How to Improve your School

Giving Pupils a Voice

Jean Rudduck and Julia Flutter

continuum

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'It is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education.'

'This call to authorise student perspectives is a call to count students among those who have the knowledge and the position to shape what counts.'

(Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 3)

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Foreword

Intrigued by this patch of colour or that scent, beguiled by a pretty shape or blown sideways by a wayward breeze, I flit from book to book, subject to subject, place to place; and it is only later, in solitude, that I begin the laborious process of changing it all into something else.

Pullman, P. (2002) *Dreaming of Spires*, the *Guardian Review*, 27 July 2002

Well. It wasn't *exactly* like that – but there are some similarities! This book is not reporting a single study; it doesn't move in a stately way from research design through to findings. What we wanted to do was create a picture of the potential of pupil voice to effect change in the way we think about young people and schools. In the last few years pupil voice has developed at an amazing – and somewhat alarming – rate (some of the reasons for this are explored in the book): from diverse small-scale and relatively uncoordinated initiatives it now has a national profile and a national legitimacy.

We have worked across data from various interview-based projects, all with pupil voice at their centre, which we have been involved in since the early 1990s. Because of this it is not easy, without weighing down the text with wearisome notes, to reference all the project sources, but they are listed in the Appendix. Where data are quoted that have not already appeared in print, we refer to these as 'fieldnotes' (e.g. 'Nick Brown's fieldnotes') and information about these sources is also included in the Appendix.

There is still much to learn from pupils about teaching and learning in schools. In this book we did not set out 'to map and conquer the world' (Bob Stake's words) but merely 'to sophisticate the beholding of it'.

Some of the issues that are not covered in this book (for instance, student-as-researcher initiatives, different ways of consulting pupils) will be covered in the following publications – all outcomes of our ESRC Project, *Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning*:

Arnot, M., McIntyre, D., Pedder, D., and Reay, D. (2003) *Consultation in the Classroom: Developing Dialogue about Teaching and Learning*, Cambridge: Pearson Publishing.

Fielding, M. and Bragg, S. (2003) *Students as Researchers: Making a Difference*, Cambridge: Pearson Publishing.

Flutter, J., and Rudduck, J. (2004) *Consulting Pupils: What's in it for Schools?* London: Routledge Falmer.

MacBeath, J., Demetriou, H., Rudduck, J. and Myers, K. (2003), *Consulting Pupils: A Toolkit for Teachers*, Cambridge: Pearson Publishing.

Finally, a comment on terms: the word 'student' is gaining ground in secondary schools, although primary school teachers still tend to use the word pupil or child; naming can provoke strong feelings and so we have used both terms, somewhat arbitrarily – a practice that will probably incite even stronger feelings! The book is about 'young people' in school.
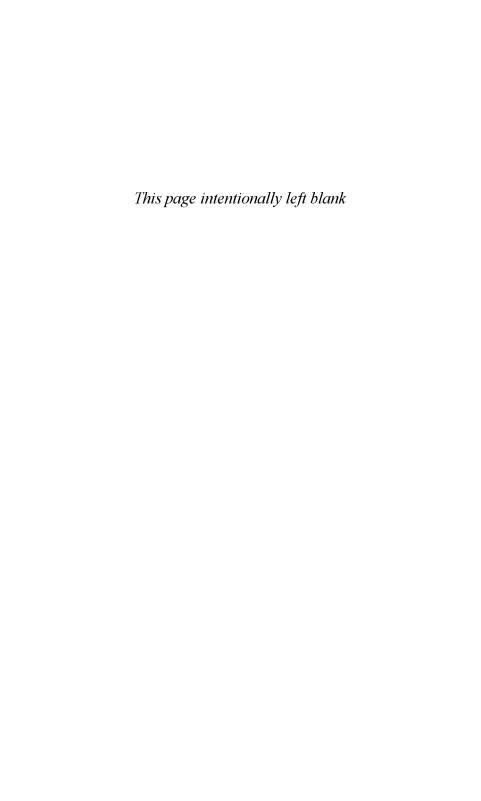
JEAN RUDDUCK and JULIA FLUTTER
April 2003

Acknowledgements

We want to thank all the teachers and the pupils, from primary and secondary schools up and down the country, who talked about their work and how they saw the world of school.

