Teaching and Learning Research Programme

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Researching creatively with pupils in Assessment for Learning (AfL) classrooms on experiences of participation and consultation

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Abstract: This paper reports on an ESRC TLRP project, Consulting Pupils on the Assessment of their Learning (CPAL). The CPAL project provides an additional theoretical perspective to the 'educational benefits' perspective of engaging pupil voice in learning and teaching (Rudduck *et al.*, 2003) through its exploration of pupil rights specifically in relation to assessment issues presently on the policy agenda in the Northern Ireland context – notably Assessment for Learning (AfL). An emergent framework for assessing pupil rights, based on Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Lundy, 2007), is being used to explore the ways in which AfL classroom practice creates the conditions for increased pupil participation and consultation. Pupil views on their AfL classroom experiences and participation are explored by means of a variety of pupil-centred, creative research methods that engage and stimulate pupils to observe, communicate and analyse their learning and assessment experiences and give meaning to them. This paper highlights preliminary data based on a sample of 11-14 years pupils' experiences of participation and consultation in classrooms adopting AfL pedagogical principles, and identifies characteristics that support or inhibit pupil participation in their learning and the expression of their views about such matters.

Key terms: assessment, pupil consultation, children's rights, creative methods

Introduction. Background of the study

This presentation reports on the project *Consulting Pupils on the Assessment of their Learning* (CPAL), which is supported by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) through its Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) – for an overview of the 56 projects funded so far by TLRP please refer to www.tlrp.org/proj/expand.html. The CPAL project provides an additional theoretical

perspective to the 'educational benefits' perspective of engaging pupil voice in learning and teaching (see Rudduck *et al.*, 2003) through its exploration of pupil rights specifically in relation to assessment issues presently on the policy agenda in the Northern Ireland context – notably Assessment for Learning (AfL). The Reviews of the Primary and Post-Primary Curricula in Northern Ireland by the Curriculum Council for Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) have led to the introduction of AfL at the core of its learning and teaching strategy for primary and post-primary schooling. An outline of the AfL policy agenda in Northern Ireland and a description of the objectives of all the studies comprised within CPAL have been presented elsewhere (i.e. Leitch *et al*, 2005). CPAL included three independent but interrelated studies, each of which had a particular focus on pupil rights and pupils participation:

- Study 1 - Pupil Profiles: specifically engaged pupils views on the development of Annual Pupil Profiles;
- Study 2 – Assessment for Learning: consulted pupils on their experiences of learning in AfL classrooms and identified characteristics of AfL classrooms supporting or inhibiting pupil participation;
- Study 3 – Teacher Perspectives: consulted teachers on two levels, (i) on their responses to the increasingly participative role for pupils in learning and assessment and (ii) on their motivations, values and moral purposes that may promote or inhibit opportunities for increased pupil participation in assessment.

This paper focuses on Study 2.

AfL has been defined by the Assessment Reform Group (2002) as 'the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there'. Professionals involved with the Assessment Reform Group and with Special Interest Groups on assessment in a number of associations have put AfL at the forefront of the English-speaking educational arena (e.g. Black and Wiliam, 1998; Black *et al*, 2002; Gardner, 2006). AfL is a pedagogical approach that emphasises the value of formative assessment in the learning process, and has been described as having four key processes:

- Eliciting information
- Providing feedback
- Sharing criteria with the students
- Promoting peer- and self-assessment

This pedagogical approach claims evidence for (i) improved learning and standards and (ii) improved

self-esteem for pupils. In addition to researching its educational benefits this project was set out to explore the 'pupils voice' in AfL classrooms from a children's rights perspective. Consequently the interest of CPAL is on how AfL engages pupils through:

- Involving pupils in decision-making
- Conveying a sense of progress
- Putting less emphasis on grades
- Making learning goals explicit
- Developing self-assessment skills
- Promoting learning goals and confidence to improve

Research questions

What are KS3 (11-14 years) pupils' understandings of assessment and their role in this?

- How do pupils feel in AfL classes?
- What is different in AfL classrooms?
- How do pupils feel they are engaged (or not)?
- In what ways do they participate/ are they consulted?
- What are the gains/ benefits/ limitations?

What is specific to AfL classrooms in terms of how pupils are engaged/consulted?

- What is the difference in language used in AfL classrooms?
- How does AfL pedagogy affect pupil participation?
- How do teachers negotiate greater pupil involvement?
- What characterises teacher-pupils relationship in AfL classrooms?

