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'Take more time to actually listen': students' reflections on participation and negotiation in school

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Behaviour in schools is an emotive topic and one of enduring political interest and sensitivity. The media often portrays schools as violent and dangerous places and young people as ever more unruly. This paper explores findings from a recent large-scale national study on behaviour and focuses on the data from primary and secondary school students within this study. The comments and suggestions offered by students move beyond a discussion of behaviour to focus on the broader questions of participation, engagement and meanings of active citizenship in school.

Keywords: *behaviour; pupil voice; citizenship; pupil relations*

Introduction

Behaviour in schools is an emotive topic and one of enduring political interest and sensitivity. The media often portrays schools as violent and dangerous places and young people as ever more unruly (Brown & Munn, 2008). This paper explores findings from a recent large-scale national study on behaviour and focuses on the data from primary and secondary school students within this study. The comments and suggestions offered by students move beyond a discussion of behaviour to focus on the broader questions of participation, engagement and meanings of active citizenship in school.

The paper draws on findings from the most recent national study of behaviour in primary and secondary schools in Scotland (Munn *et al.*, 2009). The study is conducted at regular three-yearly intervals and provides a clear and robust picture

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of positive and negative behaviour in publicly funded schools and of current policy and practice in relation to managing behaviour. The research examines the views of teachers, head teachers, support staff, key local education authority personnel and students and allows comparisons over time. This paper focuses on the views of school students, in acknowledgement of the ways that their views are still too rarely heard in debates and decision making in education, and the ways in which others 'speak too readily and too presumptuously on behalf of young people' (Fielding, 2001, p. 123). Although the focus of the research was on positive and negative behaviour, the questions addressed a range of questions relating to ideas of school as a community; for example, civic commitment, partnership in learning, dialogue and communication, personal agency and mutual respect. Although the discussion draws on research in one country, the questions raised provide a useful starting point more broadly for discussion about how best to build a more authentic and sustained commitment to children and young people as stake holders in their own school communities.

The context of the larger study is briefly outlined, along with the overall aims, methods and general findings. Approaches to data gathering with students are then described, before moving on to explore the findings. The views of primary and secondary students are examined separately. Although they were found to share many similar concerns, there were also important differences in the views and experiences of children and young people at different stages of schooling. Finally, it is argued that the reflections, criticisms and suggestions made by children and young people in the make a compelling case for reassessment of larger questions about student participation and current meanings of active citizenship in school.

The main study: aims, method and general findings

The research questions were developed from the research literature in this area. They were:

(1) What do a range of stakeholders perceive and experience to be the nature and extent of positive and negative behaviour in publicly funded Scottish schools in 2009?
(2) Are these perceptions significantly different from those in 2006?
(3) What kinds of approaches are typically used to encourage positive behaviour and manage negative behaviour? Are staff aware of these and if so are they perceived as effective?
(4) What kinds of training and support are provided to staff about managing behaviour? How effective are these in the opinion of participants?
(5) How confident are teaching and support staff in promoting positive behaviour and in managing negative behaviour?
(6) How are serious incidents followed up?

There were four main strands to the research design overall: a large-scale survey of teachers, head teachers and support staff in primary and secondary schools (N = 3587); school visits to seven typical primary schools and eight typical secondary schools; and local authority interviews with key personnel (N = 32). More detail on the methods of the study as a whole is available at www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/11/20101438/4.

The framework for analysis was based on the 2006 questionnaire and built on that used by Gray and Sime for the Elton Committee (DES, 1989). The findings from the study overall revealed some interesting new data as well as confirming findings from previous research. In contrast with common representations of young people's behaviour and school indiscipline in the media (see MacMillan, 2002), findings relating to standards of student behaviour were positive overall. Most students in primary and secondary schools reported that behaviour was usually good around the school and inside the classroom. Perhaps surprisingly, teachers in both primary and secondary schools were found to be significantly more positive about student behaviour than in the previous study (Wilkin *et al.*, 2006) and very confident about managing behaviour in general. However, students also had some significant concerns about what happens in school, particularly with regard to feelings of safety, fair and equitable reward systems and opportunities for participation in decision-making. The focus in this paper is on the power of students to shape and influence in school, and uses the findings about behaviour issues as a locus for that discussion. There was found to be a high level of scepticism among students about mechanisms for participation in schools, but also numerous suggestions about how to improve this. The need to 'take more time to actually listen' was reiterated in each school in different ways and about a variety of issues.