We also want to thank the colleagues who, in a succession of pupil voice projects, have helped to move our understanding forward (see Appendix) – and in particular the colleagues who worked with us on two projects funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC): Susan Harris, Gwen Wallace and, initially, David Gillborn (the *Making Your Way through Secondary School Project, 1991–4*); and Madeleine Arnot, Sara Bragg, Nick Brown, Helen Demetriou, Michael Fielding, Caroline Lanskey, John MacBeath, Donald McIntyre, Kate Myers, David Pedder, Diane Reay and Beth Wang (the *Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning Project, 2000–3*).

And a very special thank you to Nichola Daily and Ann Curtis who have helped in so many ways – and always with remarkable patience and good humour.

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Preface

This book by Jean Rudduck and Julia Flutter launches the new *Improving Schools* series by Continuum Books. The main aim of this new series is to combine the highest quality academic research with insights from those working within schools and for schools. It is anticipated that the combination of practitioner and academic insights will offer unique and alternative perspectives on important school improvement themes. To date, many school improvement books have not adequately integrated the voices and views of teachers, parents and pupils. In their search for solutions to improving schools they have tended to ignore those most familiar with the terrain. This is certainly not a criticism that can be made of Jean Rudduck and her colleagues as their research and writing have consistently and eloquently captured, reflected and represented the voices of pupils and teachers over many years. Since her early work with the Humanities Curriculum Project, Jean Rudduck has been committed to listening to, and learning from, teachers and pupils. In her classic book *School Improvement: What Can Pupils Tell Us?* she reminded readers of the core purpose of improving schools and of the main recipients of all school improvement efforts – the pupils.

This book is a timely and important because once again it focuses our attention on those most affected by changes in education policy and systems. It draws upon empirical evidence from a number of research projects and distils this into a compelling account of contemporary schooling through the eyes of pupils. This provides a perspective on pervasive structures and practices so familiar that they often cease to be visible and therefore remain substantially unchallenged. The book calls most powerfully for a shift in the way we currently view young people in schools and sets out a case for rethinking aspects of schooling to match our change in perceptions.

The central argument of the book is that we need to see pupils differently, to re-assess their capabilities and to review and change

aspects of school organization, relationship and practices to reflect what young people are capable of being and doing. To this end, it is suggested that we need to take seriously what pupils can tell us about their experiences of being a learner in school, about what gets in the way of being a learner and what helps them learn. Moreover, it implies that we need to find ways of involving pupils more closely in the decision-making that affects their lives in school. All too often pupils are left out of the equation when decisions are being made that directly affect them. Reconfiguring relationships with pupils articulates powerfully with important current agendas on constructivist learning and the experience (rather than the teaching) of citizenship.

In this book, pupils' voices are heard and they provide poignant, thoughtful and sometimes haunting insights into their experiences in school. Their reflections upon issues of transition, on teaching and learning and on the way school affects their self-esteem get right to the heart of the problems that still persist within the schooling system. They present their reality and day-to-day experiences of a system that continues to differentiate on the basis of ability or class, of schools considered to be 'good' or 'bad', stacking the odds against some pupils at a very early age. They don't talk about inequity, disadvantage or social barriers, but these themes lie beneath the frustration, cynicism and hopelessness of some of the comments of those young people destined to leave school without achieving success in academic terms.

On a more positive note the pupils' voices also offer rich insights into effective teaching practices and thoughtful accounts of how they learn best. As 'expert witnesses' they provide views on the conditions of learning which enable alternatives to be contemplated as the first step in fundamental change. The sub-text of these rich and engaging accounts is that the pupil voices are important and, if listened to, can be transformative. Listening to pupils means changing the ways teachers and pupils interact and there is evidence from the TLRP/ESRC 'Consulting Pupils Project' that hearing pupils talk about teaching and learning can be a catalyst for change. It is suggested here that genuine consultation and the enhanced participation of young people provide a broader frame for valuing pupil achievement.
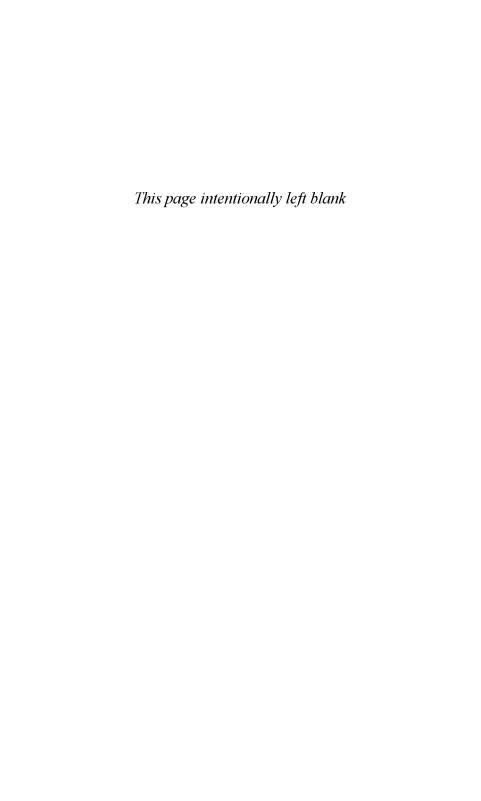
The opportunity for developing more democratic and collaborative relationships can transform teaching and learning practices and, perhaps, the whole education system for the better.

