

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme in Wales: Improving Learning by Taking Account of Learners' Perspectives

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The TLRP in Wales

Research evidence for educational policy and practice in Wales

The Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) (www.tlrp.org/), funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), is the largest single programme of educational research ever commissioned in the UK. The programme consisted of 52 separate large scale projects, covering every part of the education system from early years to lifelong learning.

As the TLRP moved into its closing stages, the ESRC, the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and the Welsh Educational Research Network (WERN), came together to commission a final project designed to explore the implications of the findings from this major research programme for Welsh educational policy and practice.

Coordinated by John Furlong of Oxford University, four teams of researchers from across Wales have reviewed the findings from the TLRP in relation to four key areas of Welsh policy identified by the Welsh Assembly Government.

The four policy issues were:

- The Foundation Phase
- Improving Teaching for the 7–14 age range
- Social Inclusion
- Improving Learning by Taking Account of Learners' Perspectives.

The outcome of the reviews is a series of posters and briefing papers aimed at bringing findings from this major research programme to policy makers and practitioners across Wales. The reports represent the findings of independent research teams; they do not therefore necessarily reflect the views of the Welsh Assembly Government.

Executive Summary

Pupil and student participation in school and college decision-making is going to become statutory in Wales in 2010. The research evidence presented in this brief report is therefore both timely and extremely important, in that it shows that if the learner has a say in school and college practices, it has many benefits – for the learner themselves, the teacher and the school.

Pupil and student participation is part of the Welsh Assembly Government's commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and is at the heart of the School Effectiveness Framework (SEF). As part of the new post-2010 Common Inspection Framework, Estyn will specifically look at what schools are doing to actively involve learners in planning how they are taught and in making decisions in their school community, under the broad heading of 'Pupil Welfare'.

Eight TLRP research projectsⁱ give an insight into the role of the learner voice, and this report highlights three broad themes emerging from these:

1. Benefits for the Learners, 2. Authenticity in Consultation, and 3. Implications and Limitations of Learner Voice.

1.

Key finding:

Benefits for the learners

Involving learners as active partners in shaping their learning experiences and environment reaps benefits in terms of learner engagement, self-esteem, confidence and skills.

Major implications:

Teachers should encourage students to be active participants in decision-making processes, developing effective and efficient ways of consulting them and responding to their voices in appropriate ways. In return, this should help teachers acquire deeper insights into pupils' capabilities, developing the ability to view the

familiar from a different perspective and bringing about a renewed sense of excitement when it comes to classroom practice.

2.

Key finding:

Authenticity in consultation

Adult attitudes towards children – and associated beliefs about their capacity to engage sensibly and productively in consultation – tend to predict the approach to consultation taken by teachers and how they respond to its results. The importance of authenticity when consulting pupils, and the necessity of consulting all pupils regardless of ability, gender, ethnicity or class, is underlined.

Major implications:

Teachers should actively encourage the involvement of all pupils in consultation – not just an articulate elite. Teachers need convincing that all children and young people can make sensible and accurate judgments about their schooling and feel confident that their authority as teachers is not going to be undermined. The introduction of pupil and student participation as a statutory requirement in Wales requires teachers to consult learners and ensure all voices are heard on a regular basis.

3.

Key finding:

Implications and limitations of learner voice

Developing effective strategies to hear more of the ‘learner voice’ can sometimes seem to run counter to other school priorities. TLRP identifies the national curriculum and governmental preoccupation with performance as potential barriers to introducing consultative pedagogy and responding to pupils’ ideas.

Major implications:

The changing curriculum in Wales has provided mechanisms for promoting pupil voice and the SEF encourages children to get involved;

however, the preoccupation with a standards agenda may work against pupil participation. How schools implement the SEF will require a lot of support if they are to see pupil participation as a positive initiative and not just another hoop to jump through. Yet, when embedded in the school effectively, the emergence of a clearer learner voice should support an agenda for change, in which pupils feel they play an active part. This active involvement can then become part of a more inclusive framework for school’s self-evaluation and the development of democratic principles and practices.

The Research Evidence

The main focus for this review is the TLRP project *Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning*ⁱⁱ. This research consisted of a network of six projects which focused on the impact of consultation on pupil engagement with learning. *The Historical, Political and Pedagogic Significance of Pupil Voice*ⁱⁱⁱ was also consulted. This meta-study of the six projects considers the changing construction of children and childhood, and how this impacts on pupil voice and democracy in schools.

