



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

'Take more time to actually listen': students' reflections on participation and negotiation in school

Citation for published version:

McCluskey, GG, Brown, J, Munn, P, Lloyd, G, Hamilton, L, Sharp, S & MacLeod, G 2013, 'Take more time to actually listen': students' reflections on participation and negotiation in school' *British Educational Research Journal*, vol. 39, no. 2, pp. 287-301. DOI: 10.1080/01411926.2012.659720

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/01411926.2012.659720](https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2012.659720)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

British Educational Research Journal

Publisher Rights Statement:

© McCluskey, G. G., Brown, J., Munn, P., Lloyd, G., Hamilton, L., Sharp, S., & MacLeod, G. (2013). 'Take more time to actually listen': students' reflections on participation and negotiation in school. *British Educational Research Journal*, 39(2), 287-301. 10.1080/01411926.2012.659720

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



‘Take More Time to Actually Listen’

G. McCluskey, J. Brown, P. Munn, L. Hamilton, G. Lloyd, G. Macleod and S. Sharp

University of Edinburgh

Author for correspondence:
Dr Gillean McCluskey
University of Edinburgh
Moray House School of Education
Holyrood Road
Edinburgh
EH8 8AQ

Gillean.McCluskey@ed.ac.uk

0131 651 6637

Introduction

Behaviour in schools is an emotive topic and one of enduring political interest and sensitivity. The media often portrays schools as violent and dangerous places and young people as ever more unruly (Brown & Munn 2008). This paper explores the views of students about indiscipline, personal safety and aggression, as well as their reflections on the systems and structures which schools put in place to nurture the skills, knowledge and confidence they need in their personal and social lives.

The paper draws on findings from the most recent national study of behaviour in primary and secondary schools in Scotland (Munn et al 2009). The study is conducted at regular 3 yearly intervals and provides a clear and robust picture of positive and negative behaviour in publicly funded schools and of current policy and practice in relation to managing behaviour. The research examines the views of teachers, head teachers, support staff, key local education authority personnel and students and allows comparisons over time. This paper focuses on the views of school students, in acknowledgement of the ways in which their views are still only rarely heard in debates and decision making in education. Although the discussion draws on research in one country, the questions raised may provide a useful starting point elsewhere for those concerned to improve the ways in which schools contribute to the positive personal and social development of children and young people in general.

The findings from the study reveal some interesting new data as well as confirming findings from previous research. In contrast with common representations of young people's behaviour and school indiscipline in the media (see MacMillan 2002),

findings relating to standards of student behaviour were positive overall. Perhaps surprisingly, secondary teachers were found to be significantly more positive about student behaviour than in the previous study (Wilkin et al. 2006) and very confident about managing behaviour in general. Most students in primary and secondary schools reported that behaviour was usually good around the school and inside the classroom. However, students also had some very clear concerns about what happens in school, particularly with regard to feelings of safety, fair and equitable reward systems and opportunities for participation in decision-making. There was found to be a high level of scepticism about mechanisms for participation in schools, along with numerous suggestions about how to improve this. The need to *'Take more time to actually listen'* was reiterated in each school in different ways and about a variety of issues.

This paper first briefly outlines the context of the larger study; its aims and methods. It then details approaches to data gathering with students, before moving on to explore the findings. The views of primary and secondary students are examined separately. Although they share many similar concerns, it was also clear that there were important differences in the views and experiences of children and young people at different stages of schooling. Finally, the reflections, criticisms and suggestions made by children and young people in the study are discussed within the context of larger questions about pupil voice and the meanings of active citizenship in school.

The main study: aims and method

The research questions were developed from the research literature in this area. They were:

1. What do a range of stakeholders perceive and experience to be the nature and extent of positive and negative behaviour in publicly funded Scottish schools in 2009?
2. Are these perceptions significantly different from those in 2006?
3. What kinds of approaches are typically used to encourage positive behaviour and manage negative behaviour? Are staff aware of these and if so are they perceived as effective?
4. What kinds of training and support are provided to staff about managing behaviour? How effective are these in the opinion of participants?
5. How confident are teaching and support staff in promoting positive behaviour and in managing negative behaviour?
6. How are serious incidents followed up?

There were four main strands to the research design overall: a large-scale survey of teachers, head teachers and support staff in primary and secondary schools (N=3587); school visits to 7 typical primary schools and 8 typical secondary schools; and local authority interviews with key personnel (N=32). More detail on the methods of the study as a whole is available at

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/11/20101438/4>

The framework for analysis was based on the 2006 questionnaire and built on that used by Gray and Sime for the Elton Committee (DES 1989).

