1 The national context for pupil consultation

The school context

Schools have changed less over the last 20 years or so than young people have changed and many young people struggle to reconcile the often complex relationships and responsibilities of their life out of school with their life in school. In school, many young people claim that they continue to be 'treated like children' and so become increasingly disengaged. Moreover, some develop a negative sense of themselves as learners, a feeling that they do not matter, quite early in their school careers.

Consulting young people is one way of responding to both these situations. Being consulted can help pupils feel that they are respected as individuals and as a body within the school. It can encourage them to feel that they belong, and that they are being treated in an adult way. Pupils who are at risk of disengaging may come back on board if they think that they matter to the school. Schools where pupils are consulted are likely to be places which have built a strong sense of inclusive membership, where differences among pupils are accepted, and where opportunities for dialogue and support are made available to those who find learning a struggle.

If we want to improve pupils' achievements and commitment then we may need to take our agenda for change, at least in part, from what they can tell us about teaching, learning and schooling. But consultation has to be genuine and pupils need to be sure that teachers are really interested in what they have to say, that their views will be given careful consideration, and that they will also receive feedback on what they have said and some explanation of any decisions taken as a result of that consultation.

At one level, teachers are always consulting pupils, checking whether they understand something, whether they have completed the task and want additional work and so on. But we are talking here about something more sustained and far-reaching. Over the last few years both the range of topics and the manner of consultation have been extended. Teachers might want:

- an occasional large-scale 'referendum' where the opinions of pupils in one or all year cohorts are canvassed
- to build up a regular pattern of evaluative feedback in lessons
- to understand, through a series of one-to-one or small group discussions, how members of a particular sub-group of pupils (the disengaged, the high achievers, the girls, the boys, for example) are feeling about their learning
- guidance on shaping a new initiative in the classroom or school.

However, where such consultation is new for the school, teachers may feel uneasy about talking with pupils in a way that changes the traditional power relationships. It can take time to build a climate of trust that allows teachers and pupils to review their work together openly and constructively.

Here are two examples of the way in which schools used the two-dimension questionnaire and the double checklist.

Example 1

A questionnaire (where pupils compared what the teacher did and what was important for them) was completed by all pupils in Year 6. The summary was then discussed by pupils. One of the items which generated a lot of discussion was this: *'Teachers praise me when I do things well'*. It had been rated by all pupils except one as very important for them and also as true of their teacher.

In the discussion the dissenting pupil owned up to it being him and said this: *'I don't need praise. If **I'm** satisfied with the work, that's all that matters. I praise other people, though. I praise them because their work is often better than mine – not always, but when it is.'* His comment sparked a lengthy discussion about praise, its effects, and different types of praise: 'cheap' praise and praise that pupils really value. The discussion highlighted the fact that praise is seen differently by different people. For the headteacher, who was present during the discussion, this was valuable information.

