The Hertfordshire Participation Pilot: a collaborative school-based project promoting student participation

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Abstract
This paper reports on a collaborative project - The Hertfordshire Participation Pilot\(^1\) - established to promote student participation in education through teachers’ and students’ leadership of research and school councils. Having sketched in the background to the project, the paper describes its design which featured an award-bearing professional development activity for teachers who went on to establish and support small groups of young researchers in their schools. A description of the key outcomes includes an account of the way the student researchers developed their peers as researchers. The benefits of this approach are discussed drawing on evidence from systematic evaluation.

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\(^1\) Partners: the HCD Student Partnership at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, Save the Children UK, Hertfordshire education authority in England and a number of schools
Introduction

This paper introduces the Hertfordshire Participation Pilot which sought to engage students in schools in disadvantaged areas in dialogue, decision-making and evaluating education, as well as developing the skills of teachers and students to lead and undertake research that informed these decisions. There were two elements to the investigation: exploring the work of school councils and developing young researchers in the participating schools. The Pilot’s final report will detail the outcomes of all elements of the Pilot including learning from the development and evaluation of school councils within three of the participating schools. This paper however focuses only on the element of the project concerned with the development of young researchers and leaders of research. It opens by setting the Pilot within a wider context which paves the way for considering the aims, process and outcomes of the project.

A wider context

There are numerous challenges for English state schools to navigate in order to develop authentic pupil participation, despite a range of government policies apparently to the contrary (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). The benefits, and challenges, of enhanced pupil participation for pupils, teachers and schools are documented and frequently set within a wider context of changes in the nature of childhood, children’s rights and power and citizenship education (Davies et al., 2006; Holloway and Valentine, 2003; UN, 1989; John, 2003 and QCA, 2000). While there are various approaches to enhancing pupil participation within schools the area of ‘Students as Researchers’ appears to have great transformative potential, not only for pupils but for teachers and the wider school community (Fielding and Bragg, 2003). However the opportunity to engage in research has more often been offered to secondary-aged students, those who are confident, articulate and of ‘higher ability’ or who choose to attend extra-curricular research sessions. However the potential for younger, ‘mixed-ability’, whole class groupings of students to engage in research within normal curriculum time are beginning to be explored as are the inclusion of students seen as more challenging by schools and research with specific school improvement foci (Frost, 2007; Roberts and Nash, 2007). The outcomes of the latter projects have shaped much of the HCD Student Partnership’s development work with schools seeking to develop young researchers and the adults who support them.

The HCD Student Partnership

The HCD Student Partnership is a partnership between the ‘Leadership for Learning’ team at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and the London based charitable educational trust ‘Highest Common Denominator’. Learning, leadership and their interrelationship are the central concerns of ‘Leadership for Learning: the Cambridge Network’. These concerns are underpinned by the following beliefs:

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2 Available from the author in summer 2008.
• Learning and leadership are a shared, as much as an individual, enterprise.
• Leadership should be 'distributed' and exercised at every level.
• Collaborative modes of working strengthen both teams and individuals.
• An independent, critical perspective, informed by research is vital.
• The status quo and received wisdom should be persistently questioned.

Out of these values come the desires:

• To improve leadership practices for the benefit of all learners.
• To explore leadership for learning in educational contexts nationally and internationally.
• To support practitioners with advice based on research.
• To help young people to play an active role in improving learning at their school.
• To undertake and facilitate research on leadership for learning.
• To contribute to a leadership for learning knowledge base.
• To influence educational policy.

These beliefs and desires place any work the HCD Student Partnership initiates or becomes involved in firmly within a context of shared leadership. This context is one which sees leadership exercised by students as central to improving schools. How this leadership is understood by children, young people and adults is a key part of LfL’s research agenda exercised through the HCD Student Partnership and other projects. Central to this endeavour is the belief that children and young people can be competent social players in their own right and that their experiences of life are valid and valuable, and that engaging with their perspectives is critical for informing and shaping schools and democratic societies.