Gathering students' views: aims and methods

The questions developed to explore key issues with students focused on:

1. Positive behaviour and negative behaviour around the school
2. Positive behaviour and negative behaviour in the classroom
3. School activities to promote positive behaviour
4. Student wellbeing
5. Teachers' interventions
6. Participation in decision-making.

Students' views were gathered through school visits, using two main methods of data collection: individual surveys and focus group discussions. Schools were selected on the basis of recent national inspection reports and were chosen to achieve a balance in terms of rural/urban location, denominational/non-denominational status and proportion of students entitled to free school meals. They were typical in achieving an average rating for behaviour in national inspections. A total of 250 primary students and 316 secondary students completed the questionnaire, with an even spread of male and female students. One P5 (age 8-9 years) and one P7 (age 10-11 years) and one S1 (age 11-12 years) and one S3 (age 14-15 years) class were chosen at random by each school to participate in the questionnaire. The research team worked in pairs to administer the questionnaires in class time and were on hand to help students who had difficulty understanding the questions. Overall 76 primary students and 104 secondary students participated in the focus groups. Students in the focus groups were selected by senior school staff who were also asked to ensure a range of students and of views were included. The focus groups aimed to gather data in ways that the children and young people would find interesting, accessible and relevant. As a result activities and scenarios were used to ease involvement, help them feel comfortable

with unfamiliar adults and stimulate discussion. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured for all participants and special attention was given to reassuring children and young people that their opinions would not be shared with teachers. The questionnaire findings are reports of general student views and should not be taken to represent any features of any particular school in the sample. It should also be borne in mind that there are limits to any broader generalisations that can be drawn from this data because of the small sample size and number of schools.

Students' views in primary schools: key findings

In keeping with much previous research (Kane et al. 2007, Hamill & Boyd, 2002, Johnstone & Munn 1992), primary children's comments about school were generally positive and related broadly to general issues of positive school ethos and the quality of relationships in school. Typical examples of student responses included, [*This is*] *A happy place to be* (PS4) (PS' is an abbreviation for 'Primary School'. 'SS', occurs later and refers to secondary school) and *My school is happy, kind and pretty big* (PS3). Unsurprisingly, salient relationships included those with peers, as well as good relations with teachers and support staff. Positive bonds with peers were particularly important for children, and most primary students reported seeing students supporting each other in all or most of their classes. Similarly, having *very nice teachers* (PS1) who were approachable was also important to children. 70% of students agreed with the statement, *I know I could ask my teacher for help when I don't understand*.

Most children reported that behaviour was generally good in their school. Although low-level disruptive behaviour, such as students calling out or talking and 'mucking about', was perceived to be fairly common in most or some lessons, over 70% of

children agreed that, ‘students listen to each other with respect’, in all or most of their lessons and nearly 80% of students reported listening to teachers in all or most of their lessons. Strong listening skills were rated very highly by primary children, especially in terms of listening to teacher instructions. On occasions, listening skills were related explicitly to being quiet and ‘not talking’, an issue which featured consistently in their accounts of both good and bad behaviour (e.g. either knowing the circumstances where it is unacceptable to talk or talking at inappropriate moments). Moreover, pro-social skills - dimensions of emotional literacy and responsible citizenship (SEAL 2005, Curriculum for Excellence 2004), such as taking into account other people’s feelings, behaving in a considerate manner and being polite, were all very much in evidence in children’s accounts of good behaviour, for example; *Being gentle; being honest; saying please and thank you; being kind* (PS6).

Although there were many questions about behaviour, there was also a number of opportunities for children to comment on ways that schools could encourage strong relationships and positive personal development. The table below shows their experiences of such systems and structures.¹

Insert Table 1 about here.

The most frequently identified supports (and most highly rated by students in focus groups) related to reward systems, pupil participation and adult supervision of children:

- Golden time and rewards (I) - 96%;

*The survey data did not permit exploration of the characteristics of pupils beyond age and gender.

- Pupils involved in developing ideas and activities in the school (S) - 95%;
- Staff on duty at playtime (F) - 96%.