Example 2

A teacher in a secondary school used a similar approach in an enquiry into 'What works in teaching and learning?'. The questionnaire asked for two responses, one about the frequency of a particular classroom activity, the other about how well (in pupils' judgments) that activity helped with learning. The teacher and pupils were able to plot frequency against perceived effectiveness, as in the diagram below:
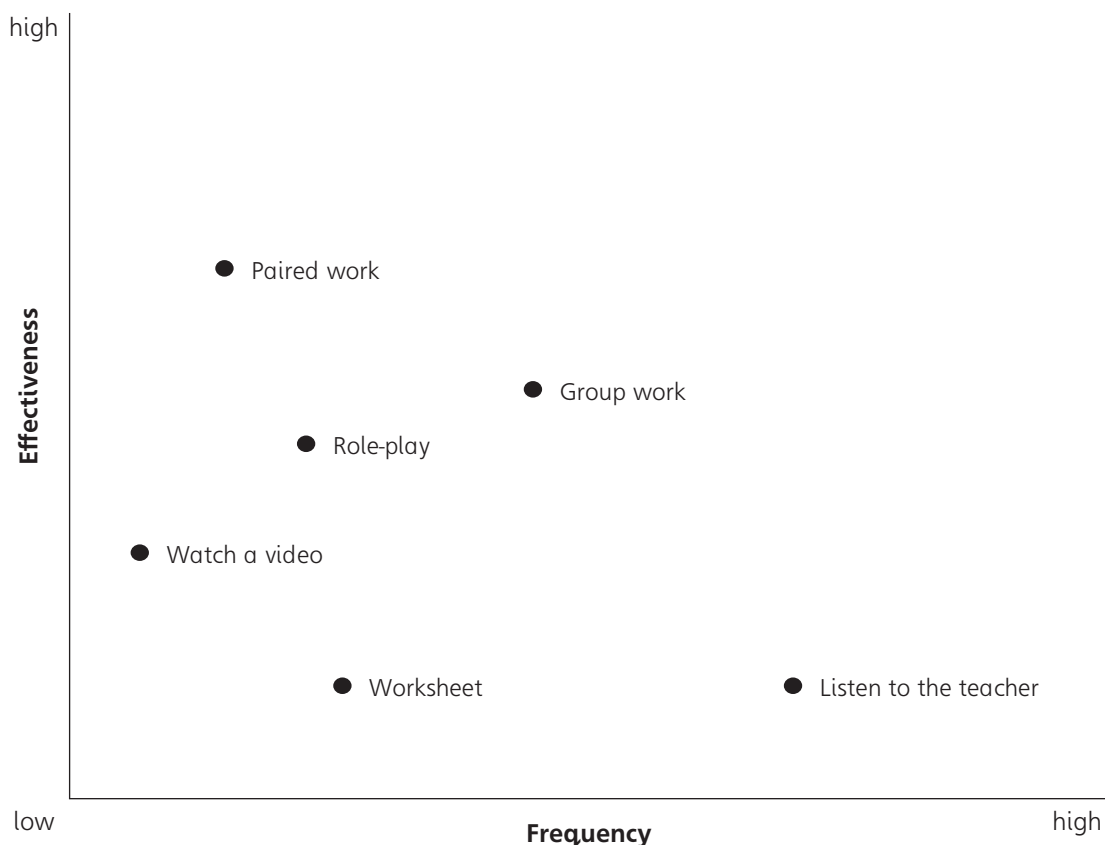
11 Talk-based approaches

The three most common forms of talk-based consultation are:

- conversations
- discussions
- interviews.

Whilst each approach differs in the degree of formality, all three can build into a habit of reflective dialogue about teaching and learning and help to build and sustain an open and trusting relationship between teachers and pupils.

Within each approach, responses usually follow fairly readily from a direct question or series of questions, but in situations where pupils may be less sure of themselves, 'prompts' can help to encourage a response. Good prompts are ones that seem familiar and real to pupils – such as statements about learning that have been made by other young people and that are 'in their voice', or photos of situations in other classrooms that they will recognise and want to comment on. Given the diversity of topics that pupils might hold a conversation about, discuss or be interviewed about, we have restricted ourselves to just a few examples that we think provide good models.

A language for thinking

It is sometimes evident that pupils lack the conceptual vocabulary to explore their own thinking. They are often more comfortable with content than process, happier to talk about what they have learned rather than 'learning'; they find it more comfortable to talk about better attendance or improving handwriting or spelling.

