

Participation and Whole School Improvement

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‘The children seem to sense what their elders are slow to sense, that you enter the world of the later twentieth century ill-armed if all you have done is submit, to some degree or other, to a pre-determined, pinched, examination-harried course of instruction [...] They are tired of being treated as children, in that sense of the word that means they are creatures from whom adults must be aloof, who can only be handled if they are first trapped in set of rules, mostly prohibitory. They want to learn to govern themselves’

(Blishen, 1969, p13-14)

I

The idea that schools should give children a say in the running of the school is widely supported by educationalists (Hannock and Mansfield, 2002, p.1-2). It is also at the heart of citizenship education. The final report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship, chaired by Professor Bernard Crick, is littered with examples of good citizenship practice stemming from pupil involvement in schools, and states that citizenship education concerns itself with the ‘development of pupils into active citizens’ (Crick, 1998, p. 40), and with giving pupils ‘the skills ... relevant to the nature of participative democracy’ (p. 40). It only forgoes recommending that school councils should be legally compulsory ‘for fear of overburdening schools and teachers’ (p.25). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the national curriculum recommends that in citizenship education, ‘knowledge and understanding are acquired and applied when developing skills of ... participation and responsible action’ (National Curriculum Online). However, even among those schools that have taken the citizenship education programme seriously, opportunities for students to develop skills of participation and responsible action are often absent or lacking, either through reluctance to make the changes necessary to give students a voice, or a failure to recognise that citizenship education requires schools to make such changes. Schools that have reluctantly approached citizenship education tend to have even worse records regarding student participation.

In this essay I intend to examine one reason for schools to support full-blooded student participation, thereby implementing one aspect of the citizenship curriculum. I shall claim that schools with full-blooded student participation have higher student attainment than schools without student participation. I shall begin by giving a more robust definition of ‘student participation’, before summarizing the empirical evidence linking it and an improvement in student attainment. I shall then offer two of several possible reasons for

the correlation, namely improved student motivation and improved learning behaviour, and analyse the ways in which these may be affected by student participation.

To begin with, though, I must add two caveats. Firstly, it is important to note that an improvement in student attainment is not the only reason schools may want to give students a voice. Schools may be motivated by the fact that they are legally obliged to consult pupils, under both UK law and international law¹; by a moral argument for student participation, such as the one offered by Alderson, (2003, p. 2), that it is simply fairer to allow children, who form the majority of people in a school, to have a say in its running; or by the argument offered in the recent IEA studies led by Torney-Purta, (Cited in Hannam, 2005, p. 22): that giving children a chance to participate in democratic practices today enhances our democracy tomorrow. There are many more reasons than these, and I do not claim that raised student attainment is the best of them. It is, however, unique amongst the arguments for student participation because of its pragmatic nature. A school that did not have the remotest interest in the well-being of its individual children, in moral arguments, in citizenship education, or in enhancing democracy, but was only concerned with its position in league tables, would be provided by this argument with a reason to give students a voice.

Secondly, we must note that not all student participation is citizenship education. Let us revisit the citizenship curriculum: in citizenship, 'knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens are acquired and applied when developing skills of enquiry and communication, and participation and responsible action' (National Curriculum Online). In other words, student participation is only citizenship if it is a means to acquiring knowledge and understanding of the citizenship Programme of Study. For instance, the process of involving pupils in the process of interviewing prospective teachers is no doubt a good thing, but unless it is done in such a way that it also develops 'knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens' then it is not technically citizenship education. It is, however, within the spirit of citizenship education, and is therefore still a worthy goal for any supporter of citizenship.

II

Let us begin the examination of this argument by looking at what I mean by student participation. It is simply this: a school has a high level of student participation if, and only if, it *genuinely* takes into account students' opinions when making decisions, and if this is done in a way that is transparent, regular, and accessible to all students. A school would not be participative if it only listened to the eldest, or the most academically gifted pupils. Nor would it be participative if it had a school council that was little more than a talking shop, or if the way in which the students' opinions were taken into account was opaque. This is a broad definition and the ways in which schools can be participative are correspondingly varied. A school could utilise year and/or school councils; it could set aside a period a week for form-forums, where children feedback to the teacher and each

¹ Section 176 of the Education Act 2002 and Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, respectively

other, it could give surveys to all of the children at the end of every term asking for suggestions and feedback. As long as all students are consulted and made aware of the ways in which their feedback will be responded to, the school is participative.