Interestingly, this provides a marked contrast with the views of young people in secondary schools where the emphasis was found to be on punishment and sanctions. Student concerns about bullying did not feature to the same extent as in the accounts of secondary school students; a finding supported by other research. Oliver and Candappa (2003) for example found that 51% of primary pupils reported being bullied during the previous term, compared with 28% in secondary school pupils. Nevertheless, specific bullies were named by individual children as being intimidating and causing them difficulties in school. Questionnaire findings showed that the primary students had high levels of awareness regarding bullying and over 85% of children responded positively to the statement that their school used 'Rules, expectations and support against bullying'. Children appeared to have considerable awareness of the emotional impact of bullying and they valued teachers who dealt with disputes and misbehaviour fairly and equitably. Over 50% of primary students indicated that peer mediation was used in their school, but also noted that it did not appear to be supported consistently by staff. However, they appreciated teachers who had honed their listening skills and took into account the views of all involved.

The questionnaire findings suggest that nearly all students were aware that in their school, students were involved in developing ideas and activities in the school (e.g. through a pupil council). The focus groups allowed greater exploration of this issue. While student councils seemed to be appreciated by students, some cynicism was apparent in focus groups in terms of their impact on decision making processes. The children offered examples of being consulted about an issue (e.g. colour of school

uniform) but not being adequately informed about the outcome of the decision and why the final decision had been made. In some schools, children said that they knew that there was a student council, but that it did not meet on a regular basis.

Children talked with enthusiasm about other formal school-wide, opportunities for participation including dedicated and specialist committees such as eco committees, transport committees and house captain meetings. Circle Time was often seen as a popular mechanism for decision making. Suggestion boxes were also mentioned and one focus group talked enthusiastically about how, in their school, these were located around their school for different purposes. These were individual boxes where children could make complaints, report a worry or a problem or pass on good ideas. The children here were eager to explain that they also had ‘golden letter’ boxes. The ‘golden letter’ box offered the children an opportunity to recommend one of their peers for a ‘golden letter’ which would recognize a particular personal achievement and be read out at school assembly before a copy was sent home. This system was highly valued by these students and, in their view, was taken seriously by staff.

Although there were notable exceptions such as these, children generally did not seem to have a high level of confidence in most of the systems developed to ensure active participation. Despite a number of mechanisms being in place, these did not operate as efficiently and smoothly as they should, and children often noted issues of ineffective communication between children and teacher groups and a lack of consistency in organization on the part of staff. Students were often willing and eager to offer suggestions to improve these systems. For example, one student proposed having a student ambassador to liaise between teachers and students, acting

as a key mediator or conduit between student and teachers. Many children, in different ways suggested that *how* teachers listened and the social context of being listened to was of crucial importance: *Take more time to actually listen. Ask us in comfortable situations, not in front of other people* (PS2).

Overall, findings from the children in these primary schools reveal that they valued positive and caring relations in school and generally felt that their schools were happy, caring and calm places. They stressed the significance of fairness and active listening skills especially in dealing with misbehaviour. Concerns about safety and bullying did not appear to feature strongly in general, although some specific bullies and bullying behaviour was reported to cause difficulties. While they gave a variety of examples of opportunities for participation in primary schools there was a general perception that such mechanisms for participation needed to be more effective and be followed through much more rigorously by teachers. Some children offered imaginative and insightful suggestions for improving consultation and involvement in decision making in school.

Students' views in secondary schools: key findings

The views and understandings of secondary school students about behaviour and relationships are outlined before examining their reflections on the school structures and systems which aim to promote and nurture positive relationships and personal development. This is followed by exploration of students' key concerns about rewards and sanctions, and opportunities for involvement in decision making.

Most students in these secondary schools reported that behaviour was usually good around the school and within classrooms. Student focus group discussion also generally elicited comments about the schools being caring, safe and supportive. One group said, *'I think [this school] is good because it cares for its students...you feel valued... there are good teachers'* (SS3). The youngest students were particularly enthusiastic about the range of lunch-time and after school activities and many were involved in one or more of these. They also appreciated the greater range of subjects than in primary school and the greater freedom to make choices, for example, about leaving the school grounds at lunchtime. In keeping with much previous research, for most students, their favourite part of school revolved around social interactions with friends and the presence of a good number of social areas.

In comparison with findings from the primary school questionnaire, however, there were lower levels of satisfaction overall; only 43% of students reported that they were 'usually' happy coming to school and 10% stated that they were 'not very often' happy about coming to school. 25% of students reported that they got into trouble 'sometimes' although only 1% stated that they 'always' got into trouble. When asked about behaviour around the school and in the school grounds, 50% of students reported that most were well behaved. The findings shown in the table below reveal that incidents of physical violence and aggression were low although it is also clear that the number of students 'saying rude or aggressive things to other students' and 'pushing or being aggressive to other students' was relatively high.