Gathering students' views: aims and methods

The questions developed to explore key issues with students focused on:

(1) Positive behaviour and negative behaviour around the school.
(2) Positive behaviour and negative behaviour in the classroom.
(3) School activities to promote positive behaviour.
(4) Student well-being.
(5) Teachers' interventions.
(6) Participation in decision-making.

Participating schools were selected on the basis of recent national inspection reports and typically achieved an 'average' rating for behaviour in these inspections. The schools were chosen to achieve a balance in terms of rural/urban location, denominational/non-denominational status and to ensure representative proportion of students entitled to free school meals. Students' views were gathered

through visits to these schools, using two main methods of data collection: individual survey questionnaires and focus group discussions.

The individual survey questionnaire was completed by a total of 250 primary students and 316 secondary students with an even spread of male and female students. In each of the seven participating primary schools, one Primary 5 (age 8- to 9-years-old) class and one Primary 7 (age 10- to 11-years-old) class completed the questionnaire. The average class size was 18. In each of the eight participating secondary schools, one Secondary 1 (age 11- to 12-years-old) class and one Secondary 3 (age 14- to 15-years-old) class completed the questionnaire. The average class size in the secondary schools was 20. Each of the participating classes was chosen at random by the school itself, often on the basis of convenience and time-table availability on the day of the visit. Members of the research team worked in pairs to administer the questionnaire in class time and were on hand to help any students who had difficulty understanding the questions.

The focus group interviews took place in the same 15 schools and with students of the same age and stage as those who completed the survey questionnaire. The focus groups were therefore drawn from classes at Primary 5 (age 8- to 9-years-old) and Primary 7 (age 10- to 11-years-old) stages and from classes in Secondary 1 (aged 11- to 12-years-old) and Secondary 3 (aged 14- to 15-years-old) stages. Overall, 76 primary students and 104 secondary students participated in these groups across the 15 schools, with an average of 10 to 12 students per group. Students were again selected by senior school staff, who were asked to use their knowledge of the children and young people to ensure a range of views was represented. The focus group interviews were led in each instance by two members of the research team working together. They aimed to gather data in ways the children and young people would find interesting, accessible and relevant. As a result activities and scenarios were developed which sought to ease involvement, stimulate discussion and help participants feel comfortable with unfamiliar adults. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured and special attention was given to reassuring children and young people that their opinions would not be shared with teachers.

The findings from the questionnaires and focus groups are reports of general student views and should not be taken to represent any features of any particular school in the sample. Although data about the gender of participants are available, no other data, for example, on individual students' socio-economic status, ethnicity or disability were gathered and therefore no analysis is possible at this level. It should also be borne in mind that there are limits to any broader generalisations that can be drawn from these data because of the small sample size and number of schools. The data reported below draw on findings from the focus group interviews and the student survey questionnaires. Where percentages are given, these derive only from the questionnaire data. Most of the quotations are drawn from student contributions within the focus group discussions, with a smaller number drawn from the 'open comments' section at the end of the survey questionnaire.

Students' views in primary schools: key findings

In keeping with other recent research (Chamberlain *et al.*, 2011; Kane *et al.*, 2007; Hamill & Boyd, 2002), primary children's comments about school were generally positive and related broadly to the quality of relationships and learning opportunities. Strong listening skills were rated very highly by these primary children, especially in terms of listening to teacher instructions. Listening skills were related explicitly to being quiet and 'not talking' (e.g. either knowing the circumstances where it is unacceptable to talk or talking at inappropriate moments). Similarly, pro-social skills—dimensions of emotional literacy and responsible citizenship (DCSF, 2008, 2005; Welsh Assembly Government, 2008; Scottish Executive, 2004, 2001), such as taking into account other people's feelings, behaving in a considerate manner and being polite, were all very much in evidence in children's accounts of good behaviour. Examples included, *being gentle; being honest; saying please and thank you; being kind* (PS6). These features are very similar to those identified by Arnot and Reay (2004) in their work on the social conditions of learning, and point to an issue about listening and being listened to explored in more detail later in this paper.