The individual projects mentioned with the web link www.consultingpupils.co.uk throughout this report are all sub-projects in these two main TLRP projects:

Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning
www.tlrp.org/proj/phase1/phase1dsept.html

The Historical, Political and Pedagogic Significance of Pupil Voice
www.tlrp.org/proj/phase1/phase1esept.html

More about these projects can be found at:
www.consultingpupils.co.uk.

1. Benefits for the Learners

Projects consulted:

Project 3: Pupil perspectives and participation: starting and sustaining the process

Project 4: The potential of pupils to act as (co-) researchers into the process of teaching and learning

www.consultingpupils.co.uk

Project 5: How the conditions of learning in school and classroom affect the identity and participation of different groups of pupils

TLRP research findings indicate that children and young people benefit from being allowed to play a more active role in their own learning.

When teachers find ways to offer learners more choices about where, how and with whom they learn, they respond positively.

However, the research indicates that it is not enough merely to offer pupils choices in learning; teachers need to identify and focus on the skills learners need to take control of, as part of their own learning. When this happens, and learners are involved as co-constructors of their own learning, levels of motivation and engagement increase.

Furthermore, the research suggests that if teachers go further than consulting learners themselves and actually engage them as co-researchers in the consultation process, and if pupils and students feel that they matter in school and that their views are respected, pupils are more likely to commit themselves to learning. The research concludes that being able to participate is, for learners, almost synonymous with being engaged.

When children and young people are consulted and their views are acted on by their teachers, a wide range of benefits arise, including a stronger sense of themselves as learners and a more positive attitude towards their learning. When pupils see it as worthwhile to contribute to school matters they have an enhanced commitment to school.

Case study

Theme:

Benefits for the Learners

Project title:

**Pupil perspectives and participation:
starting and sustaining the process.**

The importance of different school year groups is a theme emerging from the research. In this research, Year 8 was identified as a pivotal year for learners with important implications for student motivation and achievement. Empirical research with Year 8 found this stage had no clear identity: Year 8 is sandwiched between the excitement of transfer to a new school in Year 7, and the prospect of making options for GCSE in Year 9. The result is the ‘Year 8 dip’; if schools are to prevent this, they need to give more status to Year 8, which pupils can look forward to in Year 7.

The research recommends schools give a clear learning-orientated identity to Year 8 to help pupils think and act strategically in relation to their learning and to understand how a commitment to learning in Year 8 can enhance their life chances. The students involved in the research wanted opportunities for active participation in school life and time for dialogue about learning, to help them understand the longer-term implications of work in Year 8. The research concluded that to succeed in school, students need to acquire organisational skills and

self-direction in readiness for the decision-making of Year 9 and examination pressures of Years 10 and 11, and this could be a motivating focus for Year 8. TLRP researchers recommend that schools monitor the messages they give students about the status of Year 8 and Year 8 work, and suggest that for each new academic year a more explicit marking of age and responsibility could help stem the drift towards disengagement.^{iv}

Comment:

How to provide for Year 8 is an important consideration for schools. They need to give a clear learning-orientated identity and more status to Year 8, and more attention to children’s increasing sense of adulthood at this age, by increasing ‘adult’ responsibilities and relationships and treating them in ways that match their increased maturity. The TLRP research project *Learning How to Learn – In Classrooms, Schools and Networks*^v provides guidance on how schools can promote independence in pupil learning.

Key questions:

How can teachers encourage, accept and value the significance of learner voice? What judgements and decisions can children/young people make for themselves and for/with others? How can teachers help learners develop the skills they need to become more independent learners?

2. Authenticity in Consultation

Projects consulted:

Project 2: Ways of consulting pupils about teaching and learning and evaluating the impact.
www.consultingpupils.co.uk

TLRP research highlights that an uncritical adoption of learner voice might reinforce existing hierarchies among children and young people. Pupils and students do, in fact, have widely different possibilities and potentials for being included in consultation. Schools must avoid creating a learner voice elite and ensure the quiet voice in school is heard; consultations should be about real and important issues and the outcomes must be shared with the students themselves.

However, this process is not straightforward. The research finds considerable diversity in the perspectives of young people from different groups, and shows how social inequalities shape classroom communication. These differences operate in complex and important ways in terms of learners' gender, ethnicity and social class.

The findings have important implications for schools if consultation is to be authentic. The research highlights the importance of teachers listening to multiple voices. When this happens, different ways of talking about classroom life emerge, providing insight into varying perspectives on how the social dynamics of classrooms work, and this impacts on individual learning; essentially, there is a need for an 'inclusive' approach to consultation, as part of developing a school's capacity as a 'learning institution'.