Insert Table 2 about here

There were also some shared concerns about school raised within the focus groups. These focused on concerns about safety, peer relations, bullying and teacher attitudes to bullying, with students saying, for example, *'I don't like shouting and swearing'*, (SS4) and, *'I don't like bullying and teachers who don't do anything about it'* (SS5). In one school, students talked about drug use (cannabis) and selling around the school (SS6). Again, the youngest students had some different concerns from those who were older. They raised issues regarding the difficulty of adjusting to secondary school such as negotiating a larger school site and adjusting to interacting with different teachers and new peers. Many students felt strongly about dirty toilets or untidy school grounds. Where the school was in a new or refurbished building, students remarked favourably on this, *'It's a new building with good facilities, clean and colourful'* (SS7). Around 50% of students reported that there were lessons in their school focusing on personal and social relations. Around the same percentage noted that there were staff on duty at breaktime, though there was no strong recognition of any difference this might make to student safety or social relations. One group felt that there was a need for *'more lessons about how we feel/behave'*. The idea of support from student mentors was mentioned in some schools. Perhaps recalling positive primary school experience, one group suggested, *'Buddies, playground pals would be a good idea as it would stop trouble at breaks and lunchtimes'* (SS1).

As with the primary questionnaire, there were questions about different kinds of support available in each school. As can be seen from the table below, most students reported that their school offered opportunities to talk through issues and find solutions. However, it is of concern that 20% of students reported that their school

failed to provide opportunities to do this. Most students reported that their school sent students to another class or a base for extra help or support, that there was support from staff or guidance teachers and that there were other staff such as classroom assistants who helped out in class. From discussion in the focus groups, it seemed that young people did not see these as central to the question of what works best to improve behaviour and relationships.

Insert Table 3 about here

TABLE 3 SECONDARY PUPIL'S VIEWS OF SCHOOL ACTIVITIES TO PROMOTE POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR

Q10. Below is a list of things that some schools use to help pupils to behave well and to stop bad behaviour. Please tick ONE box in each row to show whether your school uses any of these. Tick "Yes" if it is used in your school some or all of the time and "No" if it is never used. If you don't know just tick the "Don't Know" box.

		Yes	No	Don't Know	
		%	%	%	N
A	Talking about behaviour as part of your school's rules or values, e.g. at assemblies	*87	7	6	314
B	Lessons about how you feel, get on with others and behave	46	33	22	313
C	Rules, expectations and support against bullying	85	8	7	313
D	Buddies/playground pals	37	46	16	313
E	Peer mediation	19	35	46	313
F	Staff on duty at playtime/breaktime	55	27	18	314
G	Circle time	6	85	9	314
H	Talking things through, sorting problems and finding solutions	62	20	17	313
I	Golden time/rewards	27	60	13	314
J	Punishment exercises	92	5	3	315

K	Detention	92	6	2	315
L	Being sent to see a senior teacher or headteacher	92	4	4	315
M	Support from other staff or guidance teachers	84	6	10	315
N	Time out	31	52	17	315
O	Another class or base where pupils can go to get extra help or support	81	8	11	314
P	Other staff who help out in class; teacher assistants	78	13	9	312
Q	Meetings with your parents/carers and other staff who can help	66	18	17	315
R	Interesting range of subjects and classes and choices	68	19	13	313
S	Pupils involved in developing ideas and activities in the school (e.g. pupil council)	74	11	15	315
T	Exclusion/suspension	89	4	6	315

* percentages rounded to the nearest whole number and may not sum to 100

Students' comments about teachers were often positive. They mirrored findings of previous research (Tisdall, Milne et al. 2010, McCluskey 2008), and revealed that they liked teachers who were friendly, who listened, did not jump to conclusions and were consistently fair. A sense of humour was seen as especially helpful to good teacher-student relations and in terms of building trust. Most students surveyed agreed with the statement 'I know I can ask a teacher for help when I don't understand'.

Some lessons were seen as boring, though others were identified as lively and engaging. Students often asserted that learning could and should be fun. One group of students talked, for example, about a regular Thursday activity in a German class, '*They weren't just games, you were learning, but it was fun*' (SS4).

The most common punishments included punishment exercises, detention and being sent to see a senior teacher or the head teacher (although the latter may also operate as

a support to students). When asked in the questionnaire for their views on effectiveness of interventions to help them behave well, students reported that the following worked best: exclusion, being sent to a senior teacher or the head teacher, rewards, detention and punishment exercises. However, the impact of punishment was also a concern explored by some students in the focus groups. Some suggested that an ineffective punishment was likely to make a student more determined to behave badly with that particular teacher. Some students suggested alternative and more punitive punishments than were already in place such as '*make them wear a dunce's hat*' or '*tie them to a chair*' (SS4). It was also felt by some that punishment had no tangible impact other than on students who were already well behaved. This perhaps explains the popularity of exclusion (for those not being excluded) as it provided respite from negative behaviour?

