1 Introduction

Education is for students and therefore students should have a say in it. (Student researcher)

Our sense of what young people can achieve and the respect they are entitled to as members of a democratic society have both changed. Young people's right to be taken seriously as *'competent social actors'* (Alderson, 2000: 243) who shape their own lives, individually and together, and who influence the society to which they belong, goes beyond the particularities of circumstance or place. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) ensures children have not only rights of provision and protection, but also those of participation – that is, rights to express views and to be heard, and to take part in activities and decisions that affect them. The Convention requires us to be less condescending and more open in our attitudes and behaviour to young people who will shape the world for those who are yet to be born.

One key arena for participation should be schools, where in recent years young people have come under increasing pressure: they often feel that they are subject to an ever-greater workload and burden of testing, their performance is heavily scrutinised, and even their achievements are often dismissed as evidence of falling standards. Yet research suggests that, in practice, schools still provide disappointingly few opportunities for students to express their views and contribute meaningfully to shaping school life (Alderson and Arnold, 1999; Wyse, 2001). This situation contrasts with the world beyond the school, where young people have increasing economic power, social maturity, funds of informal knowledge derived from the rich leisure media culture surrounding them, and a greater sense of entitlement. If they fail to engage their students, schools will miss out on valuable opportunities to develop young people's skills, improve provision, and promote citizenship and social inclusion.

This resource is about one approach – Students as Researchers (SAR) – that exemplifies new attitudes and ways of working with young people in schools. It has developed in the UK in the last ten years and has many companion projects operating across the world.

Young people's involvement in research

For some time now young people have been involved in research and enquiry in a variety of ways. In her overview, Priscilla Alderson (2000) suggests three different kinds of involvement with research. Firstly, in the course of their formal education, pupils use active learning methods in which they investigate class or coursework topics through research approaches such as interviews, questionnaires and examining documentary evidence.

Secondly, young people are increasingly involved in adult-led research where they help to plan questions, collect, analyse or report evidence and publicise findings. Adult researchers may see this as:

- a way to gather better quality data by using more appropriate language or questions
- a means of accessing the views of young people who are otherwise hard to reach
- contributing a distinctive 'youth' perspective that may differ from adult points of view (Kirby, 1999).

A pupil from a primary school shows in the following drawing how Students as Researchers projects help teachers and pupils to work together:
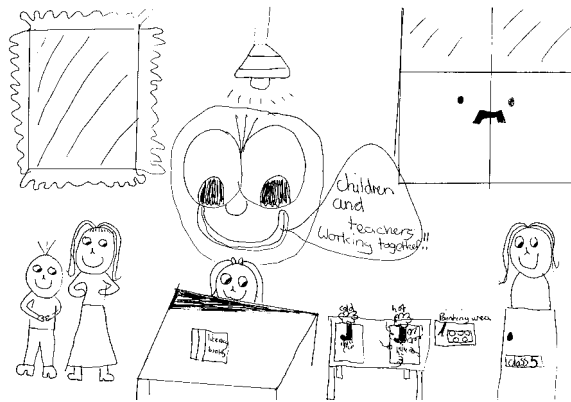
Gaining insights that help their own professional development

The research itself can contribute to teachers' continuing professional development. Students can often give valuable feedback to teachers that can help them move forward in their practice:

> *One member of staff had been at the school for 25 years and was impervious to a lot of professional development activity. Having had students observe his lessons, he shared with staff that it had been the most profound piece of professional development activity he had ever been involved in. When he had been observed by OFSTED or fellow colleagues, they just said 'He's fantastic'. When students observed him, they said, 'You always question to the right. And you walk up and down the aisles and the students have told us that they find that really intimidating'. Both of these things he has now addressed. Teacher appraisals had never picked up either of them.*
> (Secondary deputy head)

Others argue that the students' research acts as valuable reminders of what they already know to be good practice:

> *It's just bringing it all back together again – reminding you of the things you actually learned during your PGCE.* (Subject teacher)

However, they often comment on how powerful it can be to hear this from students:

> *The students' input was refreshing, inspiring and compelling … I left with a very different understanding of 'student voice' and an excitement about the part students can play in their own learning experiences and their contribution to the broader life of the school.* (Teacher responding to student researchers' conference presentation)

Sustaining Students as Researchers activities

If you have completed a first cycle or year of Students as Researchers projects and intend to continue, it is worth considering how to build capacity and help it to become a more established feature of how the school operates. Some points to bear in mind include:

- developing students' roles
- developing the identity of the work
- involving different staff and developing staff roles.