The questionnaire findings suggest that nearly all these students were aware of ways in which students were involved in developing ideas and activities in their school (e.g. through a student council). While student councils seemed to be appreciated by students, some concern and, at times, cynicism was apparent in focus groups in terms of their impact on decision-making processes. The children offered examples of being consulted about an issue (e.g., the colour of the school uniform) but not being adequately informed about the outcome of the decision and why the final decision had been made. In some schools, children said that they knew that there was a student council, but that it did not meet on a regular basis. A recent research report from the Office of the Children's Commissioner in England (Chamberlain *et al.*, 2011) revealed a similar concern, noting that 'school councils were considered effective in listening to people's ideas about school in about two in five cases' (2011, p. 1).

Children talked with enthusiasm about other formal school-wide, opportunities for participation including dedicated and specialist committees such as eco committees, transport committees and house captain meetings. Circle time was often seen as a popular mechanism for decision-making. Suggestion boxes were also mentioned and students in one school talked enthusiastically about how such boxes were located strategically around the building, each with a clearly defined purpose. These were individual boxes where children could post complaints, report a worry or a problem or pass on good ideas. The children here were eager to explain that they also had 'golden letter' boxes. The 'golden letter' box offered the children an opportunity to recommend one of their peers for a 'golden letter' which would recognise a particular personal achievement and be read out at school assembly before a copy was sent home. This system was highly valued by these students and significantly, in their view was taken seriously by staff. This example

offered by children pointed to the importance of staff investment in engagement, a modeling of authentic engagement with student ideas which seemed to offer a very effective lesson which in turn seemed to impact on the self-efficacy of students. The ethos in the school had been commented on very favourably in a recent official inspection.

Although there were notable exceptions such as the above, children generally did not seem to have a high level of confidence in most of the systems developed to ensure active participation. Despite a number of mechanisms being in place, these did not operate as efficiently and smoothly as they should, and children often noted issues relating to ineffective communication between children and teacher groups and a lack of consistency in organisation on the part of staff. Students were often willing and eager to offer suggestions to improve these systems. For example, one student proposed having a student ambassador to liaise between teachers and students, acting as a key mediator or conduit between student and teachers. Many children, in different ways suggested that *how* teachers listened and the social context of being listened to was of crucial importance: 'Take more time to actually listen. Ask us in comfortable situations, not in front of other people' (PS2).

Overall, findings from the children in these primary schools reveal that they valued positive and caring relations in school and generally felt that their schools were happy, caring and calm places. They stressed the significance of fairness and active listening skills especially in dealing with misbehaviour. Concerns about safety and bullying did not feature as strongly as in secondary schools, although some specific bullies and bullying behaviour was reported to cause difficulties. While they gave a variety of examples of opportunities for participation in primary schools there was a common perception that such mechanisms for participation needed to be more effective and be followed through much more rigorously by teachers. Some children offered imaginative and insightful suggestions for improving consultation and involvement in decision making in school. Where children had positive experiences of democratic ways of working and opportunities to engage in shaping the ethos of the school, there seemed to be more highly developed sense of personal and group responsibility.

Students' views in secondary schools: key findings

The findings from the secondary school students reveal important similarities of experience but also differences from the views of their primary counterparts. The data reveal their interest in avenues for consultation, opportunities for involvement in decision-making, engagement with school and their frequent frustrations with current systems. As in the reports of data from primary students, where percentages are given, they are drawn only from the survey questionnaires, quotations are usually drawn from the focus group data, but also occasionally from the 'open comments' sections of the survey.

Most students who participated in the focus groups in the eight participating secondary schools reported that behaviour and relationships were usually good

around the school and within classrooms. However, in discussions about these issues, some concerns were also raised about how schools develop and implement policy in this area.