The majority of student responses identified a clear need for more systematic and embedded reward systems in schools. For example questionnaire findings demonstrated that 60% of students indicated that their school did not use rewards and there was strong support for rewards as a way to encourage more positive behaviour. Some student suggestions were: '*Include rewards not just punishments*' (SS6), '*You don't get noticed if you are well behaved*' (SS7) or '*You have to try really really hard to get rewards if you're a good student*' (SS3).

Students were not asked directly about fairness in the questionnaire, but the focus group discussions revealed some strong views about fair and unfair teacher interventions. Students outlined the perceived unfairness of teachers and being talked down to. Typical comments included, '*Some teachers don't let you explain*', '[they]

jump to conclusions' (SS1), *'you don't get a chance to say anything, 'not allowed to question'* (SS2), *'teachers treat you like you are 5 year olds'* (SS5). A very common comment in each school was that teachers do not listen to students carefully enough. Another frequent comment about unfairness was a dislike of teachers shouting. *'Teachers not following the discipline system'* and *'no follow up on bullying'* (SS8) were also noted as concerns. Punishments such as writing out a passage several times or *'turning up for detention and there's no one there'* or finding *'a teacher is there but you can do what you want'* (SS4) were strongly criticised. In one school, and with no apparent sense of irony, students talked about a room called the 'inclusion room' and suggested it was an effective deterrent because it was an unpleasant and lonely place to be. They appeared to view the inclusion room as a fair and appropriate approach to tackling bad behaviour.

There were some strongly held views about boys' and girls' behaviour and also some concerns about inequitable treatment by staff on basis of gender, *'When a boy hits a girl that's abuse but if a girl hits a boy that's not so serious'* (SS4)... One student was supported by others when she suggested that *'some girls fight more than some boys'* (SS8). This view was echoed elsewhere although a boy countered, *'but boys are more violent'* (SS1). Another boy in this school felt that *'Boys get treated more harshly. Girls can make up sob stories'* (SS1). Favouritism by some teachers was a key concern for some students. There was an assertion of the subjectivity of behaviour management processes, and that, for example, whether someone was likely to be excluded depended on which child it was and which member of staff. A comment was also made in one school (SS1) about the impact of reputation on whole classes as

well as individual students, so that, for example, a class could come to be known as a 'bad class'.

In one group a key distinction was made between '*a carry on*' and '*a real fight*', with a feeling that teachers did not understand this important difference. One boy raised this issue saying that teachers should be sensitive to the differences and intentions behind these behaviours (SS3). The difficulty of resenting a teacher but being unwilling to 'tell' on friends or other students was also noted by some. Students sometimes raised quite complex questions about behaviour, speaking, for example, about how interpretations of poor behaviour were sometimes situation specific or how individual staff reacted differently to similar behaviour. The predominant feeling here was about the unfairness of adults; for example, in giving punishments to all as a response to one student's poor behaviour, or giving out a punishment for forgetting homework on one occasion. In one school a student suggested, '*Instead of having punishment ask why they did it*' (SS3). Another group highlighted an interesting issue about fairness and the ways in which teachers sometimes work on assumption; '*some people don't know what they've done*' (SS1).

One question in the questionnaire asked directly about student participation in decision-making in school. 74% reported that there was, for example, a student council, in their school but only 62% of students said that there were opportunities in school to develop personal decision-making through 'talking things through, sorting problems and findings solutions'. However, Circle Time was reported to be uncommon in these secondary schools and most students did not know whether there was peer mediation in their school.

Again, findings from the questionnaires were complemented here by information gathered within the focus groups. Students identified a number of different mechanisms set up to increase their participation in decision-making. These included student councils, committees, discussions, questionnaires, prefects who passed on views to senior management on general issues and on single identified issues such as 'eco clubs'. Two school groups noted that the Guidance Team, headed by a deputy head teacher had asked for their views, for example about bullying, through a questionnaire (In Scottish secondary schools the Guidance team comprises promoted teaching staff with specific responsibility for the pastoral care and personal support of all students). In one school, it was suggested that there was a need for the head teacher to be more visible around the school and talk to students more. There was a general sense that secondary schools were hierarchical institutions where the views of senior students were taken much more seriously by teachers.