In the light of this the HCD Student Partnership aims

• to develop and support an international network of children and young people, educational practitioners and academics who want to share their experience in the area of student participation
• to build a wide professional knowledge base by bringing together the fruits of research and accounts of innovative practice
• to promote and support student participation through the widest possible range of strategies including the development and provision of training programmes, guidance materials and resources

The exploration of an approach to developing the skills of seven- and eight-year-old researchers in a whole class context, and the teaching model developed through this work by the HCDSP Coordinator, proved successful but highlighted a number of issues: the need for greater time for, and access to, research engagement by children with SEN and LDD, more sustainable models of developing young researchers in schools, closer consideration of the impact on students and schools of allowing students the freedom to choose their own topics of research interest or locating these choices within an adult defined notion of school improvement, the dynamics of power and influence at play

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3 For further information visit http://www.youpaticipate.org.uk/
when students engage in research in schools and the need for more shared, informed dialogue with adults about research (Frost, 2007). The development of this approach and the subsequent issues that arose were all understood within the context and wider benefits of developing research engaged schools, where research is undertaken by all members of the school community and is influenced by the research of others on a variety of levels (Figure 1, Handscomb and MacBeath, 2003).

Through working in collaboration with Save the Children UK and the Herts CSF Participation Team the HCD Student Partnership could see that it would be able to support the needs of these partners as well as build on its existing knowledge about research engagement by children, young people and adults.

The Hertfordshire Participation Pilot

The Hertfordshire Participation Pilot was a collaborative project between Save the Children UK (SC), Hertfordshire CSF Participation Team, the HCD Student Partnership, one primary school, one secondary school, a special school for students with severe, profound and multiple learning difficulties and an educational support centre\(^4\) (ESC) for children and young people who have been excluded from school. It aimed to ensure that children and young people at the participating schools in disadvantaged areas were involved in decision-making and evaluating education, as well as seeking to develop the skills of teachers and students to lead and undertake research that informed these decisions. These activities were undertaken with a view to informing the practice of each of the partner organisations in the broadest sense.

Methodology

The background and aims of the Pilot had grown out of a desire to enhance participation for students and an appreciation that all elements of the Pilot needed to reflect a participatory methodology in order for this to flourish. The Pilot was characterised by

\(^4\) Education Support Centres are often known as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in other local authorities.
an emergent collaborative action research methodology. The Project Team\(^5\) sought to work in an inclusive, collaborative and dialogic way in order to allow themselves and other Pilot partners the freedom to influence the shape of the research. This was especially true of the desire in the first term to move away from ‘delivering’ a school council development programme as this was not what schools felt was helpful to them. Engaging in cycles of planning, acting, reflecting and reviewing throughout the project was essential. The Project Team could not know the context of each participant in the project but they could engage in dialogue to make the process and outcomes as meaningful for everyone involved as possible. By pursuing a collaborative action research approach the Project Team felt that the new knowledge generated through the Pilot would be less partial, more contextualized, and hence more valid, because of the dialogue with students, teachers, headteachers and other staff and amongst themselves (Somekh, 2004). This dialogue enabled participants to influence the shape of the project to varying degrees.

There were two elements to the Pilot: one seeking to explore and develop the school councils of the participating schools and the other to support lead teachers from each school in developing young researchers, who in turn would develop and support their peers as researchers (Figure 1). It was envisaged that the outcomes of the young researchers’ investigations would inform the decision-making of their school councils and the development of teachers and students as leaders of research would help build the schools’ capacity for sustainable research engagement. As a result of discussing the development needs of each school with their headteachers it was decided to only pursue the establishment of a school council in the special school. However one key outcome of the Pilot was the use of the student researcher development through The Leading Research Group (LRG) model to create a school council at the ESC. The collaborative action research methodology was continued in the Leading Research Group model through planning for participants to shape the direction of their research and the way they pursued and shared their research.

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\(^5\) The Project Team included a project leader from SC, Herts CSF Participation Team and the HCDSP.
The potential benefits to students, staff and schools of developing children and young people as researchers were acknowledged early on by the Project Team. The Leading Research Group (LRG) model was designed by the HCDSP Coordinator to build on what was already known about effective ways of developing the research skills of children and young people as well as to serve the needs of all partners in the Pilot. The Project Team also wanted to learn from and formally award the research engagement of the teachers and students involved in this element of the Pilot and so the LRG model was structured as a 30-hour Certificate of Further Professional Studies course for teachers, with students receiving a Certificate of Achievement. The teachers compiled a reflective portfolio of their work as part of this course and the students presented their work and discussed this with other group members. It was intentionally planned so that teachers and students could learn with and from each other in a cross-phase context in order to exchange ideas. The main methods and content used in the course had been found to be successful when developing the research skills of seven- and eight-year-olds (Frost, 2007). This model, using fun and kinaesthetic approaches, had then been adapted to make the content relevant for secondary aged students, although the methods had stayed the same.