Case study

Theme:

Authenticity in Consultation

Project title:

How the conditions of learning in school and classroom affect the identity and participation of different groups of pupils

Research in a working-class school showed how two visibly middle-class children were marginalised by the peer group; further interviews with the class showed a disparagement of high ability and academic success. The positioning of these pupils impacted on their self-image. Other middle class children in the same class had learnt to negotiate their identity and maintain status with their peers. In the same class, two minority ethnic working-class boys who were quiet, well-behaved and tried hard were also marginalised. Their diligence, conformity and relative passivity worked against them; such behaviour was seen as 'feminine' by numbers of their peers. The boys lacked the resources of hegemonic masculinity and this, combined with low economic and cultural capital, conspired against them and contributed to their marginalisation. The boys were worried about their learning, but felt the teacher didn't listen to them.

The research illustrates how pupil consultation can uncover aspects of both peer group cultures and classroom dynamics that work against fairness, collegiality and a sense of community in classrooms. Learners bring with them to the classroom different kinds of social, economic and cultural capital, which interacts in complex patterns with factors like class, gender and ethnicity.

The research indicates that teachers' perceptions of pupil experience might not match with the reality. Teacher assumptions that the quiet, diligent pupils had positive classroom experiences and learner identities did not match the reality of their personal experiences. Consultation with pupils revealed a picture of marginalisation and low status in the peer group, which impacted detrimentally on the marginalised pupils' identities as learners. The research helped teachers understand how teaching and learning is experienced for pupils whose voices are not normally heard, and showed how pupils can offer important insights into the social dynamics of classrooms.^{vi}

Comment:

A key concept emerging from the research is the complexity of classrooms. This research has identified a range of variables that can impact on the process of extending learner voice. Classrooms are microcosms of society, with power dynamics and exclusionary as well as inclusionary processes that can make democratic dialogue at best difficult, and at worst, impossible. The research also

shows that understanding pupil experience is an important first step to improving classroom relationships. It is important that teachers listen to the quiet voices in school and ensure consultation is purposeful and dialogic. It can help teachers understand disengagement and help them redefine students' status. Schools should avoid creating a learner voice elite and make sure consultations are about real and important issues.

Outcomes of consultation should be shared with pupils.

Key questions:

How do we promote authenticity? How can schools ensure consultations are about real and important issues? How can schools ensure that all learners are valued irrespective of gender, ethnicity or social class?

3. Implications and Limitations of Learner Voice

Projects consulted:

Project 5: How the conditions of learning in school and classroom affect the identity and participation of different groups of pupils

Project 6: Breaking new ground: innovative school initiatives involving pupil consultation and participation

Project 7: The Meta Study: pupil voice and pupil learning

www.consultingpupils.co.uk

To engage in pupil consultation which is real – in the sense that children and young people are genuine partners in change – is to challenge established power relationships. Pupils need to know and see that their views are listened to and, especially, acted upon. Otherwise, there is the danger of pseudo consultation which lacks integrity^{vii}. Teachers have to acknowledge that students can be experts on learning and know what works best for them in the classroom.

Teachers have cited a range of constraints on the implementation of learner voice – such as competing school priorities, external examination requirements, limited preparation time and insufficient skill in collating and interpreting data. Other concerns focus on scepticism about children and young people's ability to discern what they are being asked about and whether or not they have the necessary evaluative skills to make sensible and accurate judgments^{viii}. Some teachers reported that certain children struggle to find the clarity and accuracy of expression necessary to communicate their views effectively. If consultation is confined to the confident

and articulate, this will skew the results of the consultation.

TLRP researchers also identify the national curriculum, as well as governmental preoccupation with performance, as a barrier to introducing consultation and responding to pupils' ideas. If children and young people are grouped in ways that attach stigma to those in the lower levels, they are unlikely to respond positively to consultation and feel aggrieved. If doing well in tests and examinations is all that is valued in schools, there is often a resultant poor self-image for those who don't do well.^{ix}

Comment:

Despite the educational value perceived by teachers in their pupils' and students' comments and ideas, there is a danger that schools won't have the scope to respond in ways which satisfy either learners or teachers because of school and subject constraints and increasing demands being made on teachers in their classrooms.

Key questions:

Who is listening to young people's voices? Why are they listening? How are they listening? How can schools review their practices to reflect what young people are capable of? How can schools promote open and constructive dialogic relationships with pupils? How can schools embed pupil consultation at the heart of what they do? Do schools recognise the valuable part that pupil consultation can play as part of their development as a 'learning institution' – one that is negotiative, participative, responsive, supportive, etc., of all sections of their community?