Students suggested that student councils were still tokenistic. It was also suggested that student council representatives did not accurately represent the majority of opinions in school. One group noted that although students had a chance to vote for a representative, their teachers could veto student selections. It was noted in another school that although they did have class representatives for student council meetings, they '*never really have them* [the meetings]' (SS1). This suggests that the feedback from meetings is not seen as a priority and that communication about decisions is not always shared. The only report from students of a specific outcome from student council meetings was that one council had recently been successful in getting soap in the students' toilets.

A range of suggestions for increasing student participation in decision-making was made. These included a suggestion box so that issues could be raised anonymously, extending opportunities for communication through student assemblies with greater opportunities to ask questions, encouraging students to email school management, more meetings, more questionnaires and greater use of Circle time. Most students agreed that structures for consultation were in place but seemed to feel that it '*never really changes things*' (SS1). In keeping with findings from previous research (Deuchar 2009) a number of students felt that they felt they had had more of a say in primary school. Overall, there was little evidence of active student engagement in school decision-making and most students felt that they did not have a voice in the school.

The main findings from the student questionnaire and the focus group interviews with students in these 8 secondary schools present an interesting picture of their views and experiences. Misbehaviour was typically of a low level nature, but seemed to involve a large number of students, reflecting other recent findings (Brown and Winterton 2010). In contrast with primary students, they were less happy in school, and had more concerns about bullying, safety and social relations in general. Some students felt that boys' behaviour and girls' behaviour was different and treated differently by staff. Students had strong feelings about fair and unfair teacher interventions. They talked about the impact of lack of trust by teachers and frustration with staff who 'jumped to conclusions' although there was also praise for teachers who listened, were fair, had a sense of humour and who provided variety in their teaching methods. When asked about opportunities to participate in decision-making in school, there was

a high level of scepticism about mechanisms for such participation and numerous suggestions for potential improvements.

Discussion

The main focus of this research was on behaviour in schools. The findings provide strong evidence that teachers and students feel that relationships are healthy, that children and young people feel safe in school and that there are clear systems and structures in place which foster positive personal and social development. These general findings are important in themselves and particularly so because there is also evidence of a significant and encouraging shift over time in teacher views on the behaviour of students and their confidence in dealing with difficult behaviour.

However, the views of the primary and secondary students that emerge from these findings are complex. Although students were ready in their praise for good teaching and teachers, their comments were also highly critical at times and should provoke serious reflection on some key aspects of the wider remit of schools to nurture the skills, knowledge and confidence of young people in their learning and in their lives and relationships in general. This discussion focuses on the areas where students seemed aware of a discontinuity between teachers' views and their own lived experiences. It follows students' own concerns to look beyond behaviour to the larger questions which troubled them; about safety, the use of rewards and sanctions, and opportunities for active and authentic participation in decision-making in school.

Research has often indicated that students and teachers view schools differently. The research on bullying, for example, frequently suggests that schools feel they deal

fairly well with the issue, while students, particularly in secondary schools, disagree (Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Levinson & Sparkes, 2003; Renold, 2002; Thurlow, 2001). It was evident in this research that despite the efforts of schools, feelings about personal safety were often at the forefront of students' minds. Concerns about bullying and verbal aggression were raised in focus group discussions; an issue supported by findings from other surveys which focus on the lives of young people (MORI 2009). Feelings about safety in schools varied, but were a particular concern for students in secondary schools. This may seem odd in light of the priority given to school safety in policy terms, and deployment of surveillance technologies including CCTV cameras, the computer-based monitoring of attendance contact with home through texting and swipe cards in schools (Lloyd & Ching 2003). It is interesting that none of these recent developments was felt to improve a sense of security among students.

A further concern may be noted in the area of rewards and sanctions. Although all the schools surveyed 'used a multi-pronged approach to promote positive behaviour and respond to negative behaviour' (Munn et al. 2009, x), children and young people's experience of this was mixed. They valued an ethos based on rewards and recognition of endeavour but many noted that teachers often relied instead on punishments or sanctions, particularly in secondary schools. It may seem paradoxical, then, that students seemed in favour of relatively harsh punishments, such as wearing a dunce's hat or being tied to a chair or sent to an 'Inclusion Room'; a place described as so inhospitable as to provide a deterrent to disruption. These suggestions from students might be dismissed as representative of an emotional and social immaturity, but it is also possible that their views expose something about what children learn

from the modeling of teachers. Students in schools may learn that punishment per se is valued by adults, and society more generally, as an appropriate response to conflict and misbehaviour. They learn to equate more serious misbehaviour with a need for more serious punishment. Previous research has highlighted student views that punishment has only limited value and effectiveness in dealing with issues that are of central importance to them (McCluskey 2008). Conceivably their calls for troublesome peers, for example, to '*wear a dunce's hat*' represent an attempt to extend the common though faulty systems with which they are familiar.

