

8

PARTICIPATION, ENGAGEMENT AND AGENCY

Chapter objectives



- To consider participation as a student right
- To make the links between rights and responsibilities
- To clarify what is meant by giving students agency
- To explore what maximises engagement with learning
- To reflect on issues related to student attendance
- To think about what is effective in supporting returning students.

Schools which provide mechanisms for consultation with their students and structures for listening to the collective voice of students, are those which often have lower incidences of unacceptable pupil behaviour (NUT, 2005, p. 21).

There are many ways in which student voice improves behaviour:

- Participation gives children and young people a sense of inclusion and belonging.
- Engagement in your community enhances resilience and wellbeing.
- When young people are given agency they are more likely to take responsibility for the decisions they make.
- Optimal adult–child relationships include authentic consultation.
- Seeking someone’s opinion makes that person feel good about themselves and positive towards the person interested.
- Giving students opportunities to contribute increases their motivation to collaborate, encourages their creativity and thinking skills, and develops a more positive self-concept.
- Adults’ views of young people may change if we provide opportunities for students to identify and demonstrate their strengths.
- Children are often marginalised in our society and in our schools: they do not have an automatic ‘voice’ in matters that concern them and sometimes behave in ways that are attention seeking in order to be ‘heard’.
- Children have a right to be heard in matters that concern them.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) is signed by 194 countries in the world although not yet ratified by Somalia or the United States. The foundation principles are:

- *Non-discrimination*: all children, everywhere and in all situations should have the same rights.
- *Best interests of the child*: all decisions concerning the child should prioritise the child's best interests, not anyone else's.
- *The right to survival and development*: all children need access to basic services of health care and education to protect them from danger, ensure their wellbeing and to enable them to fulfil their potential.
- *The views of the child*: every child has the right to be involved and heard in matters that concern them. All effort must be made to promote children's active, free and meaningful participation.



Questions for reflection and discussion

In which ways are the rights above adhered to for students whose behaviour is causing difficulty?

What are your experiences and thoughts?

The following case study puts the rights of a child into practice across a whole local education authority and demonstrates that where schools are committed to this approach there are positive outcomes in both behaviour and student engagement.



Case study

In the county of Hampshire, England a district-wide initiative has been undertaken to make schools consistent with the rights of the child as described in the UN convention, adopted by United Nations in 1989. The initiative, known as RRR or Rights, Respect and Responsibility, uses the rights of the UN Convention as the basis for all curricula content, pedagogy, school policies and rules. It aims to create a school climate in which all staff and students are aware of and respect the rights of others. Particular attention is paid to the child's right to participation as described in Article 12 of the Convention. In accord with the article, children play a meaningful role in school rules, policies, hiring and expenditures. These school and classroom practices are consistent with the predictors of student engagement.

Where schools had fully implemented the RRR initiative into the school ethos and into the classroom and school policies and practices, there was an increase in levels of student engagement and a decrease in teacher burnout. Compared with their peers in control schools, students showed greater respect for property, greater respect for the rights of others, increased participation and improved behaviours, and over time they showed increasingly higher levels of participation and improved positive behaviours.

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When children are behaving in a socially responsible, rights-respecting way in the classroom, and particularly when they are actively involved in their classroom and school activities, teachers have improved relationships with the students and a greater sense that their teaching is effective. In the words of one teacher: 'Teaching RRR has reminded me why I went into teaching – to make a difference'. Seeing the children's behaviour and learning improve, seeing children become more engaged in school clearly is rewarding for teachers. In fact, many teachers noted how pleased they were with the improvements they noted in their students. As one commented: 'the more you respect the kids and the more you let them participate in the classroom, the more they respect you' (Covell et al., 2009, p. 283).

GIVING STUDENTS AGENCY

'Student voice' is not merely the provision of data for others to make decisions for the student concerned, but is seen to be 'integral to encouraging young people's active participation in shared decisions and consequent action about their own present and futures'. (Holdsworth & Blanchard, 2005)

These authors identify that student voice needs to be authentic and active, not merely lip service. This means giving students agency and fully incorporating their views on decisions that affect them. It is handing over some power for action. This is the opposite of doing things for pupils or to them. It is doing *with* them. When adults take this approach the following happens:

- Young people begin to understand what is involved in taking responsibility.
- They begin to learn how to weigh up pros and cons in decision-making.
- They think through what they need and what they can do to get their needs met.
- Authentic involvement is more likely to lead to responsible actions.
- It is not so easy for a pupil to blame someone else for what is happening to them.
- Adults begin to have more faith in young people to make sensible decisions.
- Students begin to see themselves differently and more positively.