The main Leading Research Group aims were to support opportunities for sustained:

- engagement with children and young people’s perspectives
- development of authentic and responsible student voice through student research and leadership skills
- reflection on learning by and between staff and students
- dialogue about learning between staff and students

The LRG model was constructed in a way that would provide professional development activity for participating teachers in the area of research engagement. These teachers would then be able to draw on this learning and adapt it to develop the research skills of a small group of students in their school. These students would then be supported by the teacher to develop the research skills of a small group of their peers. It was hoped that using such a model would develop the research capacity, and dialogue about research and learning, of the students, teachers and schools involved as well as inform the students’ decision-making, particularly through their school councils.

In particular the HCDSP wanted to find out the following through the Leading Research Group course:

1. How do teachers and students who have received a basic introduction to research engagement set about undertaking and leading research engagement themselves?
2. What are the possibilities and benefits of this?
3. What strategies support them?
4. To what extent can they use the skills of research?
The pattern of the course included an initial one day session where one teacher from each of the participating schools came to the Faculty of Education and, along with the other Project Team members, engaged in professional development activity provided by the HCDSP Coordinator. The second session of one morning’s duration supported the teachers in selecting the students they would be working with as well as helping them prepare to develop their students’ research skills. There were then two sessions in school, one where the teacher provided research development activity for their students and the other where the young people engaged in their own small scale research project. Both the teachers and students from each school then all met together in a local location for one morning where the students presented the outcomes of their research. The HCDSP Coordinator then supported the teachers as they worked with their students to select the peers they wanted to develop as researchers. Following this morning work continued in school for two sessions where the teacher supported this group as they provided research development activity for their peers. There was then one more session where these peer-developed researchers engaged in their own small-scale research projects. The final day of the course drew together everyone involved in the Leading Research Group at the Faculty of Education where the students presented the outcomes of their research, an evaluation of learning during the course took place and students were presented with their Certificates of Achievement. Unfortunately the primary school were unable to continue their involvement with the Pilot beyond the first two sessions.

Data collection

Throughout the Pilot in general data were collected in the form of project leaders’ and teachers’ award-bearing portfolios of evidence and reflection, project leaders’ field notes from development sessions with staff and students and students’ powerpoint presentations. Interviews by and with teachers and students also took place in the final session of the Leading Research Group course. Throughout the course of the Pilot informal evaluations took place as well as a formal post-Pilot evaluation, including interviews with a range of participants. This was carried out by a member of Save the Children UK who had no previous knowledge of the project. From the outset of the Pilot the Project Team aimed to make clear to partners the potential benefits and challenges of the work and to assure them that their participation was voluntary and something they could withdraw from for any reason at any time. They discussed the issues of confidentiality and anonymity with participants too and made funding arrangements clear. The team also sought to communicate these ethical considerations to all students in the Pilot as well.

Key outcomes from the Leading Research Group

The Leading Research Group course built on the prior research experience of the participating teachers in a number of ways enabling them to develop their understanding and research practice. It did this through providing teachers with award-bearing and appropriately structured course content and resources and the guidance to shape and present their research through a portfolio. They also had the opportunity to interact with each other and share approaches, hopes and concerns. This enabled them to undertake research that had a significant impact on their own professional development, pedagogy and student learning.
This experience has developed my thinking and improved my day to day teaching practice. It has taught me that the pupils do enjoy carrying out research when they get to choose what it is about and how it is done. I am pleased with the fact that all of the pupils felt this was a positive experience for them.

(Lead teacher, secondary school)

The most important lesson I have learnt is that the pupils at the ESC have responded very positively to the challenge of the project. The pupils have surpassed my expectations of them and developed in their own learning, confidence and esteem.

(Lead teacher, ESC)

The clear and comprehensive introduction to leading student research provided by the HCDSP Coordinator enabled the teachers to adapt the course content and powerpoint resource especially to suit their contexts and the students’ needs and aspirations.

Benefits for teachers

In terms of identifying the possibilities and benefits to teachers of engaging with the LRG course there were gains for the secondary teacher in terms of improved daily teaching practice with regard to increasing student independence while the ESC teacher’s confidence in leading research was seen to develop a great deal from uncertainties about directing a small group engaged in research to constructing and leading a whole school council structure based on each class undertaking half-termly school-based research projects. Both teachers expressed a general concern about more time being needed for the LRG work during the Pilot. A possible future development would be the need to consider how much evidence of the students’ learning needs to be included in the teachers portfolios. This would have added extra validity and insight to the data collected from students about their learning through the project.

