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Pupils as Citizens: Participation, responsibility and voice in the transition from primary to secondary school

Executive Summary

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Introduction

There is very little literature internationally that examines the curriculum imperatives of pupil participation, responsibility and 'active citizenship' through the transition from primary to secondary education. More specifically, there is meagre research on the topic of pupil participation and citizenship, as it relates to the Scottish context. Our previous study which focused on teachers ([Ross & Brown, 2013](#)), identified a clear gap in research on the primary-secondary transition and the development of civic competence. We argued that while it was widely recognised that this key transition involved considerable changes for pupils, in terms of their social and academic status ([Summerfield, 1986](#)), little information existed on what happened to participation, responsibility, and leadership across this primary-secondary transition, and why.

The study

This briefing addresses findings from a questionnaire administered to 738 children and young people and 17 focus groups carried out with 130 children and young people. We targeted children at the end of their primary education in primary seven (P7), and young people at the beginning of secondary school in year two (S2). Fieldwork in 25 Scottish schools was conducted in two phases. Primary schools were accessed between April and June 2015 and secondary schools between August and December 2015. This is one of the first, large-scale, studies which examines pupil participation at the point of transition internationally. As a result it provides robust empirical evidence, regarding the primary-secondary transition in Scotland in a representative sample of schools. This research was funded by the Gordon Cook Foundation.

Findings

While embedding pupil participation in schools in Scotland is widely regarded as beneficial to the well-being of pupils and their school communities (i.e., [Scottish Executive, 2004](#); [Scottish Executive, 2006](#)), this study found that there is considerably more scope to integrate pupil participation in decision-making more widely at school, not only at the beginning of secondary schooling but in specific domains and areas. The following outlines the main findings of this study.

Pupil voice and decision-making

- Overall, opportunities for pupil voice and participation in decision-making at school were found to be relatively low on a number of items. These covered issues such as pupil input into decision-making in the classroom, in addition to having a say on single issues such as school uniforms.

Pupil participation and 'active citizenship'

- Clear and substantial differences were found in rates of participation between sectors. Primary children reported significantly higher rates of participation and more opportunities to take part, as compared with pupils at secondary school.
- Activities on offer in school were found to differ between different types of schools, including those situated in rural and urban areas, as well as larger and smaller schools.

School ethos and enjoyment of school

- A significant relationship was found between a participatory school ethos and pupils' reported satisfaction at school. In schools identified as having a developed participatory ethos, on a number of measures, pupils were more likely to agree with the statement: 'I mostly enjoy school'.

Gender and decision-making

- In terms of decision-making boys were found to express a greater sense of impact and influence on decision-making at school, compared to girls.
- While these differences were not significant, gender disparities were consistent across a range of items in questionnaire responses.

Pupils with low levels of participation

- Approximately one third of pupils were found to engage in fewer activities at school.
- Pupils (mainly boys) with 'low activity scores' were much more likely to disagree with the statement: 'I mostly enjoy school', and agree with the statement: 'I am not the kind of person that joins clubs and teams'.
- This suggests that a fairly large minority of pupils may be less integrated into their school community than most of their peers.

The purposes of participation

- Secondary pupils said that taking part in activities and clubs at school enhanced their peer networks and connections with the wider school community.
- Overall, primary and secondary pupils evaluated the purposes of participation in an instrumental manner. Its benefits for individual well-being, developing self-confidence and improving future prospects were views expressed by pupils in both sectors.

Promoting participation at school

- Positive relationships with teachers were found to be central to promoting taking part at school. Parents/relatives, peers and friends were also seen as important in terms of encouraging participation in clubs and activities.
- In contrast, particular teaching styles were identified by some secondary pupils as inhibiting their participation at school.

Responsibility at school

- Children's relationship with juniors, and specifically being a buddy, was a key way primary children said they behaved responsibly at school.
- Conversely, pupils at the beginning of secondary school tended to view responsibility in relation to responsibility for 'self'. Having a wider choice of teachers and friends, independence to navigate a much larger school campus and the freedom to venture outside of school were identified as new and exciting responsibilities at secondary school.

Fostering values and Scottish schools

- Being kind to others was a core value promoted by Scottish schools. A majority of pupils (99% of primary pupils and 96% of secondary pupils) agreed with the statement: 'My school expects me to be kind to others'.
- Fostering individual responsibility and pupil autonomy was a key value communicated by schools. Approximately two thirds of primary pupils and secondary pupils agreed that: 'My school expects me to look after myself'.

Pupil views on the primary-secondary transition

- From the point of view of many secondary pupils, more choice and opportunities to be independent were regarded as the main advantages of being at secondary school.
- In keeping with previous studies, many primary-aged children were found to view the impending transition with mixed feelings of both excitement and trepidation.
- Worries about making friends, getting lost, harder work and stricter discipline were cited as common fears by primary children. Conversely, excitement about new freedoms, making new friends were also commonplace.

Conclusions and recommendations

The following recommendations suggest pointers for action. In keeping with the position of Hulme et al. (2011), we observed a discernible gap between what is recommended at the level of policy and what pupils say happens in their school. As a result we propose that the gap between policy and what children say about the practice of participation requires attention.

Embedding pupil voice and participation in decision-making in schools

Building on the earlier HMIE report (2006), the substantive implication of this study is that there continues to be considerable scope for embedding pupil voice and participation in decision-making across Scottish schools. Our findings suggest:

1. *Sector differences*: the discontinuity in what happens in terms of participation at the end of primary school and the beginning of secondary schooling is an area that requires attention if the policy imperative is to embed pupil participation evenly across schools, including both junior and senior pupils. Marked differences were found in opportunities to take part and levels of participation between primary and secondary schools which suggests that this is a key site for development.
2. *Gender and participation*: this study found that boys expressed a greater sense of impact on decision-making at school, than girls. While these difference were not significant, consistent gender differences were evident across a range of questionnaire items in pupils' responses. These findings suggest that schools may need to develop proactive solutions to encourage participation in girls.
3. *Areas of low pupil participation*: scope for development was identified in areas of low pupil participation. For instance, limited pupil participation in specific areas of decision-making (defined as under 20% of pupils agreeing with an item), included input into the formulation of school rules (e.g. bullying policies). Advances in this domain are suggested as especially important for meaningful student engagement at school (Lansdown, 2001; Drakeford et al., 2009; Hudson, 2012). Another area was staff recruitment; an arena according to Fielding (2004) and others (e.g. Robinson, 2014), where pupils would be in a position to effect a degree of change.
4. *Low participators*: this study identified a group of pupils (around a third of the sample) as: 'low participators' at school. Previously we suggested that some of these pupils may be less well integrated into their school community than other pupils. Again, this indicates that levels of pupil participation – used prudently and wisely – may be one very helpful gauge of pupil well-being at school.

It was also highlighted that opportunities to be active citizens and engage in democratic practices such as voting, as well as committee membership were found to be fairly limited. The above findings suggest that a multi-pronged approach is necessary in a number of domains in order to make continued headway in pupil participation at school. Findings show clear sector deficits, particularly at the beginning of secondary school and point to the need for raised awareness in the developed sense of influence reported by boys. In conclusion this study provides a firm evidence base from which to develop research informed strategies to move the participation agenda forward in Scottish schools.

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Further information

Further information about the project is available from Dr. Jane Brown, CREID, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ, J.A.Brown@ed.ac.uk. All publications and information about this project are available at <http://bit.ly/CREID-GordonCook-project>

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