Developing students' roles

If students feel that they genuinely own the initiative then they will drive it forwards and ensure it continues successfully: positive outcomes encourage future recruitment. Existing student researchers may want to repeat the experience or take on new roles – such as:

- monitoring changes as a result of previous research recommendations
- helping to involve new students
- helping to train new students:

    We'd like to see the present Year 9 training up new students like we did, so we're continually developing students throughout the year groups on research and presentations… We shouldn't be the main people in this because we're eventually going to go. If we take control they won't know where to start, we need to make sure they have the skills. (Y10 researcher)

- acting as 'consultants' or advisors to new groups – attending meetings, encouraging, passing on what they learnt the year before, suggesting approaches or areas to focus on or avoid.

Some of these roles allow students who are preparing for exams to continue to be involved without having to commit too much time.

Developing the identity of the work

Strategies that have proved useful include:

- producing leaflets or other written records of the research, in order to build a sense of its history
- putting a logo on all communications that come from the group or groups to give the initiative continuity and coherence.

Involving different staff and developing staff roles

Some things to bear in mind include:

- making sure that information about the projects is part of the induction of incoming staff so that they become aware of the research traditions of the school
- as far as possible, delegating and enthusing other staff. For instance, staff who have previously supported research groups can be asked to become coordinators. Student researchers can play a part in inviting other teachers to get involved
- ensuring that discussions of future funding priorities consider staff and students' needs for support or training in this area.

Staff who are enthusiastic about pupil participation tend to be successful at engaging others when they inspire by example and acknowledge the continuities between the new emphasis on accessing children's perspectives and existing good practice. Alison, for example, introduced pupil voice work to other staff (September Year 1) by recognising the extent to which all teachers are skilled in listening to pupils, but pointing out that she herself wanted to find new ways of listening to children she did not teach.

A culture of enquiry and research among teachers

Pupil engagement with issues related to teaching and learning is unlikely to succeed unless teachers too are continuing learners – involved in seeking new ideas, analysing results, being reflective, trying out new practices and working with others. The opportunities that a school provides for staff to get involved in action research and other forms of professional enquiry are therefore crucial.

Central to this process is what Hargreaves et al (2001) call 'professional discretion', that is to say, opportunities for teachers, more often than not in collaboration with their peers, to ask searching questions of educational practice that arise from their own professional circumstances, interests and commitments.

In the case of Students as Researchers, a deputy head argued that it would be '*extraordinarily difficult*' to '*encourage children to do research in a school where no teacher has ever done any research*'. Our case study schools have often had a history of engaging teachers as action researchers before they have embarked on Students as Researchers projects – for instance, through university MAs, diploma courses, or Government-funded initiatives that involve teachers in investigating their own practice. Teachers may have already begun to work with children as co-researchers in their own inquiries; it is then a smaller step to envisage encouraging children to carry out research themselves.

Schools that are successful at building a whole-school commitment to pupil voice are also successful at finding ways of engaging in dialogue – not to exert control but to learn together. Teachers consistently argue that professional development in a supportive context is a key to sustainability:

> *When I started teaching there was no support whatsoever. I was put into a classroom and nobody ever talked to me about what I was doing. I was never observed by anybody… My whole view about teaching now is about working with others. Working and learning with others. I just live it every day of my life.* (Secondary deputy head)

Professional solidarity and companionship built through working together in open ways is a necessary condition of the much vaunted 'risk-taking' that is a recurrent mantra on management and leadership courses. Such support can come not just from the staff, but also from pupils. For example, suggestions from pupil focus groups can give a teacher the courage to take responsible and imaginative risks in developing new approaches to pedagogy.

Forming links with external supporters – such as schools with similar values and commitments, LEAs or universities – offers both affirmation and learning. Dynamism and growth depend upon learning from others (networking-as-learning) as much as internal capacity building, as the National College for School Leadership Networked Learning Communities initiative has recognised (see page 56).

7 Further reading

New pupil voice publications from the *Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning Project*

Titles from Pearson Publishing (series editior: Jean Rudduck)

Arnot M, McIntyre D, Pedder D and Reay D (2004) *Consultation in the Classroom: Developing Dialogue about Teaching and Learning*, Pearson Publishing

Macbeath J, Demetriou H, Rudduck J and Myers K (2003) *Consulting Pupils: A Toolkit for Teachers*, Pearson Publishing

Other titles

Rudduck J and Flutter J (2003) *How to Improve Your School: Giving Pupils a Voice*, Continuum Press

Flutter J and Rudduck J (2004) *Consulting Pupils: What's in it for Schools?*, RoutledgeFalmer

The Student Voice Special Issue of *Forum* (43, 2, 2001) contains a number of international case studies and accounts by young people of student research. For further information or copies of it, contact Michael Fielding (see page 56).

Many youth organisations have advocated the involvement of young people in designing and conducting research. The best source of further information here is Perpetua Kirby's (1999) *Involving Young Researchers: how to enable young research to design and conduct research*. It covers the arguments in favour of young people's involvement, how to engage them successfully, and refers to many existing case studies. A companion volume by Steve Worrall (2000), *Young People as Researchers: a learning resource pack*, includes practical training exercises and handouts.