Support for teachers

Strategies that supported teachers’ engagement with the LRG included having the support of their Headteacher and Senior Management Team, discussing their work with other course participants, having email and phone contact with the HCDSP Coordinator, two schools being geographically close, the motivation and diligence of the students, the powerpoint and data collection carousel resources and a whole class demonstration lesson provided by the HCDSP Coordinator at the primary school.

Teachers using the skills of research

Teachers used a range of project management skills as well as demonstrating through their practice and portfolios that they were able to use research skills as well. Their portfolios showed how they structured and presented their work appropriately and sensitively designed, undertook and reflected on a research project informed by an awareness of the work of others, an appropriate use of data collection methods and analysis that had an impact on student, their own and their school’s learning. In all of
these areas they showed the potential to be able to develop their research capability further in future if desired.

Having considered the teachers’ learning through their research engagement the students’ development is now evaluated against the aims of the LRG course.

**Students engaging in research**

Although the students had no prior experience of research they all possessed language, literacy, numeracy and social skills that enabled them to engage successfully with the work. They also had good working relationships with their teachers who understood their needs well, despite the teachers acknowledging they had underestimated their students’ capabilities in the area. The students’ presentations showed how they had engaged in research in ways that were accessible and meaningful to them, treated others ethically and that the teachers’ adaptations of the LRG resources had supported them well. It was unfortunate that it was not possible to collect data that independently documented how the students engaged with their research. The students identified the need to be more creative and imaginative in their approaches in future. The areas of power and motivation would also need careful consideration in future to ensure that students are able to engage more fully in a change process linked to their research and also to ensure that those students who were less motivated initially could have access to this worthwhile experience. The table in Appendix 1 shows how the two student groups were formed, the approaches they and lead teachers used and the research they engaged in.

**Students leading their peers in research engagement**

Feedback from teachers and students shows that students were able to lead their peers in research engagement through adapting and sharing the development tasks and materials their teachers had shared with them as well as developing a range of other basic language and interpersonal skills. However due to limited time there was no opportunity for the HCDSP tutor to observe what actually took place in order to reflect on this area independently. In future it may be more fruitful to specify more clearly throughout the LRG course the need to include evidence in the teachers’ portfolios of the way students are guided in and interpret the role of leadership of research. Both teachers and student leaders of research recognised the need to give the people they were teaching more independence in future. However there may be other more effective ways to gain new insights in this area. An impromptu discussion with a small group of students showed that their understanding of leadership was that it depended on both ‘nature and nurture’, required a selfless disposition and being clever in understanding how things will affect others as well as themselves and thinking about what is best for people. They also considered there were many different role models for many different people depending on an individual’s personality and aspirations.

**Benefits for students**

Feedback from students and teachers illustrated that it had been beneficial to students to be involved in the Leading Research Group work. They developed a range of language,
interpersonal, technical and research skills and surpassed their teachers’ expectations in terms of what their teachers thought they were capable of. This development as well as the students’ engagement with research that explored and sometimes challenged the status quo, albeit in small ways locally, reinforces what is known already about the potential of student research engagement to support the development of student agency and school improvement. Unfortunately, due to the limited data collected about the way in which students set about developing their peers as researchers, it is only possible to say that this area was beneficial to students and in the light of this has positive potential for the future rather than providing any greater insights.

*I think that I have learnt how I can get involved and to be open minded. This has helped me to think I can get more involved in things.*

(Student researcher, ESC)

*I had a good relationship with the teachers while doing the project. I would not usually talk to staff before. I feel more confidence. Now I talk to members of staff I feel equal. I feel they treat me as an equal and talk to me as an adult.*

(Student researcher, secondary school)

**Support for students**

Strategies that aided the students included the support of the school’s senior management team, their parents, peers and teachers. This enabled students to explore a range of potentially challenging areas in school with a view to improvement or enhancing understanding about school life. Where students experience challenging behaviours from their peers because of their research engagement they also experienced a range of support and guidance from each other. Their teacher’s guidance and support was critical. The content and structure of the LRG course and resources underpinned the work and enabled the students to move beyond their own and other’s expectations of them although in some cases there needed to be more work undertaken with parents to support even greater student achievement.

**Students using the skills of research**

The students were able to use a range of research skills including identifying a topic for investigation, data collection and analysis and reflecting on and presenting their work. They were informally assessed through the LRG course structure and content, including their own presentations and the teacher’s portfolios. As indicated already students were able to develop their own ways of working and think independently about ethical issues in relation to themselves and others.