However, in one primary school one of our team asked a group of Year 6 pupils to describe something they had learned which they felt confident they really understood. One boy, surprisingly, volunteered the mean, median and mode. The other six in the group were all able to explain what these terms meant and the differences among them, which gave a useful impetus to discussing how they learned these concepts, how they remembered them and how they applied them to situations outside the classroom. While most struggled with vocabulary to describe the process – "just learned it" – one of the group produced quite an elaborate explanation of his remembering, so providing for his peers an inroad into a metacognitive perspective:

> I think about median. I think in my head of what a middle is like. What would a middle be? I think about like where you would find a median. If you were just walking about and you met a median. And like in the class we can find the middle person, and I think about the median person and what they look like – that's Chris. And mode, well, that's fashion isn't it. In the mode, everybody's doing it, or most people. That's what most people do. Mean, well that's pretty mean because it's not always a good way of describing how people are the same or different. It misses out a lot. It's mean.

This short passage shows how interesting – and unpredictable – inviting young people to **talk** about learning can be.

Pupils have also made diagrams or pie charts to show how much time they spend on different activities during the weekend or in the evening.

Even adults have been asked to draw as a way of summarising their feelings about a particular topic. Researchers working on an international study of school leadership invited school leaders to draw 'leaders in the workplace'; this proved to be a powerful qualitative medium. It not only helped to overcome the barriers of language but provided a starting point for discussion about attitudes, belief systems and conceptions of leadership (see MacBeath and McGlynn, 2002, p123). The drawing below is taken from this research which shows a workplace with a poor leader on the left side of the building and a good leader on the right side.

Photographs

Cheap, disposable cameras have made it easier for pupils to communicate their views on key aspects of the environment of school and home that they feel support their learning. The photos are not an end in themselves but can be used as a prompt for exploration and discussion.

In one secondary school, Year 7 pupils took photos of activities and ways of organising the classroom that helped them to learn. They were able to keep the cameras for several days but had to think, first, about what things they wanted to photograph and then were on the lookout, in their own classes and in others that they were allowed to observe, for the images they wanted to capture.

The photos indicated that pupils preferred classes which were more 'hands-on' (eg design and technology, ICT, science), and that they enjoyed working in groups and also in pairs with their learning mentors. It was apparent from the photographic record that they least liked lessons where they had just to sit and listen to teachers talking.

It's not a quick fix!

In any school there will always be enthusiasts among the staff – described by Schratz (1999) as 'missionaries'. Enthusiasts can sometimes 'overpromise' and their voices may induce a false sense of optimism about the ease of building pupil consultation into thinking and practices right across the school. This teacher was more realistic:

> *I think it's going to be a long process in a (big) school to get these approaches embedded right across the curriculum … it's going to be a gradual, incremental process, not something that happens overnight.*

It depends, of course, what your starting point is in the school, individually and collectively. Sometimes, being linked to an external project or working with a group of schools can help make things happen because time and priority are then rearranged to meet external expectations. Finding ways of demonstrating to colleagues and to governors how useful pupil commentaries can be is a first step towards extending pupil consultation school-wide.

And then there are deep-rooted structural factors which have to do with the nature of the school day, the curriculum, subjects, timetables and degrees of separation between one teacher and the next. This can create a discontinuity in pupils' experience not only from one class to the next but from one year to the next. This is related to school phase and size. Pupils can be the vehicle through which consultative practices transfer from class to class while receptive teachers can learn from those pupils and adopt new practices. On the other hand, if pupils are too assertive it may generate resistance from some staff.

But there **are** schools which, in the present climate, have made a commitment and are using consultation in a coherent and sustained way to support learning. They think it is worth it. When the classroom taboos that surround talk are lifted then pupils are more ready to speak out in class and to pay attention to the views of others. They are more likely to volunteer to answer questions. Even more risky, they will ask questions and acknowledge where they need help. As the head of a primary school said: *'Pupils are more confident, more aware and accepting of their learning needs and able to tell their teacher confidently if they don't understand'.*

Ultimately the longer-term impact of consultation depends on the extent to which teachers are able to build its processes and relationships into their regular practice.

> *Decades of calls for educational reform have not succeeded in making schools places where all young people want to and are able to learn. It is time to invite students to join the conversations about how we might accomplish that.*
>
> (Cook-Sather, 2002, p9)