Students' comments about teachers were often positive. They mirrored findings of previous research (McCluskey, 2008; Tisdall *et al.*, 2010), and revealed that they liked teachers who were friendly, who listened, did not jump to conclusions and were consistently fair. A sense of humour was seen as especially helpful to good teacher–student relations and building mutual trust. However, the majority of student responses identified a clear need for more systematic and embedded reward systems in schools. For example, questionnaire findings revealed that 60% of students felt that their school did not use rewards but also found strong support for rewards as a way to encourage more positive behaviour. Some student suggestions were: 'Include rewards not just punishments' (SS6), 'You don't get noticed if you are well behaved' (SS7) or 'You have to try really really hard to get rewards if you're a good student' (SS3). The problems for the 'good' student have been well documented in research, but perhaps less has been said about effect of lack of acknowledgement at this level and its potential affect on an emerging sense of self-efficacy.

Students were not asked directly about fairness in the questionnaire, but focus group discussions revealed some strong views about fair and unfair teacher interventions in ways that relate directly to issues of participation and teacher respect for student contributions to the school as a community. Students outlined the perceived unfairness of teachers and being talked down to. Typical comments included, 'Some teachers don't let you explain', '[they] jump to conclusions' (SS1), 'you don't get a chance to say anything, 'not allowed to question' (SS2), 'teachers treat you like you are 5-year-olds' (SS5). A very common comment in each school was that teachers do not listen to students carefully enough. Another frequent comment about unfairness was related to a dislike of teachers shouting. 'Teachers not following the discipline system' and 'no follow up on bullying' (SS8) were also noted as concerns. Punishments such as writing out a passage several times or 'turning up for detention and there's no one there' or finding 'a teacher is there but you can do what you want' (SS4) were strongly criticised. In one school, and with no apparent sense of irony, students talked about a room called the 'inclusion room' and suggested it was an effective deterrent because it was an unpleasant and lonely place to be. They appeared to view the inclusion room as a fair and appropriate approach to tackling bad behaviour.

There were some strongly articulated views about boys' and girls' behaviour; 'When a boy hits a girl that's abuse but if a girl hits a boy that's not so serious' (SS4). One student was supported by others when she suggested that 'some girls fight more than some boys' (SS8). This view was echoed elsewhere although a boy countered, 'but boys are more violent' (SS1). Another boy in this school felt that 'Boys get treated more harshly. Girls can make up sob stories' (SS1). There was an assertion of the subjectivity of behaviour management processes, and that, for example, whether someone was likely to be excluded depended not so much on

the severity of the incident but on a range of other factors, often including the gender of the student and the gender of the teacher involved (Epstein *et al.*, 1998; Wright *et al.*, 2000). This was often constructed as 'favouritism'. A comment was also made in one school (SS1) about the impact of reputation on whole classes as well as individual students, so that, for example, a class could come to be known as a 'bad class'.

In one group a key distinction was made between 'a carry on' and 'a real fight', with a feeling that teachers did not understand this important difference. One boy raised this issue saying that teachers should be sensitive to the differences and intentions behind behaviour (SS3). The difficulty of resenting a teacher but being unwilling to 'tell' on friends or other students was also noted by some. Students sometimes raised quite complex questions about behaviour, speaking, for example, about how interpretations of poor behaviour were sometimes situation specific or how individual staff reacted differently to similar behaviour. The predominant feeling here was about the unfairness of some adults; for example, in giving punishments to a whole group as a response to one student's poor behaviour, or punishing a student for forgetting homework on one occasion. One student suggested in exasperation, 'Instead of having punishment ask why they did it' (SS3). Another group highlighted an interesting issue about fairness and the ways in which teachers sometimes work on assumption; 'some people don't know what they've done' (SS1). Reflections such as these highlight the frustration felt by these young people and the close links they continually made between a school's discipline policy and their own sense of a need for negotiation and open communication.