Case study

Theme:

Implications and Limitations of Learner Voice

Project title:

Consulting pupils about teaching and learning

Moving from consultation to participation is a journey. TLRP created a ladder of participation to reflect different stages that schools could be at:

Stage 1: Listening to learners

Pupils are a source of data; teachers respond to student data, but pupils are not involved in discussion of data; there may be no feedback to pupils. Teachers act on the data.

Stage 2: Learners as active participants

Teachers initiate enquiry and interpret the data, but pupils are taking some role in decision-making.

Stage 3: Learners as researchers

Pupils are involved in enquiry, and have an active role in decision-making.

Stage 4: Learners as fully active participants and co-researchers

Pupils play an active role in decision-making; together with teachers, they jointly plan action in the light of data and review the impact of the intervention^x.

Comment:

The ladder of participation can help schools plan for the implementation of pupil participation in a controlled and structured way.

Key questions:

What will be involved in making such a system manageable and beneficial for all? Are consultation and participation genuine or merely symbolic? Will the changes required be manageable? Will the changes be in the interests of all children?

Further Insights

The Welsh Context for Learner Voice

It is helpful to look at the TLRP research in the context of the Welsh Assembly Government's policy framework, which demonstrates a clear commitment to the concept of learner voice and lifelong learning. In 2004, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted as the basis for policy-making for children and young people (0–25) in Wales. The UNCRC is an international convention setting out the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of children. Article 12 of the Convention sets out the right of children and young people to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account on any matter that affects them. The adoption of the UNCRC in Wales indicates that the views of children and young people are to be listened to and acted upon.

WAG's commitment to the UNCRC has been emphasised in *Rights To Action 2004*. The recently launched UNCRC Action Plan for Wales, *Getting it Right*, sets out how the Welsh Assembly Government, and its partners, will take forward actions to strengthen participation in school, the classroom and any learning setting, to increase opportunities for all children and young people in Wales to participate in decision-making on issues which affect them.

Guidance on the UNCRC in Wales can be found at www.uncrcletsgetitright.co.uk.

Implications for the School Effectiveness Framework

The embedding of **Learner Rights** through the UNCRC means taking seriously what young people tell us about their experiences of being a learner, of what gets in the way of their learning and what helps them to learn. Listening to learners leads to changes in **Learner Relationships** with teachers

and peers and can promote **Learner Identity**, which in turn can lead to **Learner Agency** – where learners become actively engaged in the planning and management of their learning environment, giving them an explicit stake in the learning process and its outcomes. Innovative thinking and practice will be required at all levels if the UNCRC, pupil participation and the implications of pupil voice are to be embedded effectively into practice. The TLRP research project *Learning Lives: Learning, Identity and Agency in the Life Course*^{xii} provides some important insights into the importance of learner voice across the course of life.

All schools in Wales are required to have in place effective school councils, which should be used to ‘actively engage children and young people in the planning and management of their learning environment, thus giving them an explicit stake in the learning process and its outcome.’^{xiii} The establishment of school councils and wider participation in decision-making in schools, youth forums and Funky Dragon (the Children and Young People’s Assembly for Wales), are further indications of the WAG’s commitment to learner voice.

The School Effectiveness Framework is the key document to guide schools in school improvement and has a strong emphasis on the role of learner voice. The SEF emphasises the importance of involving children and young people in ‘decisions about their learning’. The WAG wants children and young people to be ‘active participants in improving school effectiveness’.

The importance of pupil voice runs through all Welsh curriculum documents, including the Skills Framework 3–19, the Foundation Phase, Key Stages 2 and 3 and Learning Pathways 14–19. A number of TLRP research projects can support the development of learner voice in curriculum context:

The *ACTS II: Sustainable Thinking Classrooms* report demonstrates the value of infusion approaches in developing thinking skills – this can support the Skills Framework.^{xiv}

The report *Improving Effectiveness of Pupils Groups in Classrooms* provides research evidence on the power of group work to promote higher standards of learning through peer collaboration.^{xv}

Supporting Group Work in Scottish Schools: Age and Urban/Rural Divide explores these findings in

the context of small rural schools with mixed aged classes – a common feature of schools in Wales.^{xvi} A project in Northern Ireland, Consulting Pupils on the Assessment of their Learning, provides evidence that involving learners in assessment can support learner voice.^{xvii}

If pupils are to be included in the process of deciding what makes an effective school, teachers will need to see pupils differently and re-assess their capabilities. Schools will need to review and change aspects of school organisation, relationships and practices, to review what young people are capable of. All learners need to be actively involved in decision-making processes. In many schools in Wales, pupils have formed a SEF group and become actively involved in the processes of discussion and research into what makes an effective school.

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