Methodology

An emergent framework for assessing pupil rights, based on Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Lundy, 2005), is being used to explore the ways in which AfL classroom practice creates the conditions for increased pupil participation and consultation. Article 12 of the UNCRC gives children the right to express their views as follows:

> *'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'.*

This framework conceptualises with four interrelated themes the children's rights to express views and to have their views given due weight (Lundy, 2007):

- Space: children must be given the opportunity to express a view.
- Voice: children must be facilitated to express their views.
- Audience: the view must be listened to.
- Influence: the view must be acted upon as appropriate.

Pupil views on their AfL classroom experiences and participation were explored by means of a variety of pupil-centred, creative research methods that engage and stimulate participants to observe, communicate and analyse their learning and assessment experiences and give meaning to them. These methods, which have been used extensively by CPAL team members in other projects, included classroom observation, pupil/researcher video-taping of classroom practice (Odena and Cabrera, 2006), end-of-lesson reflection sheets, group activities, participants' drawings of classroom experiences (Leitch, 2006; Leitch and Mitchell, 2007) and the use of videotaped extracts of lessons during interviews to facilitate the eliciting of thinking (Odena, 2001, 2002, 2006).

This paper highlights data based on a sub-sample of Key Stage 3 (11-14 years) pupils' experiences of participation and consultation in classrooms adopting AfL pedagogical principles. The whole sample for Study 2 comprised 11 classrooms from 6 post-primary schools. Lessons videotaped included English, Science, Art, Geography and Maths. The schools were selected taking into account the variety of institutions in Northern Ireland and the sample reflected this diversity as far as possible. Previous to data collection the researchers obtained informed written consent from pupils, teachers and parents/guardians. Advisory pupil groups formed by up to 5 students in each school were also consulted on their opinions and the suitability of materials throughout the research process.

Focus group interviews were undertaken after each lesson and the full transcripts are being currently analysed using content analysis with the assistance of the software programme NVivo (Gibbs, 2002). This analysis is a thorough process of reading, categorising, testing and refining, which is repeated by the last co-author until all categories are compared against all the pupils' responses and the analysis is validated with all the other CPAL researchers. The same process has previously been labelled as thematic/content analysis (e.g. Kvale, 1996) and 'recursive comparative analysis' (Cooper and McIntyre, 1993) and has successfully been used in other projects (e.g. Odena, Plummeridge and Welch,

2005). The data used in this paper is from 3 different classrooms and illustrates the on-going analysis.

Illustrative findings and discussion

One data gathering technique used was a 'group task' where pupils were asked to communicate their views and experiences of: 'what helps, what hinders your learning?' After this they were asked to individually write down some of the ideas. Pupils observed some instances that helped them learn better, for example:

> *'When the teacher is not nasty and talks to us like adults'*
>
> *'When the teacher goes over things to help you and doesn't stop until you get it (spends time on every person)'*
>
> *'When the teacher tries not to shout and doesn't use their 'authority' like a lot of teachers do but it's usually just young teachers that don't shout!'*

And they commented on some situations that hindered their learning as follows:

> *'When the teachers are strict, then I don't learn and also when you get a de-merit'*
>
> *'When the teachers don't let you talk about things you want to change'*
>
> *'When the teacher just doesn't like you or picks people in your class and has favourites'*
>
> *'The merit system…puts you down and makes you feel bad and stops you from learning'*

Participating pupils were also invited to make drawings representing experiences of learning and assessment, in particular, images of the teacher and the group of students including themselves. Pupils were asked to make up a name to maintain anonymity. The following are some illustrative examples of drawings (pseudonyms used):

After completing their drawings participants were asked to describe their images in terms of how they experienced learning in this classroom. For instance, one of the students observed:

'I feel good in Geography, it is a very good experience. I feel exhilarated and happy. He has really good methods of working and he does fun activities'

Other students commented:

*'We do **a lot of different things** not just writing'*
*'My **favourite activities**…are group-work activities'*

*'English is easier than other classes because everyone gets involved and **no-one gets left out***'
*'You feel **involved** in the class because everyone's view counts'*
*'I feel **comfortable** in this class because you get to have your own view of stuff'*
*'It makes me **feel good** because I can speak out in this class'* [emphasis added]

What seems to emerge from these preliminary findings is that, from the pupils' perspective, there are patterns of what is important regarding participation and the educational benefits of AfL pedagogy. Emergent patters regarding participation are:

- Practical activity: learning through games/ experiments/ discussions;
- Teacher style: interested, fair, concerned (about what the students know), respectful, listening to their ideas;
- Assessment: it is *'OK not to know'*, encouraging to indicate learning or lack of knowledge; feedback from pupils leading to increased interest and increased learning;