One question in the questionnaire asked directly about student participation in decision-making in school. Seventy-four per cent reported that there was, for example, a student council in their school but only 62% of students said that there were opportunities in school to develop personal decision-making through 'talking things through, sorting problems and findings solutions'. Circle time was reported to be uncommon in these secondary schools and most students did not know whether there was peer mediation in their school.

Again, findings from the questionnaires were complemented by information gathered within the focus groups. As in the primary schools, students identified a number of different mechanisms set up to increase their participation in decision-making. These included student councils, committees, discussions, questionnaires, and prefects who passed on views to senior management on general issues and on single identified issues such as 'eco clubs'. Two school groups noted that the guidance team, led by a deputy head teacher had asked for their views, for example about bullying, through a questionnaire (in Scottish secondary schools the guidance team comprises promoted teaching staff with specific responsibility for the pastoral care and personal support of all students). In one school, it was suggested that there was a need for the head teacher to be more visible around the school and talk to students more. In keeping with findings from other recent research (Deuchar, 2009) a number of students felt that they felt they had had more of a

say in primary school and there was a general view that secondary schools were hierarchical institutions where the views of senior students were taken much more seriously by teachers.

Students suggested that student councils were still tokenistic, and that student council representatives did not accurately represent the majority of opinions in school. One group noted that although students had a chance to vote for a representative, their teachers could veto student selections. It was noted in another school that although they did have class representatives for student council meetings, the council met rarely; they 'never really have them [the meetings]'(SS1). The feedback from meetings was not seen as a priority and communication about decisions was not always shared. The only report from students of a specific outcome from student council meetings was, that in one case the council had recently been successful in getting soap in the students' toilets.

A range of suggestions for increasing student participation in decision-making was made. These included a suggestion box so that issues could be raised anonymously, extending opportunities for communication through student assemblies with greater opportunities to ask questions, encouraging students to email school management, more meetings, more questionnaires and greater use of circle time. Most students agreed that structures for consultation were in place but felt that it 'never really changes things' (SS1). Overall, there was little evidence of active student engagement in school decision-making and most students felt that they did not have a voice in the school.

The main findings from the student questionnaire and the focus group interviews with students in these eight secondary schools present an interesting picture of their views and experiences. Misbehaviour was typically of a low level nature, but seemed to involve a large number of students, reflecting other recent findings (Brown & Winterton, 2010; McCluskey, 2008). In contrast with primary students, they were less happy in school, and had more concerns about bullying, safety and social relations in general. Some students felt that boys' behaviour and girls' behaviour was different and treated differently by staff. Students had strong feelings about fair and unfair teacher interventions. They talked about the impact of lack of trust by teachers and frustration with staff who 'jumped to conclusions' although there was also praise for teachers who listened, were fair, had a sense of humour and who provided variety in their teaching methods. When asked about opportunities to participate in decision-making in school, there was a high level of scepticism about mechanisms for such participation and numerous suggestions for potential improvements.

Discussion

The main focus of this research was on behaviour in schools. The overall findings provide strong evidence that teachers and students feel that relationships are healthy, that children and young people feel safe in school and that there are clear systems and structures in place to foster positive personal and social development.

These general findings are important in themselves and also because of a significant and encouraging shift over time in teacher views on the behaviour of students and their confidence in dealing with difficult behaviour.

However, the views of the primary and secondary students in this study are complex. Fielding reminds us that, 'Students see different issues and see issues differently' (2001, p. 130) and although students were ready in their praise for good teaching and teachers, their comments were also highly critical at times. This discussion focuses on the areas where findings reveal a strong sense of discontinuity between teachers' views and students' own lived experiences of school. It follows students' own concerns to look beyond behaviour to the larger questions which troubled them; about safety and responses to bullying, the use of rewards and sanctions, and an underlying frustration about the lack of opportunity for active and authentic participation in discussions about these and other issues.