The following case study is an illustration of what can happen when you give pupils agency. As with many behavioural strategies the impact is rarely on one student alone. There is a snowball effect.



Case study: on report – the alternative

Britney, aged 13, had been placed on every kind of report imaginable. She hated showing report cards to her teachers and felt that any good behaviour was ignored. 'Disruptive as usual' was the most common comment. Both the educational psychologist (EP) and deputy head had some sympathy with the teenager, knowing something of her particular situation. Britney was aware that the deputy head had her interests at heart as more than once

he had rescued her from a potentially explosive crisis. After some thought and a few misgivings about staff reactions it was decided to put her on report just one more time – but this time it was to be a positive report only. Britney was involved in setting her own targets and teachers were to record only her successes – or at least her efforts. These included ‘Coming into lessons quietly’, and ‘Working with others if asked’. The report booklet was designed using a desktop publisher and placed inside a plastic wallet. It looked a serious and valued document. Each page had a frame labelled for the day’s lessons and a good-sized space for teachers’ comments. Across the top of each page was written ‘Britney is trying hard to complete some tasks successfully. Please write how well she is doing in your lesson’. At the end of each day the booklet had to be shown to the deputy head.

Teachers were to ask for the booklet at the beginning of every lesson and only write the good things. If they wanted to complain about behaviour or lack of work then the tutor was to be informed by other means.

Britney liked it. Though some were initially sceptical, teachers agreed to go along with the requests for positive reporting and to everyone’s surprise Britney managed to get to the end of the week with the booklet intact and her behaviour somewhat improved. After two weeks, Britney, the EP, the deputy head and Britney’s mother met in school. This time instead of the usual catalogue of complaints she was able to hear some praise and her mother was shown evidence of completed work, Britney was flushed with pleasure and for once able to acknowledge that improvement was possible and that she could take control of her own actions and behaviour.

Since then the booklet has been adapted for many pupils. Targets are negotiated and often there is a space for students’ comments at the end of a week. Some of these are illuminating, for example, ‘Thought of bunking as I got bored, thought of what we agreed and stayed put’. Sometimes discrepancies between teacher comments and self-assessments have proved a useful focus for further discussion.

Many pupils have asked if they can have a booklet, some for a second time when they felt their efforts needed a boost. They have, however, been used sparingly so as not to devalue them. They are taken seriously by staff and by students and appreciated by parents who are often requested to sign after checking them each evening.

Although it hasn’t worked with every student, especially when a holiday has broken the pattern of new behaviours, for many it has made a significant difference. A genuine long-lasting improvement has begun within a few weeks of positive teacher reporting, self-assessment and a feeling by the student that perhaps after all they did have the ability to be in control of their own behaviour.

ENGAGING PEDAGOGIES

In a study in Denmark, pupils were asked about when they thought they really learnt something. Top of the list was ‘debate in the classroom’, and at the bottom ‘when the teacher talks’ (Jensen & Kostarova-Unkovska, 1998). There is surprisingly little attention paid to pedagogy in relation to children with behavioural difficulties, though engagement is becoming a buzzword in education (Field, 2004). Despite social and technological changes in the last half-century, teaching methods remain primarily didactic, particularly in high schools (Race & Powell, 2000). Common practice is for teachers to impart knowledge to students who hopefully want to learn. As we know this is not

always the case. Student behaviour can be related to disengagement with the curriculum and how it is delivered. Although issues outside school impact on student motivation there is also growing evidence that student-centred rather than teacher-centred pedagogy is more effective in engaging students and by extension, reducing unwanted behaviour.

Keirsley and Shneiderman (1999) talk about the value of small teams of students being presented with 'meaningful, messy and ill-structured tasks' that they work on to find real solutions. This is sometimes referred to as problem-based learning (PBL). The teacher is coach and mentor, imparting knowledge to answer questions that evolve from the task. This takes both courage and skill on the part of the teacher who relinquishes their usual control of proceedings. Technology plays a supportive role but is not an end in itself. Three schools in low socio-economic areas who have taken on this approach have found that previously disruptive students are interested in the real-world tasks being presented to them. Teachers report greater work satisfaction (Aldred, 2008).

