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Listening to pupils' voices

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LISTENING TO PUPILS' VOICES

ANN MACPHAIL

Research has demonstrated that pupils enjoy, are motivated by and strengthen their self-esteem and respect by being consulted about their school experiences and welcome the opportunity to share ideas that may help them to learn more effectively. This chapter reports pupil voice and consultation discussions before contextualizing the discussion within school physical education, recognizing the need to explore links between young people's voices in and beyond school.

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Chapter Outline

Introduction

Defining 'consulting pupils' and 'participation'

How to consult pupils and what to consult pupils about

Caution in consultation

Pupil consultation specific to physical education

Extending pupil voice

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Introduction

“If we view the world through the eyes of our students and hear the messages embedded in their actions, we will learn things we never knew we did not know. There seem to be some consistent messages from our students – messages about the content of the curriculum, their value perceptions, and the meaningfulness of their experiences” (Lee, 1997, p.274).

There may be a tendency to under-estimate the extent to which pupils care and are perceptive about their educational progress. However, numerous studies and the quotation above provide evidence that pupils enjoy, are motivated by and strengthen their self-esteem and respect by being consulted about their school experiences and welcome the opportunity to share ideas that may help them to learn more effectively. This can convey to pupils that they are legitimate members of the schooling system, and acknowledge that a worthwhile school experience relies on the pupils and teacher informing each others' learning. That is, the teachers' practice of teaching is integrated with and through pupil consultation and subsequent participation.

Physical education teachers strive to provide pupils with authentic experiences that meet their changing needs and interests with the ultimate goal being to encourage young people to be more physically active and to adopt a healthy lifestyle. It is therefore vital that teachers not only understand how pupils perceive physical education but how such values and beliefs can inform the development of effective practice in physical

education (Brooker & Macdonald, 1999). The way in which pupil voice can contribute to the construction of the physical education curriculum in partnership with teachers (Glasby & Macdonald, 2004) is vital in providing authentic and meaningful learning experiences.

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Informing authentic learning experiences in physical education

After reading the extract below from Luke, a thirteen-year old boy with Asperger Syndrome, consider how, as a teacher of physical education, you could begin to construct a physical education teaching and learning environment that would allow Luke to be authentically involved in physical education along with his peers in the class.

'Please realize that making someone do a team sport is not suddenly going to make him or her become sociable and co-ordinated. In fact it is a pretty daft idea to think that anything at all is going to make an AS [Asperger Syndrome] person suddenly have no difficulty with social interaction. That is like saying that if a blind person holds a book in front of their nose long enough they are going to suddenly be able to see! Maybe if you are still in doubt, you could put in a set of ear plugs, wear a pair of goggles and try a team sport whilst only allowing yourself to catch or kick the ball with the hand or foot that you are not used to. This is what it feels like all the time for us. It's very difficult isn't it?!' (Jackson, 2002, p. 132).

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This chapter reports pupil voice and consultation discussions before contextualizing the discussion within school physical education, recognizing the need to explore links between young people's voices in and beyond school. In 1989 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which incorporates children's (under the age of eighteen) civil and political, social, economic and cultural rights and their rights to protection. Fundamental to the rights of young people is for their opinions and views to be heard and considered and to have a say in matters affecting their own lives (Article 12 of the Convention). A number of national government organizations (Children and Young People's Unit in the UK and the Children's Rights Alliance in Ireland) have formally committed to uphold the Convention and actively encourage young people to become more formally involved in their own lives.

Defining 'consulting pupils' and 'participation'

This chapter refers to the working definitions for the terms 'consulting pupils' and 'participation' promoted by Rudduck & McIntyre (2007). 'Consulting' between teachers and pupils, and among pupils, about their experiences with teaching and learning in school is a way to converse about what learning is like from the pupils' perspective. 'Participation' develops such consultation with a view to strengthening pupils' opportunities for decision-making, investment and participation in schooling, in turn hoping to increase their sense of involvement in the school as a member of a learning community. It is not simply listening to pupils' voices in response to whether they understand the content but rather increasing our level of participation and engagement

with them and responding to their perspectives. In short, explicitly seeking pupils' perspectives and taking full account of these as we, as teachers, strive to provide more effective learning opportunities for all pupils through the organization of schooling, pedagogical practices and relationships between teachers and pupils. Research into such participation and the impact of pupil consultation on teachers' practices and their use of pupils' ideas is becoming increasingly more prominent (see student voice Special Issues of *Educational Review* 2006 (vol. 58) and *Forum* 2001 (vol. 43) for related research).