Research has often indicated that students and teachers view schools differently. The research on bullying, for example, frequently suggests that schools feel they deal fairly well with the issue, while students, particularly in secondary schools, do not (Chamberlain *et al.*, 2011; Levinson & Sparkes, 2003; MORI, 2009; Norwich & Kelly, 2004; Renold, 2002; Thurlow, 2001). The effects of bullying and identity-based bullying in particular have become much better understood in recent years, and give added impetus to recent research which identifies links between bullying and under-achievement (see for example, Goodman & Gregg, 2010). It was evident here that despite the efforts of schools, concerns about personal safety were often at the forefront of the minds of secondary students, and issues relating to bullying and verbal aggression were often raised in their focus group discussions. This may seem odd in light of the priority given to school safety in policy terms, and increasing use of, for example, CCTV cameras, computer-based monitoring of attendance, contact with home through texting and swipe cards in schools (Lloyd & Ching, 2003). Although reasons given for introducing such technology are often framed in terms of safety and security, none of the children and young people in this study referred to these recent developments as helpful. Arnot *et al.* (2004) note that teachers often reject student suggestions on the basis that they are impractical rather than because they disagree with them in principle, but the suggestions and examples offered here by participants both at primary and secondary level were mostly pragmatic and sensible.

As noted earlier, a further set of concerns raised by these students was in respect of rewards and sanctions. Although all the schools surveyed 'used a multi-pronged approach to promote positive behaviour and respond to negative behaviour' (Munn *et al.*, 2009, p. x), children and young people's experience of this was highly variable. They valued an ethos based on rewards and recognition of endeavour but many noted that teachers often relied instead on punishments or sanctions, particularly in secondary schools, and did not listen sensitively enough to understand events from a student perspective. Again, issues of fairness were raised here, alongside concerns about the effects of individual reputation, group or class reputation, and gender. The perception that boys' and girls' behaviour is treated

differently connects with debate about boys' underachievement, perceptions about girls' underachievement and changes in economic conditions and opportunities (Benjamin, 2003). These are not new concerns and indeed the consistency with which these issues emerge in research with children and young people as students in school, suggests that they must remain a key focus for discussion and change, if young people are to feel engaged and involved in their own learning through primary and into secondary school.

Perhaps most telling, in view of the range and specificity of the comments and criticisms, were student views about opportunities to participate in school decision-making. The ability to listen and empathise with peers is identified as among the key social skills known to help children integrate and cope with day-to-day life in schools (Beinart *et al.*, 2002). The work of Jean Rudduck and colleagues has provided a hugely significant body of evidence on the importance of consulting students and how this relates to their commitment to learning and their sense of personal agency (Rudduck *et al.*, 1996; Rudduck & Flutter 2004; Rudduck & McIntyre 2007). It is essential then, that schools model active listening and provide ways for students to develop those same skills in their own interactions. Despite this, opportunities for children and young people to discuss important issues still seemed under-developed in each of the schools. Although all schools included personal and social education in the curriculum, some students commented that this was inadequate in addressing their concerns. Sellman notes that personal and social education is often 'taught' as a lesson because 'many schools construct students as citizens "to be" rather than citizens "in situ"' (Sellman, 2009, p. 1). He suggests that attempts to increase student participation in decision-making falter because they do not adequately consider the complexities of cultural change required by schools. He notes, 'One such aspect of transformation is the need to reassess power relations between teachers, other adults in schools, and students' (Sellman, 2009, p. 2). Like Ellsworth (1989) he points to the tension between democratisation and the dynamics of power in schools. This seems to be borne out by the experiences of students in these schools. Many of the schools had, for example, an 'Eco-committee'. Discussion about the effects of climate change and the need for schools to be more respectful of the environment is in some senses an 'easy' place for schools to allow student participation, when so many today agree on the basic principle of working towards a more sustainable future. The topics that school councils and groups discussed were often of this kind; laudable but not in any real and immediate sense genuinely controversial or likely to demand skills of reasoning or critical engagement. (As noted earlier, the only successful action by a student council reported in the study was about soap in the student toilets.) There were no discussions or consultations, for example, about whether students should have the right to use the internet to share their views on the performance of their teachers using, for example, the 'Rate My Teacher', website, or whether secondary schools should support student actions such as anti-war walkouts or university fees protests (Britton, 2010; Cunningham & Lavallete, 2004). In such turbulent times internationally, in the context of the

'Arab Spring', 'Occupy Wall Street' campaigns and the street protests across Europe as economic recession deepens, these are unique and challenging times for exploration of citizenship in school.

