

2008

## POSITION STATEMENT

# ***Taking pupils seriously: involving pupils in decisions that matter***


'Pupil voice is the consultative wing of pupil participation. Consultation is about talking with pupils about things that matter in school. It may involve: conversations about teaching and learning; seeking advice from pupils about new initiatives; inviting comment on ways of solving problems that are affecting the teacher's right to teach and the pupil's right learn; inviting evaluative comment on recent developments in school or classroom policy and practice'.

Ruddock, J. Pupil voice is here to stay! *QCA/ Futures, 2004*

### **Introduction**

ATL believes that learning is more meaningful and pupils learn more when they are engaged in their learning. We believe that this must involve more than just taking part in lessons. Real engagement means participation in decisions that affect their schooling. There are risks associated with this kind of engagement by pupils, and ATL believes that schools, and government, must consider how to minimise these risks, so that pupils and their teachers can benefit.

'Pupil voice' is a popular concept that is already embedded in government guidelines. Curriculum requirements across the UK include developing pupils' abilities to take part in discussion, and to contribute to the life of the school. In England, enabling children to make a positive contribution is one of the five outcomes of *Every Child Matters*. By 2009, schools are expected to be working towards Healthy School Status, which will involve putting mechanisms in place to ensure that all pupils' views are reflected in curriculum planning, teaching and learning and the whole school environment. The School Self-Evaluation Form asks for an assessment of how well learners express their views and take part in community activities, both within and beyond the school. In Wales, School Councils have been statutory since 2006.



There are different levels of ‘pupil voice’ in schools, ranging from inviting comments from pupils about particular issues at specific times to involving pupils in making decisions about school policies. It can include filling out anonymous surveys, representation of peers in a School Council and meetings between pupils, staff, senior managers, governors and the wider community. Pupils and staff need to have a clear understanding of what is being developed, the power and responsibility available, and its possible limitations.

### **Benefits of pupil involvement**

ATL members have identified a range of benefits of greater participation. For pupils these include increased self-confidence and feelings of empowerment, and a greater sense of responsibility. Many also point to the potential for improved behaviour with pupils taking responsibility for their own and others’ behaviour, as well as improved learning.

Members also identify a positive impact of pupil participation on their own work. Many welcome the increased focus on the child’s perception of their learning and the school environment. Others point to children’s insight into the ways they learn best, and the ideas they have for changes to lesson content or style, and to the life of the school, in order to meet their needs.

### **Pupils involved in learning**

Pupil participation in their learning means a range of different things. In classrooms, this may include attempting to develop projects to reflect interests and needs as expressed by pupils; encouraging reflection by pupils on their own (and others’) learning, and development of a language of learning; reflection by pupils on the style and content of lessons, and opportunities to give feedback to teachers.

ATL’s publication, *Learning: A sense-maker’s guide*, suggests that effective learning takes place when learners continually review their learning strategies to decide whether they are suitable for the task in hand. This implies that learners will have some sort of control over how they learn in classrooms, which can only happen if teachers can offer opportunities for pupils to speak about their learning. Assessment for Learning encourages a view of assessment as an essential part of everyday classroom practice involving both teachers and learners in reflection, dialogue and decision-making.

ATL believes that pupils should have a voice in the ‘what’ of their learning too. While there is a place for a national curriculum, we believe that this should be a slim, skills-based curriculum, with the knowledge content developed locally to reflect local community needs. Pupils are part of that community, and have a role to play in the development of curriculum at school level.

### **Pupils involved in the wider life of the school**

In a recent survey, ATL members said that pupils have a vital role to play in decision-making at school level. In particular, pupils should be involved in practical issues such as resources and equipment, school rules, timetabling and uniform, as well as extra-curricular (out-of-school) activities and pastoral issues, such as anti-bullying, and behaviour policies and practice. Although some members expressed concerns about pupil involvement in areas like staffing and recruitment, and others in issues of school management, finance and

strategic planning, many others suggested that all areas were open to pupil involvement, with certain caveats.

Those caveats are vitally important. ATL believes that pupil participation in decision-making must be properly managed and that it will be introduced differently depending on the ages of the children concerned. This means that:

- all staff must be consulted before pupils become involved;
- pupils must be supported so that they can develop the necessary skills to provide constructive input, so that they are aware of the part they play in decision-making;
- teachers and support staff must have access to training to ensure that they too have a voice in the decision-making, and the know-how to guide their pupils.

Schools cannot assume that everyone is able or happy to involve pupils more widely.

### **School Councils**

Many schools develop pupil participation through School Councils. In Wales, these are statutory, which means that discussion can now focus on how to make them effective. School Councils are not the only way of developing pupil participation. Schools use pupil surveys and questionnaires on particular issues, or regular general consultation across the school, as well as formal meetings between pupils and staff, pupils and the head and pupils and governors. School Councils on their own are not the answer to greater pupil participation in the life of their school; schools which do not yet have a School Council may have established other ways of encouraging participation, or may not have developed an ethos in which a School Council would be effective. On balance, ATL does not believe that School Councils should be made compulsory in England.

### **For School Councils to be effective real support is required from the headteacher, senior management and staff, along with good leadership.**

- Councils should be properly representative of all pupils, and offer opportunities for all pupils to contribute.
- Pupils must feel that they are listened to, and that School Council discussion and decisions are reflected back to the whole school community.
- Pupils must be able to discuss issues of importance, and not just 'toilets and school dinners'.
- Schools will need to be open to the idea that pupils may wish to influence issues beyond those that are originally part of the School Council's brief.
- Pupils will need training and support in order to participate effectively, and the younger they are the more guidance they may need.