**Ethical issues**

Despite the primary school being unable to continue the Pilot beyond the second session of the LRG course the HCDSP Coordinator had been able to work with a whole class of nine- and eleven-year-olds at the school prior to the course beginning. This was in order to introduce the project to students and the lead teacher and introduce the data collection methods carousel which formed a central part of the approach to developing young
researchers. An issue that arose while the carousel was taking place in the primary school was the need to explain clearly at the outset of the session that when students are trying out the different methods they need to think that what they are writing is either private data and they can keep or dispose of it or it is public or invented data which everyone in the class can see if they are willing. If this is not highlighted clearly there can be a clash between a teacher’s normal practice of looking at and commenting on what students are writing when the status of what is being written this time is different i.e. that it is data and requires a different ethical consideration to normal written work. Students need to know they have the choice to keep their responses confidential or anonymous and that teachers and others need to negotiate their use of this data with students for purposes of classroom display or their own data collection. This is important education in the area of personal responsibility, ethics and power.

A further example of learning in this area arose when the HCDSP Coordinator visited the primary school to observe the lead teacher working with four nine- and ten-year-old student researchers. After much discussion about ethics and consent as part of their development work the students were asked by the HCDSP Coordinator if they would mind their work being photocopied for use in the Pilot evaluation. Three of the four group members consented to this however it was very encouraging to see one student refuse this request and very tempting for his teacher to want to talk to him to persuade him to relinquish the information. It takes a great deal of courage for a young student to refuse an adult’s request yet this appeared to be confirmation that he understood that ethical considerations and protections applied to him as much as to the students he would be researching in school.

**Conclusion**

A key finding for the Pilot was that developing young people to lead and manage research can enhance the quality of the work of the school council. The student research element of the Pilot appeared to enhance the dialogue taking place within the School Parliament structure at the secondary school. The researchers formed part of the Parliament’s School Improvement Group and they actively contributed to the gathering of ideas and decision-making processes to enhance the school community. The group is beginning to consider how they can include students in their decision-making.

*In the Student Parliament this year, people are asking more people about their opinions.*

(Student leader and researcher, secondary school)

*The original reason for responding to the pilot was that the ESC did not have a school council and students did not have a voice. If they had a voice, then it was more of a shout and demand…. Young people are learning about asking about issues or for help in a more appropriate way.*

(Headteacher ESC)

The LRG model enabled students and teachers at the participating schools to begin to use research engagement to develop authentic and responsible student voice and the conditions that support it. There were opportunities for individual reflection and dialogue about learning yet limited ones for a more equal reflection and dialogue as researchers. A number of issues arose for future development including: sustainability,
inclusion, exploring student leadership, safeguarding young researchers and their respondents, students researching independently and with teachers in ways that build their ability to influence learning and schools and finally to share dialogue about research and learning through engagement with ethical, skeptical and systematic research – research that allows researchers of all ages to explore and improve schools through taking considered risks together.

References


## Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approaches and group information</th>
<th>ESC</th>
<th>Secondary school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students in group</strong></td>
<td>13-year-old boy 15-year-old boy</td>
<td>12-year-old boy 12-year-old girl 13-year-old boy 13-year-old girl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers’ teaching resources</strong></td>
<td>Adapted powerpoint resource from LRG</td>
<td>Adapted powerpoint resource from LRG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timing</strong></td>
<td>Students attended in own time then in lesson time</td>
<td>2 x 100 minute lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student data collection methods</strong></td>
<td>Questionnaires</td>
<td>Questionnaires Photo evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student research topics</strong></td>
<td>• What students think about getting excluded from school • Students hobbies and favourite football teams</td>
<td>Choice of topic with school improvement focus • Toilets • Teachers views on behaviour and students’ views on learning and behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Students in group</strong></td>
<td>2 x 15-year-old boys</td>
<td>1 x 12-year-old girl 2 x 13-year-olds girls 1 x 13-year-old boy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group 1 students’ teaching resources</strong></td>
<td>Powerpoint resource</td>
<td>Group 1’s own presentations and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Timing</strong></td>
<td>Attended in own time</td>
<td>1 x 100 minute lesson</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Student data collection methods</strong></td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Questionnaires Photo/video evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student research topics</strong></td>
<td>• Students and staff views on redecorating common room • Student lifestyles</td>
<td>Choice of topic with school improvement focus • ‘the wall’ (a place where students gather) • breaktimes the classrooms</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1 Lead teacher, student researchers and leaders of student research approaches to research development and engagement*

*This document was added to the Education-Line database on 20 September 2008*