Regarding educational benefits the following patterns are observed:

- Increased motivation
- Less fear *('OK not to know and to say so')*
- Greater attention in classroom
- Willingness to learn
- Feeling of everyone being included
- Improved academic self-belief
- More focused learning *('Know what they need to know to improve')*
- Less conscious learning *('Learning being fun')*
- Desire to continue with the subject as GCSE choice

With regards to the Children's Rights framework previously outlined (Lundy, 2007) there seem to be learning and teaching situations that can be categorised in each of the four themes:

- Space – Children must be given the opportunity to express a view: classroom climate as a 'safe space' where children can express themselves without fear of disapproval and with everyone being involved;

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- Voice – Children must be facilitated to express their view: practical/experiential (AfL) activities create motivation and opportunities to participate in learning; positive response when pupil asks questions/interrupts;
- Audience – The view must be listened to: being genuinely (respectfully) listened to what they have to offer as ideas, even if wrong;
- Influence – The view must be acted upon as appropriate: teachers acting on pupils' feedback (of what they know or don't yet) in order to plan/adjust the lesson or future lessons, e.g. stopping, explaining, changing activities, giving one-to-one feedback.

Hence a delicate balance of control and participation in teacher/pupils interactions appears to be in place in successful AfL classrooms, as represented in the figure below:

Balance of control and participation in teacher/pupil interactions
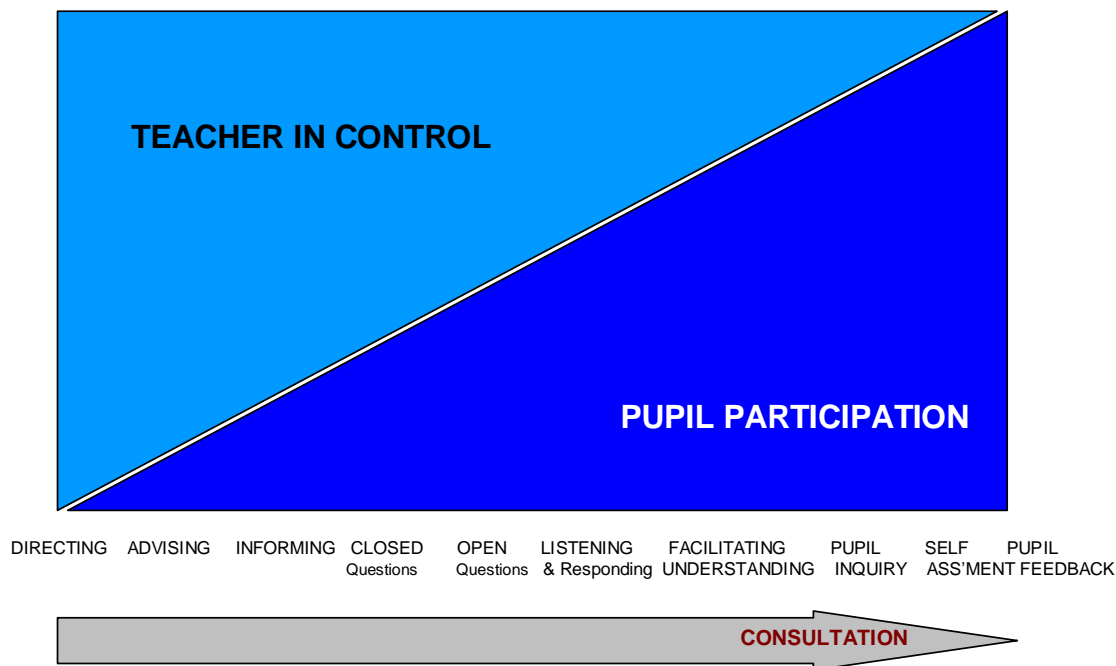
Conclusions

The ongoing analysis of CPAL Study 2 has identified specific classroom characteristics that support

and inhibit pupil participation in their learning and the expression of their views about such matters. In this paper we have outlined some of these characteristics. Although AfL ideology has pupil participation at its heart, the findings demonstrate the various ways in which AfL relate in practice to pupil rights, teasing out relationships between styles of AfL pedagogy, teacher-pupil power balance and opportunities for pupil participation and consultation within a Children's Rights framework.

Acknowledgments

For further information on this project see the CPAL website www.cpal.qub.ac.uk or the TLRP website www.tlrp.org/proj/leitch.html

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