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Pupil evaluations of learning and teaching

Pupils provide input and considerations for physical education teachers regarding the effectiveness of the physical education curriculum, quality of teacher instructional methods and how to utilize pupil voice in the gym and sports hall. A sample of prompts (School Change Collaborative, 1997) that can be presented to pupils to initiate discussion between pupil-pupil and teacher-pupil on young people's current experiences of teaching and learning include;

- Does the teacher understand the pupils' point of view?
- Does this teacher seem to care whether pupils learn?
- Does this teacher behave differently toward pupils?
- Has this teacher been helpful to you in your learning efforts this year?
- Does the teacher usually know what he/she is talking about?
- Does the teacher give pupils the opportunity to confirm and get a firm grasp of what they have learned?

- Is the teacher enthusiastic about the class?

Once discussion of responses to the prompts has taken place the challenge is then for the teacher and pupil to co-construct more meaningful learning and teaching experiences, most likely through further discussion or through a task similar to that noted under the reflection boxes titled ‘Involving students in curriculum design and development’.

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A number of typologies convey the increasing levels of pupil participation and engagement in consultation. As McMahon (2007) explains, these typologies of pupil participation tend to rank projects by means of a ‘ladder of participation’, meaning that the higher the rung on the ladder the greater the level of pupil participation and involvement. Fielding’s (2001) four-fold typology of pupil engagement links closely with such typologies, denoting increasing levels of reciprocity from ‘students as data sources’, to ‘active respondents’, to ‘co-researchers’ to ‘researchers’. Fielding (2001) maps each level with the essential teacher and pupil role and teacher engagement with pupils. Treseder’s (1997) model avoids a ladder of participation layout by placing ‘degrees of participation’ at the centre of his framework with opportunities for involvement placed equidistant from the centre (Figure 17.1). Such a typology acknowledges that, rather than a hierarchy of consultation, appropriate degrees of involvement / consultation will vary according to the particular project and the needs and capacities of the young people to be involved.

<Insert Figure 17.1 here>

There are a number of common arguments provided in support of consulting with pupils. Firstly, consulting with pupils not only identifies pupils' preferred and most effective way of learning but can also reveal insights into how to effectively provide opportunities that will strengthen their commitment to learning (Pollard, Thiessen & Filer, 1997). Secondly, developments in national Children's Acts highlight young people's moral, ethical and legal rights on being consulted on matters that affect them (Davie & Galloway, 1996; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Thirdly, as well as becoming more involved in the school community, consultation can help pupils develop life-skills such as communication, working collaboratively and articulating their thoughts and opinions (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007).

How to consult pupils and what to consult pupils about

In what ways, and under what conditions, can the teacher realistically encourage and enhance pupils' engagement in being consulted? In what ways can the teacher respond to such consultations? A user-friendly pack entitled 'Hearing Young Voices' (McAuley & Brattman, 2003) provides guidelines for consulting children and young people while other references focus particularly on developing dialogue about teaching and learning (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Macbeath, Demetriou, Rudduck & Myers, 2003). For consultation to flourish and survive conditions in the classroom for developing consultation include trust, respect, recognition and time to reflect.

Pupils have been consulted about school-wide, year group and classroom issues. Teachers need to consider legitimate pupil concerns appreciating that teachers can learn

from pupils about what and how to teach. The Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning Project includes six constituent projects that foreground pupils' perspectives about teaching and learning and the ways in which teachers can develop effective ways of enhancing pupil engagement (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007).

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Considerations for actively involving pupils in discussions and decisions

When considering involving pupils in discussions and decisions that are expected to result in identifying more effective learning opportunities you should consider the following (adapted from Alderson, 1995);

(1) The purpose of the consultation

Have the pupils helped to identify and plan the explicit purpose of the consultation? If the consultation and subsequent findings are to benefit certain pupils, who are they and how might they benefit? Can the exclusion of pupils for particular reasons be justified? Do pupils know they can refuse or withdraw from their involvement at any time?

(2) Costs and hoped for benefits

Might there be risks or costs such as time, sense of failure or coercion, or embarrassment? Are the pupils made aware of possible benefits, risks and outcomes?

(3) Privacy and confidentiality

Is it possible for pupils to remain anonymous when significant extracts from their discussions might best qualify the need to reconfigure learning opportunities?

(4) Dissemination

Will the pupils be involved in disseminating the outcomes of discussions and decisions within the school and to their parents?

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Caution in consultation

The unprecedented international interest in pupil consultation has led some to warn that we not lose sight of grounding such an interest in worthwhile and defensible principles and practices (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). There is an assumption that the value of student voice to school improvement is often a good thing and it is important to be aware of occasions when consultation with young people is inappropriate or exploitative (McAuley & Brattman, 2003).

It is imperative that young people are afforded meaningful, equitable and sustainable opportunities to be heard. A tokenistic approach to consultation, where pupils' contributions are directed and structured by the teachers' agenda, is worse than not consulting at all and will be counterproductive. It is also important to classify what 'consultation' means, what can and cannot be expected of involvement in a consultation and whether or not pupils have a preference for facilitation by someone they know (McAuley & Brattman, 2003).