Perhaps most telling, in view of the range and specificity of the comments and criticisms, were student concerns about opportunities to participate in school decision-making. The ability to listen and empathize with peers is identified as among the key social skills known to help children integrate and cope with day-to-day life in schools (Beinart et al 2002). It would seem essential then, that schools model active listening, and provide ways for students to develop those same skills in their own interactions. Despite this, opportunities for children and young people to discuss important issues still seemed under-developed in each of the schools. Although all schools included Personal and Social Education in the curriculum, some students felt this was inadequate in addressing their concerns. Sellman notes that Personal and Social Education is often 'taught' as a lesson because 'many schools construct students as citizens 'to be' rather than citizens 'in situ' (Sellman 2009, p1). He suggests that attempts to increase student participation in decision making falter because they do not adequately consider the complexities of cultural change required by schools. He notes, 'One such aspect of transformation is the need to reassess power relations between teachers, other adults in schools, and students' (Sellman 2009, p2). This

seems to be borne out by the experiences of students in these schools. Many of the schools had, for example, an 'Eco-committee'. Discussion about the effects of climate change and the need for schools to be more respectful of the environment is in some senses an 'easy' place for schools to allow student participation, when so many today agree on the basic principle of working towards a more sustainable future. The topics that school councils and groups discussed were often of this kind; laudable but not in any real and immediate sense, genuinely controversial or likely to demand skills of reasoning or critical engagement. There were no discussions or consultations, for example, about whether, students should have the right to use the internet to share their views on the performance of their teachers, or whether secondary schools should support such student actions as anti-war walkouts (Cunningham and Lavallete 2004; Britton 2010). Equally, there was nothing in student accounts to indicate development or progress in level of debate or active participation in decision making in school as they moved from primary to secondary stages of schooling.

This lack of opportunity to engage in discussion about issues directly affecting them seems to resonate with student concerns about the need for more authentic mechanisms and structures to enhance their participation in decision-making in school overall. As noted earlier, both primary and secondary students offered a range of creative and practical suggestions for developing such structures, many of which have proven to be effective where tried (Alderson 2000). It is interesting to note two particular points made by students here. Secondary students commented that they felt they had 'more of a say' when they were in primary school. Younger secondary students also noted that senior students had 'more of a say'. This finding is supported

by a recent longitudinal study of democratic educational practice (Deuchar 2009) and may suggest that something very important is lost at the point of transition to secondary schools, a level of trust in the teacher/student relationship that takes several years to re-establish; and then probably only for that minority students who then stay on at school for longest.

The link between positive school ethos and student participation in school life has been highlighted in a number of policy initiatives (Better Behaviour Better Learning 2001; Education for Citizenship 2002) as well as empirical studies (Hahn 2008, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald and Schulz 2001). Brown and Winterton's recent review suggested that 'the extent to which school structures and processes contribute to indiscipline... is seldom considered' (2010, 38) and that schools which emphasised listening to children tended to deal with difficult behaviour more successfully. The findings from this study indicate that schools may still be struggling to find inclusive ways of listening to students and acknowledging that, at present, there are still voices which are not being heard. The enthusiasm of the children who spoke about their school's system of suggestion boxes, worry boxes and the 'golden letter box' stands out perhaps because it was evident that children and staff invested these boxes with shared value and meaning.

When these children and young people ask for *teachers to actually listen*, they call on adults to share in conversations and debate about issues that matter to them (Tisdall 2009) premised on an understanding that action and change may be a necessary consequence of listening. In the context of broader concerns about children and young people in the UK, these findings have an important place. The first joint report of the

UK Children's Commissioners to the UN (2008) and OECD Report on child wellbeing in rich countries (2007) highlighted significant concerns about children and young people across the UK. Schools occupy a unique place in society and have a unique opportunity to help address these concerns by responding to the call to 'actually listen'.