Equally, there was nothing in student accounts to indicate a structure for development or progress in level of debate or active participation in decision-making in school as they moved from primary to secondary stages of schooling. It is interesting to consider the way the comments made by primary children about the importance of listening (to teachers) is replaced by a disquiet about lack of listening (by teachers) among secondary students in the study. O'Brien and Macleod offer a helpful analysis of different models of a Personal and Social curriculum (2010), drawing on Watkins (1999). The latter's notion of the 'community curriculum' with its 'emphasis on belonging to and socialisation into the group and notions of the civic good' may be closest to the expressed desire of students but they may more often encounter a 'factory', 'hospital' or 'knowledge/work' curriculum instead (2010, pp. 35–36). The extent to which young people are respected and encouraged to see themselves as powerful, competent and able to negotiate their way through school, relates very directly to which of these models underpin a PSE curriculum and to the development of positive reciprocal and equitable relations overall.

This lack of opportunity to engage in discussion about issues directly affecting them seems to resonate with student concerns about the need for more authentic mechanisms and structures to enhance their participation in decision-making in school overall. As noted earlier, both primary and secondary students offered a range of creative and practical suggestions for developing such structures, many of which have proven to be effective where tried (Alderson, 2000). It is interesting to note two particular points made by students here. Secondary students commented that they felt they had 'more of a say' when they were in primary school. Younger secondary students also noted that senior students had 'more of a say'. This finding is supported by a recent longitudinal study of democratic educational practice (Deuchar, 2009) and may suggest that something substantial and significant is lost at the point of transition to secondary schools. This relates to a sense of communal responsibility and a level of trust in the teacher/student relationship that may take several years to re-establish; and then perhaps only for those students who stay on at school beyond compulsory stages of schooling.

The links between positive school ethos, engagement and student participation in school life have been highlighted in a number of policy initiatives referred to earlier, as well as empirical studies (Hahn, 2008; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007; Torney-Purta *et al.*, 2001). Brown and Winterton's recent wide ranging review suggested that 'the extent to which school structures and processes contribute to indiscipline… is seldom considered' (2010, p. 38) and that schools which emphasised listening to children tended to deal with difficult behaviour more successfully. The findings from this study indicate that schools may indeed still be struggling to reflect constructively on their own traditional processes and find inclusive ways of listening to students. Reay (2006) warns about the difficulties of

listening to young people when there may be a 'cacophony of competing voices' but also reminds us that there are still voices which are not being heard. A recent review of the evidence about poverty and educational disadvantage for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Hirsch, 2007) noted that schools still often fail to offer students from less advantaged backgrounds 'the space to build co-operative relationships with teachers and other adults; they saw it [school] as controlling and coercive' (Hirsch, 2007, p. 5). The findings from this study suggest that the experience of disadvantaged children may be the experience of others.

The enthusiasm of the children who spoke about their school's system of suggestion boxes, worry boxes and the 'golden letter box' stands out perhaps because it was evident that both children and staff invested these boxes with shared value and meaning in a way that reveals much about the 'acoustic' of their school (Bernstein, 1996). They affirm the value of Fielding's (2001) questions about dialogic democracy; about 'speaking, listening, attitudes, systems, spaces, action and the future' and 'a simple but searching interrogatory framework for arrangements and practices which seek to acknowledge and promote student voice' (2001, p.133).

When the children and young people in this study asked for *teachers to actually listen*, they call on adults to share in conversations and debate about issues that matter to them (Fielding, 2009; Tisdall *et al.*, 2010), premised on an understanding that action and change will be a necessary consequence of listening. In the context of broader concerns about children and young people in the UK, these findings have an important place. The current global unrest and uncertainty is both a challenge and an opportunity for schools; a unique moment within which to examine and reinvigorate debate about listening, negotiation and relationships in schools.

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