Now, what is the link between student participation in its varied guises and attainment? The answer I offer, that the two are positively correlated, is by no means a new one. In 2001 Hannam tested the following hypothesis:

‘In schools that are already taking ... ‘participation and responsible action’ ... seriously for significant numbers of students of the full range of academic ability, an improvement in attainment would be found across the full range of GCSE results though not necessarily mainly at the higher grades. If the hypothesis proved accurate this might well be, in part at least, a consequence of higher self-esteem and a greater sense of ownership and empowerment’ (p. 10)

Hannam found that ‘When compared to similar schools, higher than expected levels of attainment at GCSE were found in the 12 ‘student participative’ schools when viewed collectively’ (p. 9). Moreover, OFSTED agreed with his judgment. Their report, which covered 16 ‘student participative’ schools, said ‘when compared with similar schools these sixteen are performing consistently better than expected.’ (Hannam 2001, p. 9). However, research along these lines goes back at least as far as 1979, when Rutter et al concluded that ‘the extent to which children are able to take responsibility’ was a contributing factor to how effective a school would be (p.178).

Hannam’s research was concerned specifically with student participation and so it may be suspected that his research was somehow biased. It is therefore worth noting that researchers who have approached the question of what makes a school effective with an open mind have shared his conclusions. For instance, MacGilchrist et al (1997) surveyed the literature on effective schools and, from that, identified 11 shared characteristics of effective schools, of which they believed that ‘four [are] essential core characteristics of effective schools, with one providing the fulcrum for the other three’ (p. 27). This key feature is ‘pupils’ *rights* and responsibilities, i.e. their *agency* and engagement in learning.’ (p. 28, my emphasis).

The list of texts that could be added to this list of people claiming that there is a link between student-participation and school effectiveness could be extended². Suffice to say that there is a near-consensus amongst the authors who have addressed the question that there is such a link. I now want to explore the reasons for that link and, in doing so, claim that improved motivation and improved learning behaviour caused by student participation is significantly responsible for the rise in attainment in participative schools.

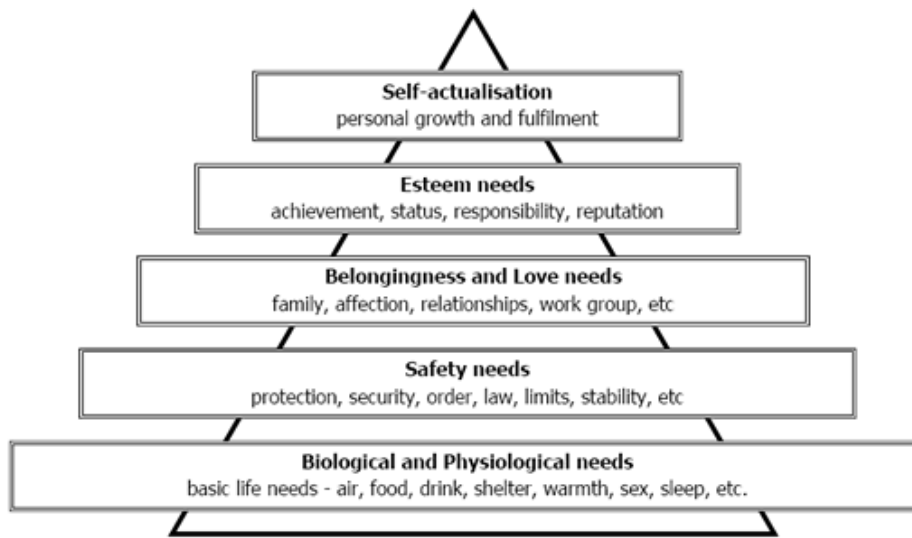
² Trafford (2003, p.16) gives a fairly comprehensive list

III

Let us begin with motivation, and address the claim that student participation increases student motivation. First, some motivational theory: Fig 1 shows a hierarchy of human needs, proposed by Maslow (1954). Maslow argued that higher order needs could only be met once lower order needs were met. So a person's need for personal growth will not be met or even pursued if that person is hungry or thirsty. Whilst Maslow's hierarchy of needs is far from universally accepted (Wahba and Bridwell, 1976) it does provide a useful framework for the purposes of this essay, and so, right or wrong, I shall continue to use it.

Maslow's theory is relevant to schools in three ways. Firstly, academic success is both an esteem need and a component of self-actualisation, and so if schools want pupils to be motivated to achieve academic success they must ensure that all of the prerequisite needs are met in schools. Students will not be motivated, or even particularly able to learn unless their physiological, safety and love needs – their lower order needs – are met.