Feeding back to pupils following consultation is essential and involves sharing the findings and informing pupils on how their contributions have informed decisions and actions. Asking young people to evaluate the consultative process in which they have been involved is vital to improving future interactions. While there is an increasing wealth of information on what schooling means in the lives of young people and what

pupils say about issues related to teaching and learning, there is little published research exploring and reporting what pupils' perspectives are on being involved in consultation practices (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). Morgan (2008) examines pupils' understandings of consultation in general and their perspectives on all classroom consultation that takes place. While pupils reported welcoming consultation, having much to say about the benefits of consultation for their learning and their teachers' teaching, they were conscious of issues of trust, anonymity and not upsetting teachers. Pupils felt that not all teachers could be trusted to the same extent, were concerned that information gained from consultation could be used against them and did not want to offend teachers because of the possible consequences for themselves as well as a genuine concern for teachers.

Pupil consultation specific to physical education

The 2005 monograph of the *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* (Graham, 2005) presents the findings of studies that specifically investigated the way pupils experienced elementary / primary physical education. In his review of pupil perspectives Dyson (2006) reports on pupils' views, experiences and perspectives of physical education, focusing on the physical education curriculum, pupils' likes and dislikes in physical education and pupils' perspectives of innovative curriculum. Drawing from these two sources, the compiled studies indicate that pupils (1) inherently enjoy being active in interesting and fun activities, (2) enjoy taking part in some form of (competitive) game play, (3) would appreciate a wider variety of activities and more input into their activity choices, (4) have a preference for particular activities, (5) enjoy the social aspect of being involved in physical activity, (6) appreciate learning activities that allow them to achieve

a sense of success, (7) at times feel alienated from learning experiences that are not enjoyable, interesting or motivating, and (8) report that showering and changing can be barriers to participation. Variables that have been identified as influencing pupils' thoughts on physical education include age and gender, beliefs about their own ability and competence, beliefs about the value of a task and goal orientation.

While there is acknowledgement that pupil voice is an important aspect in designing a relevant physical education for young people, there is little referenced work on how such values and beliefs have informed the development of effective practice in physical education (Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Ennis & McCauley, 2002) or how pupil voice can contribute to the construction of what Glasby & Macdonald (2004) term a 'negotiated curriculum', curriculum designed in partnership with teachers. Rikard & Banville (2006) support teachers soliciting and considering pupil voice in physical education curriculum modifications that are educationally appropriate and that increase participation and motivation.

One innovative study developed a new physical education unit that was pupil-directed and examined curriculum negotiation in physical education (McMahon, 2007). The focus was on one class of 10-11 year old Irish pupils' views of their involvement in curriculum negotiation and how it affected their investment and ownership of the physical education curriculum. The researcher acted as the teacher and the study was undertaken in two parts. Phase one involved pupils' participation in a Sport Education unit, designed to give them more responsibility for their learning through an increase in decision making from previous physical education classes. Following the recommendations made by pupils after phase one, phase two involved pupils in a process

of curriculum negotiation with the researcher / teacher in which they determined the purpose, content, aims, teaching methods and assessment of the curriculum. Numerous reasons were shared by pupils for claiming that this physical education experience was one of their best. These included ‘the nature of the activity being dance (something the students rarely got to do), student learning that was consistent with objectives students created, students feeling more involved in the lesson, and students having greater responsibility and getting to make decisions’ (McMahon, 2007, p. 92-93). In this project, pupils were not simply involved as subjects in the collection of data but had agency in defining, extending and providing direction for the physical education curriculum collaboratively with the researcher / teacher. This encouraged pupils to identify those issues that they (and not necessarily the researcher / teacher) felt were of importance in their experience of physical education.

Seeking ‘voice’ from particular populations involved in physical education and sport are sought and these include adolescent girls (Oliver & Lalik, 2001), young disabled people (Fitzgerald, 2005) and disengaged youth (Sandford, Armour & Warmington, 2008). However, Groves and Law (2003) warn researchers / teachers to be cognizant of not treating members of a specific population as one entity but rather acknowledge that there are cultural and social vagaries that constitute individuals even within an identified population. This is another challenge to eliciting pupils’ voice.