References

- Alderson, P. (2000) School Students' Views on School Councils and Daily Life at School, *Children and Society*, 14 (2), 121-134.
- Beinart, S., Anderson, B., Lee, S. & D.Utting, (2002) *Youth at Risk? A National Survey of Risk Factors Protective Factors and Problem Behaviour among Young People in England, Scotland and Wales* (London, Communities that Care).
- Britton, A. (2010) The Citizenship Teacher and Controversial Issues, Paper presented to *Democracy and Citizenship in Schools* seminar series, University of Edinburgh, 21 May 2010.
- Brown, J., & Munn, P. (2008) 'School violence' as a Social Problem: Charting the Rise of the Problem and the Emerging Specialist Field', *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 18, (3), 219 — 230.
- Brown, J. & Winterton, M. (2010) *Violence in Schools: What is Really Happening?* (Macclesfield, British Educational Research Association).
- Cunningham, S. & Lavallete, M. (2004) 'Active Citizens' or 'irresponsible truants'? , School student strikes against the war, *Critical Social Policy*, 24 (2), 255-269.
- Department for Children, Schools & Families (2005) *Social and emotional aspects of learning for secondary schools* (Nottingham, DCSF Publications).
- Department of Education & Science (1989) *Discipline in Schools* Report of the Committee of Enquiry chaired by Lord Elton (London, HMSO).
- Deuchar, R. (2009) 'Seen and Heard, and Then Not Heard: Scottish Pupils' Experience of Democratic Practice During the Transition from Primary to Secondary School', *Oxford Review of Education*, 35 (1), 23-40.

- Hahn, C. (2008) Education for Citizenship and Democracy in the United States, in: J. Arthur, I. Davies & C. Hahn (Eds) *The Sage Handbook of Education for Citizenship and Democracy* (London, Sage), pp.263-278.
- Johnstone, M. & Munn, P. (1992) *Discipline in Scottish Schools* (Edinburgh, Scottish Council for Research in Education).
- Levinson, Martin P. & A. Sparkes (2003) Gypsy Masculinities and the School-Home Interface: exploring contradictions and tensions, *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 24(5), 587 — 603.
- Lloyd, R., & Ching, C. (2003) *School Security Concerns*. Research Report RR419 (London, DfES).
- MacMillan, K. (2002) 'Narratives of Social Disruption: Education News in the British Tabloid Press', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 23, (1), 27–38.
- McCluskey, G. (2008) Exclusion from School: What can 'included' Pupils Tell Us? *British Educational Research Journal*, 34(4), 447-466.
- MORI, Market and Opinion Research International (2009) *Youth survey 2008: Young People in Mainstream Education*.
http://www.yjb.gov.uk/Publications/Resources/Downloads/MORI_08_fullreport_EDU.pdf (accessed: Jan 2010).
- Munn, P., Sharp, S., Lloyd, G., Macleod, G., McCluskey, G., Brown, J. & Hamilton, L. (2009) *Behaviour in Scottish Schools* (Edinburgh, The Scottish Government).
- Neill, S. R. St. J. (2002) *Unacceptable Pupil Behaviour: a Survey Analysed for the National Union of Teachers* (University of Warwick, Warwick).

- Norwich, B. & Kelly, N. (2004) Pupils' Views on Inclusion: Moderate Learning Difficulties and Bullying in Mainstream and Special Schools, *British Educational Research Journal*, 30 (1), 43 — 65.
- Renold, E. (2002) Presumed Innocence: (Hetero)Sexual, Heterosexist and Homophobic Harassment among Primary School Girls and Boys, *Childhood* .9(4), 415–434.
- Scottish Executive (2002) *Education for Citizenship* (Edinburgh, HMSO).
- Scottish Executive (2001) *Better Behaviour – Better Learning: Report of the Discipline Task Group*, (Edinburgh, HMSO).
- Sellman, E. (2011) Peer Mediation Services for Conflict Resolution in Schools: What transformations in activity characterise successful implementation? *British Educational Research Journal*, 37 (1), 45-60.
- Thurlow, C. (2001) Naming the ‘Outsider Within’: Homophobic Pejoratives and the Verbal Abuse of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual High-School Pupils, *Journal of Adolescence*, 24, 25–38.
- Oliver, C. & Candappa, M. (2003). Tackling bullying: listening to the views of children and young people, Department for Education and Skills and ChildLine, Nottingham, available at, <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR400.pdf>
- Tisdall, K., Milne, S., Gwanzura-Ottmoller, F. & Sher, J. (2010) *Having a Say at School* (Edinburgh, Children in Scotland).
- UK Children’s Commissioners’ Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2008) <http://www.childcom.org.uk/uploads/publications/61.pdf>

UNICEF (2007) *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child wellbeing in rich countries*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

<http://www.unicef.org/media/files/ChildPovertyReport.pdf>.

Wilkin, A. Moor, H., Johnson, F. & Kinder, K. (2006) *Behaviour in Scottish Schools* (Edinburgh, HMSO).