The second way in which Maslow's research is relevant to schools is brought out by research conducted and reported by Nicholls (1989). Nicholls surveyed students and found that students who saw school work and coming to school as a means to an end, such as becoming qualified to get a well-paid job, were more likely to adopt work avoidance strategies and report dissatisfaction with schools. Students who saw school work and coming to a school as an end in itself were more satisfied with schools and less likely to avoid work (p. 186). This suggests that if we can make schools places that students view coming to as an end in itself, rather than as a necessary but unpleasant chore, we will have more motivated students. Maslow's hierarchy provides us with a recipe for making school an end in itself for students: it predicts that if we meet children's higher order needs in school, they will not only be able to learn, they will *want* to come to school to do so.

Figure 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs³.

Ensuring that children find school to be an end in itself will have an additional benefit vis-à-vis attainment. For Nicholls also found that there was a link between attitudes to what the purpose of schools and beliefs about the causes of academic success. Those who adopted the means-end view believed that success was a matter of innate ability. Those who saw school as an end in itself believed that success was a matter of hard work and mutual support. Motivational theorists believe that the latter belief about success is superior to the former in so far as the motivation of the student who holds it is concerned. The reason, outlined by Covington (1992, chp. 4), is that if a student holds such a belief and fails, then this leads him to believe he has low ability, which is damaging to his self-esteem. To avoid this harm, failure-prone students have a motive to not make an effort with their school work, so that when they fail, they have an explanation that is not related to any lack of ability. They can tell themselves that they would have achieved more highly if only they had worked harder, thus attributing the failure to lack of effort and avoiding shame. Turning schools into a place where work is seen as an end in itself, by meeting the needs outlined by Maslow, thus reduces the prevalence of this type of perverse goal, as students will see success as caused by mutual support and hard work. This, in turn, leads to harder work (due to improved motivation), and, hence higher achievement.

I shall now show how student participation can improve motivation in each of these three ways by significantly improving the ways in which a school can meet both children's lower order, and higher order needs. Let us begin with the ways in which student participation can raise standards regarding physiological needs. One way is to provide ways for students to simply ask to have those needs met, and for being listened to. The minutes of the school council in Queen's School, Kew, show that the council 'requested that school dinners are made with healthier (less fried) ingredients'. Similarly, the school council of Our Lady Mount Carmel submitted requests such as 'Could vegetarians please have a choice?' and

³ This diagram is © Alan Chapman, www.businessballs.com

‘Could there be three main courses on offer?’ to their school’s catering manager.⁴ In fact, ‘the three most common topics for discussion in school councils are facilities, meals and uniforms’ (Hastings, 2003). This can be seen as a symptom of school councils lacking in imagination or having only superficial powers. Alternatively, it could be seen as students making their first order of business (most councils are still very young) their most immediate, lower order needs. If you give students a voice, they will use it first of all to say what they need the most. What are the effects of responding to these requests? “‘They picked the decor for the new toilets,” says Sarah Putil of Kingsbury high school in the London borough of Brent. “It’s hideous. We wouldn’t have chosen it in a million years. But it hasn’t been graffitied or vandalised once.” ’ (Hastings 2003)

Safety needs are also met more effectively by increasing student participation. The way in which this happens will be explained during the discussion concerning the link between participation and learning behaviour. I shall assume that a school with less bullying and disruptive behaviour is one where pupils are able to feel safe, and so such a school will effectively meet safety needs. Let us therefore move on to belonging and love needs. Increased student participation meets these needs because students who have a say in their school have a sense of ownership in the school; it becomes *their* school where they can act rather than just be acted upon. This thought is aptly summed up by one anonymous student who writes ‘By being on the school council I now realise that I am also part of this school’ (Pattison and Barnett, 2005, p. 16). In a similar vein 15-year-old Francesca Rothkell points out that ‘[giving children responsibility] will also give students a sense of belonging and being part of the community’ (2005, p. 41).

Esteem and self-actualisation needs are met by student participation because in schools with increased participation children are given positions of responsibility and status within the school. As Brandes and Ginnis point out, ‘When we value the learner, we increase her self-esteem and her openness to learning’ (1990, p. 13). Rothkell’s personal experience corresponds with this analysis, when she speaks of how the positions of responsibility she filled increased her self-confidence (2005, p. 41).