### **One voice or many voices?**

In describing pupil participation, 'pupil voice' is often used as a shorthand. But this is not necessarily a helpful description. In deciding how to manage pupil participation, a number of issues need to be debated. Any opportunities for pupils to participate can lead to disagreement within the pupil body. Schools will need to decide how this disagreement will be managed, and whether to seek consensus or majority, or to take pupils' views into account in some other way. This process must be transparent.

As with any democracy, a single voice does not necessarily represent the views of all. Putting too much emphasis on the views of a vocal minority can offer a distorted view,

whether of an individual teacher or of the school as a whole. This raises questions of how to ensure that all pupils are represented in discussions and decision-making, and, in particular, how to make sure that it is not only the articulate, well-behaved or loudest pupils who are listened to. Teachers must be supported to deal with negative feedback constructively, and must have confidence that an individual pupil's views will not be allowed to distort the bigger picture.

Benefits of participation are often described in terms of the development of individual voices. Pupils gain in self-confidence when listened to and when taken seriously. It is important that pupils are supported to enable them to listen to each other and to others in the school community, including parents. Pupils also need support in learning cooperative decision-making and in viewing their involvement as part of collectively making things better, rather than a focus on 'what I want'.

### **'Pupil voice' projects or overall ethos**

Often, 'pupil voice' is seen as a series of projects, introduced by staff with a commitment and interest in involving pupils. At other times, adding a School Council is seen as meeting the need for pupil participation. But there is very strong argument to be made that pupil participation cannot be limited to times and opportunities organised by staff. Allowing pupils to be heard only in particular lessons, or on particular issues, leads to confusion for pupils and possible disruption as pupils attempt to be heard in other places. Equally, it can become token participation, with only certain pupils able to participate, and only token issues deemed reasonable for discussion. Or it can lead to unrealistic expectations, with pupils believing that they have more power than is possible or desirable. Introducing particular projects may be a good place to start, but it cannot remain at this level. If listening to pupils and encouraging participation is important then it should be recognised that it will underpin everything a school does.

### **Rights and responsibilities**

'Pupil voice' is often encouraged as part of the fulfillment of the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child. While this is very important, there are many who argue that children are all too aware of their rights. In developing pupil participation, it is important that pupils understand their rights, but also the responsibilities that these entail. Many people view rights as pertaining to individuals; pupil participation can, however, be developed in such a way that pupils begin to understand how rights can conflict, and how they can begin to address those conflicts. This is vital learning, for school life and for pupils' lives outside of school.

### **Teacher professionalism**

Some teachers view pupil participation as a threat to professionalism, particularly when pupils are invited to comment on teaching. ATL believes that teaching professionals need: 'knowledge and understanding of particular pupils as individuals, their interests, needs and potential obstacles to learning, knowledge developed through assessment and through relationships with pupils, families, communities and other professionals'. *New Professionalism*, ATL, 2005.

Encouraging pupil reflection on learning and teaching is a tried and tested route, and can also support professionals to develop: 'practical knowledge through reflection and



interaction [and] to review the nature and effectiveness of practice'. *New Professionalism*, ATL, 2005.

ATL is equally clear that this review and reflection is almost impossible where teachers are subject to decisions and changes imposed from above, whether at school level or from government. If pupils are truly to participate in the life of the school, then teachers too must have the power to make decisions about the important business of the school.

### **What are the risks?**

Schools are already required to enable pupil participation. But its development needs sensitive handling and projects cannot be imposed on pupils or staff. ATL believes that staff will need regular opportunities to share their approaches, successes and concerns through professional dialogue. Pupil participation will need to be monitored sensitively, to ensure that all pupils are supported to take an active part, and that they develop the skills and language to do so appropriately and effectively. Some forms of participation, particularly pupil feedback on lessons, may need particularly careful handling, in order that it is constructive for staff and pupils.

ATL opposes any imposition of methods of pupil feedback for monitoring and performance management purposes.

Some members express concerns that pupil participation projects can prove to be a distraction to learning, rather than enhancement. This may reflect the way in which participation has been developed within a school, without proper participation by teachers and support staff. Where pupil participation of any kind is imposed, it is likely to be perceived negatively, with resentment for the amount of time and additional work needed (both in and outside of the classroom) to support a practice that is deemed unnecessary and irrelevant.


ATL opposes the imposition of pupil participation in any form, without proper agreement from school staff.

Pupil participation takes time and money. This affects the amount of time available for other activities, including teaching and learning. School leaders must be clear about the priority which is given to pupil participation, and must find ways of mitigating additional pressures on staff.

All of this implies commitment and work for teachers and support staff. This commitment cannot be ensured by introducing a statutory requirement.

ATL believes that for pupils to participate effectively in decision-making at school level there must be no imposition of pupil participation without agreement from staff, and no imposition of methods of feedback for monitoring or performance management purposes. Instead, there should be:

- commitment from senior management, and particularly the headteacher, to involving pupils in this way;
- involvement of all staff in the development of pupil participation;

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- allocation of resources, including staff time, with a consequent reduction in other activities;
  - the development of a pupil participation protocol and ground rules, with particular reference to the use of any information collected, so that staff and pupils know what is expected and permitted;
  - high quality professional development opportunities with opportunities for professional dialogue within and between schools to develop effective practices;
  - greater flexibility within the curriculum to allow time for pupils to participate, and a greater emphasis on the development of skills so that participation is seen as part of the curriculum rather than an add-on;
  - greater priority given to assessment for learning and less emphasis on national test data.

If you would like further information or to comment on this briefing paper please do so by contacting ATL on [policybriefings@atl.org.uk](mailto:policybriefings@atl.org.uk)

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