Cooperative learning has been advocated widely for both learning outcomes and positive behaviours. In competitive environments, some students feel they can never win or shine, so working together towards shared goals in a strengths-based framework offers a useful alternative. Cooperative learning is not having students sit at the same table talking with each other as they do their individual assignments nor one student doing all the work on behalf of the group. Although cooperation does include discussion, helping others and sharing resources it is more than this. One definition of cooperative learning (Smith et al., 2005) is that it involves three or more students working together on a common group activity with shared goals that requires them to:

- contribute to the task (positive task interdependence)
- help each other by using appropriate interpersonal and small-group skills
- ask intelligent questions
- provide detailed responses to questions
- promote each other's learning.

Positive interdependence means linking students so that success is dependent on everyone. It may be useful for each team member to have assigned roles and responsibilities. Shared findings need to be agreed by all group members and able to be explained by each. A shared mark can encourage both individual effort in the group process and enhanced interaction to reach the set goal (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

Cooperative learning can be structured or informal. Even in teacher-led classrooms, breaking a lesson up with discussions to clarify, share understanding and add meaning can re-engage students. There is evidence that cooperative learning pedagogies enhance thinking skills, promote social and emotional learning and increase connection to school.

Gillies (2008) found that schools needed to ensure that teachers were trained in establishing cooperative learning and that students needed regular opportunities to put this into practice. When this happened they found that students were able to provide more detailed help to their peers and developed more complex thinking and problem-solving skills.



Question for reflection and discussion

Think of two learning experiences, one in which you were fully engaged and one in which you were distracted or bored.

What was happening in each that gives you insight into how to increase pupil engagement with learning?

Discuss your thoughts with a partner and identify what you have in common.

INCREASING CONNECTEDNESS

Without mindful processes to develop social capital, toxic environments easily develop. Where there is little sense of connectedness there is little relational trust and few shared goals. This is the atmosphere in which prejudice, intolerance and bullying thrive. One way to give students agency in a democratic forum is to ask them to collectively devise class guidelines. A framework for doing this is given in the Circle Activities at the end of this chapter.



Case studies

One secondary school had a problem with graffiti. No sooner had it been cleaned off than it re-appeared. Staff, especially maintenance staff, were at their wits' end. The head teacher introduced a new policy. Each class in the school had responsibility for a section of the walls. When any graffiti appeared on that wall the whole class had to ensure that it was removed as quickly as possible. It wasn't long before graffiti became less visible. Now it isn't a problem at all.

In another school pupils designed and painted a large mural along the outside wall. Some of the most disaffected students were involved in this project and found a way to feel a sense of pride and identity.

In both cases students increased their sense of belonging – school became more 'theirs'.

NEGOTIATION

Adults may be concerned that young people will not make good decisions about what is best for them. When someone is not used to being given the power to make decisions they may only consider short-term consequences. It is a bit like being forbidden to eat sweets and then being handed a box of chocolates. It is tempting to scoff the lot. Negotiating decisions ensures best outcomes. A way of doing this is drawing up behavioural contracts. A contract is an agreement between two parties, not something that benefits only one signatory.

Negotiating a contract

The school writes down three things that they want to include – these should be SMART targets: Specific, Measurable, Achievable (and Agreed), Realistic and Time Limited. Keep behaviour targets positive – doing something rather than stopping something. Make behaviours observable so everyone, including the student, will know when this has been achieved. If targets are negotiated with students so they agree what is manageable for them, the chances of success will be higher.

These are examples of SMART targets:

- Mandy will bring the correct book to four out of five lessons every day for the next two weeks.
- Jack will sit with his feet and chair legs on the floor whenever he is in the classroom. This to be reviewed after one week.
- Tam will come to school by 9am and report to Ms Lang before going to class: this to be reviewed after two weeks.

The student also writes down what *they* want to include in the contract. This is potentially challenging for teachers but makes the contract a genuine two-way agreement. All staff named need to say whether or not they agree – as with students, anything imposed without genuine consultation is unlikely to be sustainable.

Some examples might be:

- Mr Patel, my science teacher, will acknowledge when I do something right at least once every lesson for the next three weeks.
- Ms Hardy, head of year, will meet with me twice a week on Tuesday and Friday lunchtime for 5 minutes to see how things are going.
- I will be allowed to leave the classroom for five minutes every lesson if I need to.
- I will be allowed into the IT room on Thursday afternoons to research my project on Leeds United Football Club for the next three weeks.