So student participation can ensure schools meet students’ needs at all levels, and in doing so it raises their ability and their desire to learn, directly contributing to a rise in attainment. My own limited classroom experience backs up this conclusion. I planned one scheme of work after allowing the class to choose one of several options for projects. I then gave them a large choice over the exact focus of the project. I believe these choices, though admittedly small, contributed to the success of the scheme of work by making the class more enthusiastic about their work. I have also been fortunate enough to teach a group of key stage 3 students philosophy. These lessons have involved sitting in a circle discussing philosophical questions for an hour a week. Most of the class told me, through anonymous feedback forms, that they appreciated the opportunity to express themselves, and I was left with the impression that this was one of the main reasons they enjoyed my (voluntary)

⁴ Queen’s School minutes available at www.queens.richmond.sch.uk/kids/council.asp;
Our Lady Mount Carmel minutes available at
http://www.ourlady Mount Carmel.doncaster.sch.uk/School%20Council/Meetings/feb_05.htm

classes. I have found that if students enjoy a class, and arrive looking forward to the lesson, they are much more likely to learn.

IV

I shall now turn my attention to the improvements in learning behaviour which increased student participation can lead to. Let us begin with a case study. Garner (1992) describes a US programme called Reaching Success through Involvement (RSI) that has met with some success. It involves 'disruptive' pupils and teachers working together in formal and informal contexts on a range of individual school discipline problems across a lengthy period of time. Together, the teachers and pupils developed profiles for 'good' teachers and students. Garner writes, 'Reporting on RSI, [a researcher] showed dramatic school improvements in levels of acceptable behaviour ... students were more involved in preventing inappropriate student behaviour' (p. 14). Garner interviews several disruptive students from a different school and finds that they themselves display 'a desire for more self-advocacy: "If we were given the chance to have a say we'd run [the school] better with better rules and more self control" and "I'd like to get more responsibility myself so I can encourage myself"' (p. 15).

Why has this programme been so successful? Garner postulates that disruptive children's unacceptable behaviour is caused by the sense of alienation from the educational process that these students feel. Traditional sanctions like detentions, removal from classes, or expulsions only serve to enhance this feeling of alienation. A much better way to deal with student behaviour is to attack the sense of alienation itself, by allowing children to become involved in meaningful ways in the educational process.

Hedley (1999) finds that student participation can also improve the learning behaviour of whole classes through the creation of a classroom charter. He discusses the effects of making a classroom charter together with a difficult year nine maths class he was teaching, and found that

'The atmosphere in the class became much more positive as a result of the charter, with students becoming more cooperative. I felt there had been a significant improvement in the relationship between myself and the students. Relationships amongst students seemed to improve slightly. Discipline problems became less common and were easier to deal with ...' (p.131)

The classroom assistant working with the groups felt the use of a charter had improved the behaviour of the group as a whole and of most (but not all) individuals in the group'

Hedley explains that this improvement in behaviour is entirely down to the active student participation, agreeing with Rutter et al (1979) that 'the message of confidence that pupils can be trusted to act with maturity and responsibility is likely to encourage pupils to fulfil those expectations' (Hedley, p. 130-131)

Finally, at the level of the school, Prys Owen and Tarr (1998) discuss how a school council launched a project on bullying. They organised and ran an awareness campaign, established a monitoring system, and set up a behaviour policy. They also used their budget allocation to purchase playground equipment, which pupils then took responsibility for, and set up, and in some cases ran, lunch time clubs. These actions were based on research the council conducted on its fellow students and all action was constantly fed back to the student body (p. 89-90). The result of this project is summarised by Prys Owen and Tarr thus: 'Over a period of time, evidence was gathered and staff and pupils agreed that the level of difficult behaviour at break-times had been *significantly* reduced (p. 90, my emphasis). Thus student participation can improve the quality of learning behaviour at individual, class and school levels.

V

We have now seen that there a clear and well-accepted link between student participation and an increase in attainment. We have explored the reasons for this link, suggesting that student motivation and learning behaviour are both increased directly by an increase in student participation. Student participation can improve motivation by allowing schools to be responsive to children's physiological needs; by providing safe, less disruptive learning environments (which is a bonus to teaching independent of any motivational benefits); by creating a sense of belonging within the school; and by giving young people a sense of responsibility and self-esteem. These features allow children to be comfortable enough inside school to concentrate on their learning, and make school an end in itself, thus implanting the desire to learn into pupils' heads. As Toogood said, 'Democratic practice in the system of education is vital to the achievement of education' (1989, p.98, cited in Trafford, 1993, p.14). These findings provide schools with a very good, pragmatic reason to support student participation.

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