Traditional methods of seeking pupils’ perspectives, such as questionnaires and interviews, often restrict and prescribe content for discussion with pupils’ voice subsequently limited to opinion on specific issues pinpointed by the researcher rather than the pupil (Groves & Law, 2003). While research interested in gaining a better

understanding of children's motivational process and achievement behaviours has relied on models and theories (not necessarily acknowledging the social influences on young people in contemporary society) to explain motivational patterns, methodological considerations encouraging a level of sophistication in listening to, and positioning, student voice, as well as involving pupils in guiding the educational research process, are becoming more evident in physical education, and related, research. These include the use of narratives (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2007), drawings (MacPhail & Kinchin, 2004), diaries (Lines, 2007), magazine exploration (Oliver & Lalik, 2001), photography (Pope, 2007) and ethnographies (O'Donovan & Kirk, 2008). Discursive practice through which we examine how young people construct their identity (beliefs and values) and position themselves in relation to their school context and the larger sociocultural context outside the school extends and contextualises teachers' understanding of pupils' reality (Sandford and Rich, 2006).

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Involving students in curriculum design and development

Pupil drawings and pupils working in small groups to construct a poster are ways in which teachers can be encouraged to avoid limiting pupils' voice to opinion on specific issues pinpointed by the teacher. By asking pupils to draw an image of their experience of school physical education, without any further prompts, and then encouraging them to explain their drawing to the teacher, teaching and learning issues pertinent to the current provision of physical education will arise. A follow-up activity would be to ask pupils to draw a second picture, this time denoting an image of what they would like their

experience of school physical education to be. This will encourage a space for pupils to share their views with the teacher on how they would like the physical education curriculum to be constructed. Similarly, encouraging pupils to work in groups to construct a poster that illustrates the creation of a physical education curriculum based on their needs and interests has potential to involve students in curriculum decision-making. These posters can be shared with the class and discussion can ensue between the pupils and teacher on ways in which the pupils' contributions can inform a particular physical education unit of work.

In both instances, feeding back to the pupils is essential and involves consulting and sharing with them ways in which their contributions have informed resulting decisions and actions.

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Extending pupil voice

A potential extension of the school-focused interest in listening to pupil voice is prompted by Vadeboncoeur (2006) who encourages engagement with young people's learning in informal contexts such as extra-curriculum programmes, community organizations, family and friendship groups. This offers a clear link to those of us involved in teaching physical education with an aim to motivate the pupil to choose a lifestyle that is active, healthy and meaningful. By encouraging young people to share how different contexts contribute to their learning about, and involvement in, physical activity we may be in a better position to acknowledge and address how physical

education and such contexts can most effectively work together to motivate pupils to choose active lifestyles.

The traditional power dimension between the pupil and the teacher needs to be challenged to redefine the boundaries of possibility (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006). Recently, primary-aged pupils reported the pupil-teacher dyad as comparable to ‘ants versus giants’ where, in the context of school physical education experiences, pupils perceive teachers (the giants) as those who boss the student (the ants) around (McMahon, 2007). A mix of pre-conditions and commitment in a particular school that create a more collaborative teacher-pupil relationship where learning is accepted as a joint responsibility have been identified as having guidelines for policy-makers in schools that help to define the more specific conditions in which consultation can flourish (Rudduck, 2006). Pre-conditions include a classroom or school climate that is marked by trust and openness and encouraging teachers and pupils to see each other differently from traditional conceptions, believing that they can reciprocate with open and constructive dialogue about teaching and learning experiences.

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Assessment (and teaching) for learning

Formative assessment is intended to enhance pupil learning through frequent opportunities to provide evidence their understanding, which in turn will help individual pupil progress. Assessment for learning extends to informing pupils about their own learning, acknowledging that they are decision-makers in their own learning. One example would be to construct a report card for each unit of work in physical education,

identify a number of related learning outcomes and allow a space for the physical education teacher and the pupil to denote the extent to which each believe the pupil achieved each outcome. As an outcome, the completed report cards could contribute to an annual pupil profile as a way, for pupils and teachers, to assess pupil development and progress. This not only serves the purpose of alerting parents to the pupils' progress but also acts as a facilitation tool in the pupil-teacher discussion on co-creating plans to continue and expand their learning.

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While it seems that within physical education we have examined pupils' experiences and understandings of the physical education context there is a lack of evidence regarding the extent to which students' perspectives have impacted the practice and research of physical education (Dyson, 2006). Encouraging pupils to design and undertake their own research (a shift from what Fielding (2001) terms students as data sources or active respondents to co-researchers or researchers) is a promising way in which to hear the voices of pupils in areas that they identify and believe to be crucial to their sense of membership in the school as a learning community. Considering how to build capacity and help pupils as researchers become a more established feature of how the school operates is a further challenge.

Learning more

A number of sources have been written as a practitioner's introduction to considering the potential benefits and implications of consulting with pupils about teaching and learning

(e.g., Fielding & Bragg, 2003; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; McAuley & Brattman, 2003; Rudduck & Flutter, 2003). The assumption that young people are active participants in their own lives and that they are entitled to a voice in matters that affect them is evident in published reports concerned with well-being and recreation (e.g., Nic Gabhainn & Sixsmith, 2005; Office of the Minister for Children & Department of Health and Children, 2007).

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