The book concludes by arguing that the transformative potential of consulting pupils is considerable. This view is reiterated by others:

> What surprised us most about the pupils was how insightful they were and how fluent many were . . . at expressing their ideas. What surprised *them* most was that anybody was prepared to listen. (Osborne and Collins, 1999).

It is important in the academic world that we also have researchers who are prepared to listen to pupils, and represent their views. This book is important not only because it does this so well, but also because it makes us rethink, revaluate and re-assess exactly what we mean by school improvement. *Who* is it for? The books that follow in this series will present similar challenges to the conventional wisdom about school improvement from both an academic and practitioner perspective. We need new perspectives, new understandings and new insights to move the school improvement field forward and to transform the conditions of learning for all in schools. This book and this series offer an initial step in that direction.

ALMA HARRIS and JANE MCGREGOR

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1 Introduction: The Case for Changing Our Perceptions Of Young People

'It were right good. They treated you like adults.' This 14-year-old boy, interviewed soon after he returned to school, was talking about his period of work experience. It is not an unusual response. Nor is the surprise of teachers that students can seem 'totally different' on work experience. Wanting to be treated 'like an adult' is shorthand for a number of aspirations to do with what we have called the 'conditions of learning' in school: in particular the need for respect, responsibility, challenge, support. It is not a new plea but it is one that we need to give serious attention to.

Out of school, many young people find themselves involved in complex relationships and situations, whether within the family or the peer group. Many carry tough responsibilities, balancing multiple roles and often finding themselves dealing with conflicting loyalties. In contrast, the structures of secondary schooling offer, on the whole, less responsibility and autonomy than many young people are accustomed to in their lives outside school. And, compared with TV soaps and youth magazines, there are fewer occasions when anxieties and aspirations can be opened up and explored. The traditional exclusion of young people from the processes of dialogue and decision-making, this bracketing out of their voice, is founded upon an outdated view of childhood which fails to acknowledge young people's capacity to take initiatives and to reflect on issues affecting their lives. In many schools expectations are still shaped by what Gerald Grace calls 'an ideology of immaturity' (1995, p. 202).

A central strand in the argument of this book is that some pupils disengage because the conditions of learning in school today do not always support the development of *all* young people as learners. Indeed, schools have changed less in their deep structures in the last 20 or 30 years than young people have changed. As Sonia Nieto says (1994, pp. 395, 396): 'Educating students today is a far different

and more complex proposition than it has been in the past.' Being in school, said Aries (1962), is like being put in quarantine for a number of years – a limbo world between infancy and adulthood. And each time the school leaving age is raised, so the period during which young people remain as 'uneasy, stranded beings' (H. and P. Silver, 1997, p. 5) becomes longer.

We are battling not only with the legacy of the past which constrains our view of what schools and young people might be but also with a set of powerful contemporary initiatives that limit the possibilities for change by defining achievement narrowly and by keeping schools on a tight rein.

This book is an attempt to sketch out the case for changing our perceptions of young people in school and re-thinking aspects of schooling to match our new perceptions. Our argument is that we need

- to see pupils differently and to re-assess their capabilities; and
- to review and change aspects of school organization, relationships and practices to reflect what young people are capable of being and doing.

