they can gather. Apart from the practical organisational considerations, the creation and naming of a meeting place will make visible the importance of VIA and will enable pupils to develop their collective identity and autonomy as agents of change (Thomson and Holdsworth, 2003). However, there is already considerable competition from many specialist programs needing work spaces in a crowded school.

Competing systemic demands, conflicting expectations from within the school community and a shrinking resource pool may challenge the continued long-term allocation of appropriate human, financial and physical resources to pupil participation.

### **Congruence of school's structures and systems**

Closely aligned with appropriate resourcing for genuine pupil participation is the challenge of ensuring that pupil voice is not a single, unrelated programme. Instead, principles of pupil voice need to permeate every aspect of the school's organisation and operation.

Pupil councils may engender the perception that pupils are actively involved in their school when, in practice, their voices may be restricted to formal, hierarchical meetings with agendas set by adults. In such circumstances, pupils are not informed of or engaged in everyday decision-making about their classroom, school, learning or teaching. Similarly, the creation of VIA groups at Woodville may promote the perception that pupil participation is addressed by these four groups. The danger is that the community is therefore absolved of further responsibility to look critically at what is actually occurring in all aspects of the school. If pupil voice was limited to the formal business of VIA meetings, even with enthusiastic support from all classes for each of the VIA, claims of enabling pupils to work in partnership with other members of the school community would be overstated. Some questions which will assist our critical reflection on the degree to which pupil voice permeates the school's operations include:

- Have pupils been informed about this? (eg via special events, concerns raised at staff meeting or Governing Council, changes to grounds and facilities)
- What pupil consultation process is in place for the review of policy and practice? (eg homework, time out room, appeal against suspension, dress code, bell times)
- What does this process, practice or facility say about pupils and their position/role/opinions? (eg pupils prohibited from entering certain areas such as office and staffroom, classrooms before school)
- How do adults respond to pupils' enquiries about the reasons for certain expectations?
- Is there a process for pupils to resolve unfair behaviour from adults?
- What impact has pupil participation had on decision-making and school change?

Each of these questions interrogates many of the routine customs of the school and will assist us to be alert to Alderson's caution:

...children have well-tuned antennae for tokenism and inauthentic it. (Alderson, 2000, p 244)

### **Staff commitment to pupil voice**

I acknowledged the importance of staff understanding of and commitment to pupil participation by:

- deliberately structuring collaborative experiences for staff
- making explicit the purposes and processes of participatory decision-making
- providing opportunities for staff to develop the skills required to enable them to contribution to decision-making and
- making clear the links between pupil participation and constructivist learning theories.

By allowing time for staff to become familiar with the principles and practices of participation, while simultaneously gradually introducing structures to promote greater pupil engagement, I aimed to ensure that staff members were skilled in the techniques, knowledgeable about the methods and increasingly convinced of the value of pupil voice. However, during the three years since I have been at Woodville, there has been considerable staff turnover. Some vacancies were caused by staff members deciding they did not wish to remain at the school, some resigned from DECS and others were the result of our practice of encouraging teachers to apply for promotion positions. Combined with illness, limited tenure and a variable staffing formula, these factors resulted in 12 new staff members in 2003. Although an evenly paced, sequential approach to pupil participation has been in practice for three years, a significant proportion of staff has not participated in all of it.

Further, it cannot be assumed that increased staff understanding and development of expertise automatically leads to greater belief in the importance of pupil participation. Their long-held beliefs about children and their expertise may continue to challenge our advocacy of pupil voice.

Even those who have endorsed Epstein's claim that "children's abilities to make adequate judgements are much greater than we give them credit for" (Epstein in Walford 1998, p38) face the dilemma of listening to what their pupils are saying, while at the same time trying to teach them to express themselves in acceptable ways. Teachers at Woodville take seriously their responsibility to teach their pupils appropriate ways of seeking change. Non-compliant behaviour may certainly convey pupil response but it is often unsuccessful in achieving the desired outcome for the pupil. Within the context of busy classrooms with a multiplicity of competing demands, there is a tendency to disregard underlying causes of behaviour and focus instead on only the overt behaviour. Another difficulty is for staff to listen to the message when pupils are telling us something we don't want to hear. Considering the following questions may assist them in listening to what the pupils are saying:

- Are there opportunities for informal as well as formal conversations with individual pupils?
- Have we structures in place which encourage us to consider and discuss with the pupil, non-compliant and disruptive behaviours?

- As a whole staff do we examine aspects of pupils' school experiences to identify those school structures that may generate undesired behaviours?
- Have we processes in place to enable us to reflect on challenging feedback?

Enacting the advice of Hill and his colleagues, who use children's own words in summarising ways to include their perspectives, may support adults at Woodville in their endeavour to hear what children are saying.

STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN....stop and give time to children, look at children to give them attention and listen much more completely to what children are saying. (Hill, 1998, p12)



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