A regular review of a behavioural contract provides opportunities to identify the difference it has made for the student, acknowledge their achievements and include them in continuing conversation about progress and whether targets need to be changed. This is more motivating than telling pupils what they must do and what the consequences will be if they do not. Some students will not be willing or able to maintain contracts so having one must be their choice in the first place and all necessary support must be provided to maximise their chance of success. If schools break their side of the contract this becomes an issue for discussion with school leaders.

PUSH AND PULL FACTORS IN ATTENDANCE

Attendance may first become a concern at primary school but unauthorised absence increases as students go through school. The ‘push’ factors comprise what is going on

at school that discourages children and young people from wanting to be there. These factors include bullying and other social issues, struggling to keep up with learning, poor relationships with teachers and getting into trouble. 'Pull' factors are outside school. These may include joining friends who are also out of school and perhaps getting paid work. Family issues often keep younger pupils at home, especially distressed parents and issues of loss. Poor attendance needs to be addressed promptly as the longer a student is away the less connected they are and the less they learn.

The most effective way of preventing unauthorised absence escalating is to make a *positive* contact with home on the first day of absence. This shows both concern for the student's welfare and vigilance on the part of the school: it conveys to families how much it matters if their child is not there. Monitoring school attendance is not only important for learning outcomes but also contributes to child protection. The quote below highlights the importance of interpersonal skills in what can be a sensitive situation.

We trained a member of our existing support staff team to organise first day absence phone calls. We found that this person already possessed excellent negotiation skills, which we developed further with training and he soon built a rapport with many of our parents that had been considered unsupportive to the school's aims in the past. Before long he was texting some parents, emailing others as well as having regular phone contact with a number of other parents. The lines of communication improved rapidly and it had a remarkably positive impact on both attendance as well as pupil behaviour (from the Steer Report, DfES, 2005, p. 24).

RE-CONNECTING STUDENTS AFTER ABSENCE

Children returning after a long absence cannot perform miracles – renewing or remaking friendships, catching up in the classroom, readjusting to a structured day – all take time and do not happen overnight. But throughout the process children must feel that the school is glad to see them and values their return (Cambridge County Council, 2008).

As this quote suggests, expecting students to re-integrate into school without a supportive process in place is unrealistic. Pupils who miss long periods of school through sickness, exclusion or unauthorised absence have similar needs to those who join school halfway through a year. Unlike new entrants they may already have gained a reputation that is not helpful to their re-integration. This needs to be carefully planned with all involved, especially the student concerned. The following questions need to be addressed:

- Is it better to have a phased and gradual return to school or full return from day one?
- If phased, which lessons or times of day does the student feel will bring most success and how will time in school increase? Will this be flexible, based in meeting criteria or decided at the outset?
- Who is the best person to support the student on their return and monitor how well they are doing? This person needs to be someone that has established a positive relationship with the pupil and is someone they trust.
- What will be the expectations on this person? How regularly will they meet with the student in the first week, month and term? How will this time be protected?

- Are there student peers who can support a successful re-integration? What will be the expectations on them and how will this be monitored?
- Is there a need for extra classroom support? What will be the role of support staff in this situation? What does the student say they need?
- How will information about this student's return be communicated to all staff? What are the expectations about making this student feel welcomed back. Negative or sarcastic comments can undo hours of constructive planning.
- How will parents/carers be kept informed of progress? Who is responsible for this and how will good communication be negotiated between school and home?
- What contingency provision will be made if the student feels they are having difficulty either in or out of the classroom? What would be a 'safe place' for the student?

Lown (2007) studied the experiences of students re-integrating into different schools after exclusion. Critical issues were the involvement of the pupil in decision-making and the quality of all relationships; adults with adults, adults with students and students with their peers. Peer networks were found to be one of the most important factors in both facilitating and inhibiting successful re-integration. Planning peer support, peer mentoring or similar interventions can make all the difference.



Questions for reflection and discussion

What has been your experience of joining a group where everyone knows each other, are familiar with what happens and you are out on a limb?

What has helped you feel included?

STUDENT INFLUENCE IN THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Research suggests that students who perceive they have a degree of autonomy in the learning environment are more committed and intrinsically motivated. They are more engaged in learning activities than students who regard the climate as more controlling (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Thuen & Bru, 2009). Van Merriënboer and Paas (2003) found that encouraging students to set their own goals contributed to engagement and therefore more time spent on learning activities. By engaging pupils in the planning and management of educational tasks, teachers also foster responsibility (Wang & Zollers, 1990).

SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES TO PROMOTE POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR

- Devise class guidelines with students.
- Promote an inclusive and democratic class ethos.
- Make the links between rights and responsibilities, freedoms and obligations.

- Make learning student-centred rather than teacher-centred and give students a say in setting their own learning targets.
- Develop cooperative and meaningful pedagogies.
- Teach cooperative skills.
- Encourage students to ask questions.

SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULTIES

- Give students structured opportunities to have agency and develop solutions to both individual and class issues.
- Give students a say in contractual agreements.
- Plan re-integration programmes in detail and include students in decision-making.
- Make a supportive call home on the first day of absence.

Professional Development Activities for Teachers

UNCROC

In pairs, research the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Write a Charter for the Rights of the Student in School.

Contracts

In small groups draw up a contract between a student (Maddy) and school (Primrose Pond High). This student is returning to school after a suspension for verbal abuse of a science teacher (Mr Petty). Maddy was talking to her friends about the break-up with her boyfriend – she was upset. Mr Petty told Maddy to settle down to work. She continued the conversation and the situation escalated very publicly until Maddy stormed out of the classroom.

It is easy to see what the school might want in the contract – imagine what Maddy might ask for. Think of what might be negotiable and what is not.

Setting targets

Write down your own learning targets for the next few weeks. What do you want to achieve? Is this realistic? How are you going to get there? What help do you need?

Review your progress and reflect on how you were engaged in your learning. In which ways would this activity be relevant for pupils?

Circle Solutions activities with students



These activities will help foster a sense of responsibility.

All Circles begin with a statement of the principles:

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- When one person is speaking everyone else listens.
- You may pass if you do not want to say anything.
- There are no put-downs.

Wants and rights

Download wants and rights cards from the Cape Breton University Children's Rights Centre. There is one set for children and another for young people: http://discovery.cbu.ca/psych/index.php?/children/resources_item/wants_and_rights_cards/

Put all the cards onto the floor in the middle of the Circle and ask students to take it in turns around the Circle to place a card that should be a basic right for all children on one side of the Circle and those that are wants on the other side of the Circle. All those they are unsure of place the middle. Ask students to talk in pairs about the decisions that they have made and what they think is the difference between a want and a right. Ask them to see if they can agree a definition for a right.

Two sides of a coin: small group activity

Present students with a 12-inch circular piece of paper to represent a coin. On one side of the 'coin' write one of the following phrases:

- Right to be safe from harm
- Right to have a say in decisions that concern you
- Right to choose your friends
- Right to be treated fairly

Groups turn over their 'coin' and discuss what responsibility comes with this right. One of the group writes what is agreed. Groups share their thoughts with the Circle.

Mix up silent statements

Stand up and change places if you agree with the following:

- Everyone should have a say in deciding guidelines for behaviour
- Once guidelines are agreed everyone has a responsibility to keep to them

Class guidelines

Explain that guidelines are agreements about how people should behave towards each other – they are not rules imposed by others but statements made by people in a group.

Pair share

How do you think people should behave in this class?
Agree two guidelines that everyone should abide by.

Small group

Pairs meet up into fours and share their guidelines.
They look at whether any are more or less the same.
Then they put them in order of importance.

All groups write up their first three guidelines. Teachers collate these to ensure there are no repeats. These are displayed in the classroom. Over the next week each person has 10 votes: he or she can give all 10 votes to one guideline, one each to 10 or any combination. The 5 guidelines with the most votes are agreed as the class guidelines.

Small group discussion

Divide the class into five groups. Each group discusses one of the guidelines and ways in which everyone can be helped to keep to them.

RESOURCES



Unicef UK have developed curriculum resources on rights and responsibilities for all phases of education: www.unicef.org.uk/tz/resources/

David and Roger Johnson are the gurus of cooperative learning. You can read more about their work on www.co-operation.org

www.jigsaw.org gives some excellent guidance on developing cooperative learning and dealing with some of the difficulties you might encounter.

How to reach hard to reach children, edited by Kathryn Pomerantz, Martin Hughes and David Thompson (2007, Chichester: John Wiley) has some excellent chapters including one by Lynn Turner on what pupils have to say about under-achieving pupils and under-achieving schools.

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