To this end, we should

- take seriously what pupils can tell us about their experience of being a learner in school – about what gets in the way of their learning and what helps them to learn; and
- find ways of involving pupils more closely in decisions that affect their lives in school, whether at the level of the classroom or the institution.

It is important to know what pupils think will make a difference to their commitment to learning and, in turn, to their progress and achievement. We also need to understand more about why we haven't in the past paid much attention to the views of pupils and why it may be important to do so now.

We start by looking at young people today and the images of childhood that schools have traditionally responded to and, to a large extent, reproduced; we then look briefly at the forces that have shaped schools and their expectations of young people as learners.

Young People and Schools

A closer look at young people

In the 1980s M. D. A. Freeman, professor of English Law, offered a swingeing critique of the status of children in our society:

> Children have not been accorded either dignity or respect. They have been reified, denied the status of participants in the social system, labelled as a problem population ... (Freeman, 1987, quoted in Davie, 1993, p. 253)

Indeed, there is a legacy of public perceptions of childhood that has made it difficult, until recently, for people to take seriously the idea of encouraging young people to contribute to debates about things that affect them, both in and out of school.

Austin *et al.* (2003, p. 8) offer comparative evidence of childhood as a culturally specific construction and not a universal 'state', and M. D. A. Freeman (1983, p. 8) reminds us that in England childhood only really became a distinct period around about the seventeenth century and that it was invented by the upper classes 'who alone had the time and money' to support it; later the trend 'diffused downwards through society' (Prout and James, 1997, p. 17). Earlier, young people looked like miniature adults – 'once out of swaddling clothes they adopted the dress of their parents' (M. D. A. Freeman, 1983, p. 8).

There were two dominant images of childhood. One emphasized the natural wildness of children, the other, their natural innocence. An extreme view is expressed by a member of the Wesley family: 'The bias of nature is set the wrong way: education is designed to set it right'; the advice for dealing with these young self-willed creatures was unflinchingly stern: 'Break their wills betimes, begin this work before they can run alone, before they can speak plain, perhaps before they can speak at all. Whatever pains it costs, break the will if you would not damn the child' (in Darling, 1994, pp. 8–9, quoting Southey, 1820). And, of course, the impulse behind mass education was, as Jones (1990, pp. 57–8) has pointed out, a concern 'to regulate the nomadic, dissolute, degenerate, and marginal population of the urban slum'. Teaching was a technology for transforming 'wild beings' into 'ethical subjects'.

The romantic view was equally constraining: the child came from God, 'trailing clouds of glory', entitled to freedom and happiness. Rousseau explored this alternative view of childhood in a treatise, *Emile*, published in 1762, which had, apparently, an electrifying effect: 'Women particularly adored it. Such was the demand that booksellers found it less profitable to sell the book than to rent out copies by the hour' (Darling, 1994, p. 6). In the nineteenth century, public images of childhood which combined innocence and compliance were the stock-in-trade of studio photographers although the stereotyping was to some extent attributable to the long exposure time: children were sometimes given doses of laudanum, a tincture of opium, to ensure that they remained virtuously still. Again and again the same battle was played out – a battle between freedom and control and in relation to young people's bodies and their minds.

The most enduringly comfortable assumption, and one that has shaped policy and practice in many aspects of life, has been that childhood is about dependency. Children are widely thought of as 'incomplete, vulnerable beings progressing with adult help through stages needed to turn them into mature adults' (Mayall, 1994, p. 3); we are preoccupied, says Oakley (1994, p. 23), with their 'becoming' – 'their status as "would-be" adults' – rather than with the here and now state of 'being'; this perception has led us to underestimate their present capabilities. Recent work in the sociology of childhood is an important counterweight to such attitudes and presents an image of young people as accomplished social actors in their own world (James and Prout, 1997, p. ix). In schools, however, it is acknowledged that most young people still lack the power to influence the quality of their lives. It is time to review our notions of childhood.

MacBeath *et al.* remind us of the need to 'get real' about the mix in young people of social maturity, street wisdom and naivety: 'In July 1999 three English teenagers were sent to jail for intimidation, extortion and drug dealing. They had built an extensive network of debtors – children and young people of their own age – trapped into becoming pushers to pay off their escalating debts to the gang, too afraid to tell their parents, too scared to alert the police, not so much because of the consequences of the law as because of the retribution they might face from their terrorist peers' (2000, p. 82).