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Consulting Secondary School Students on Increasing Participation in their Own Assessment in Northern Ireland

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Ruth Leitch and Oscar Odena
with
**John Gardner, Laura Lundy, Stephanie Mitchell,
Despina Galanouli and Peter Clough**

School of Education
Queen's University Belfast
69 University Street
Belfast Northern Ireland
BT7 1NN
Ph: 0044 2890975949
Email: r.leitch@qub.ac.uk
www.cpal.qub.ac.uk

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Abstract

The Consulting Pupils on the Assessment of their Learning (CPAL) project comprises three interrelated studies focusing on (1) the development of Annual Pupil profiles in NI in the context of giving pupils 'a voice' (Lundy, 2007); (2) students' perceptions of 'AfL classrooms'; and (3) teachers' and parents' perceptions of pupils increasing participation in assessment. This paper presents the main findings and educational implications of studies 2 and 3 which consulted pupils at key stage 3 (11-14 years). It identifies teachers', parents' and students' perceptions of the increasing pupil participation in the assessment of their own classroom learning. Preliminary findings of this twenty-one month study, completed at the end of February 2007, were presented in this ECER Children's Rights Network last year (see Leitch et al. 2006). This presentation updates some of the main findings for Key stage 3 pupils. The samples included approximately 200 students and a sample of their parents (n=180) from six post-primary schools in Northern Ireland (NI), as well as 11 teachers of different subjects (i.e. Arts, Maths, English, Geography and Science). All teachers were engaged in an in-service course to help them embed Assessment for Learning (AfL) - a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the use of formative assessment to help students take control of their own learning by being aware of where they are, *'where they need to go to improve, and how best to get there'* (Gardner, 2006). It establishes that, where principles of AfL are embedded in practice, pupils can experience high levels of participation in their learning and assessment. However, the relationship between consultation and participation requires further clarification and there is a need is to promote greater consistency amongst teachers in understanding what consultation means from a rights-based perspective.

Key words: assessment; consultation; children's rights; qualitative methods.

Introduction

Consulting Pupils on the Assessment of their Learning (CPAL) is a Northern Ireland (NI) extension project on the ESRC/TLRP *Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning* (led by the late Jean Rudduck (Rudduck et al. 2003; McIntyre & Rudduck, 2007) and also has significant links to the *Learning How to Learn* (LHT) project, directed by Mary James (James et al. 2005; 2007). CPAL is a small-scale, ethnographic project comprising three independent but interrelated studies, designed to examine the issue of pupil[1] consultation and pupil participation through the lens of children's rights, specifically in relation to assessment initiatives on the policy agenda in Northern Ireland (the Revised Curriculum from CCEA:, 2006a). One of these initiatives is local, the development of an annual Pupil Profile to record pupils' progress during their primary schooling and the other is a local expression of internationally recognized trends to adopt a more formative approach to assessment through the introduction of Assessment for Learning (AfL) (DES, 2007; Gardner, 2006). Although locally situated, it is anticipated that CPAL potentially provides rich, additional sources of data for understanding practices in assessment and learning relating to policy developments in other countries (Sebba, 2006: 185) and the role of pupils within a policy-making and implementation agenda.

CPAL's research questions engage respectively with the existing research fields of Assessment for Learning, Pupil Voice and Children's Rights.

Assessment for Learning: AfL is a pedagogical approach, emphasizing the crucial role of formative assessment in the learning process based on such practices as sharing learning intentions, expectations and success criteria; providing effective feedback, quality questioning, dynamic group work and self- and peer-assessment, but is not embodied in any one of these (Black & Wiliam, 1998: ARG, 2002; Black et al, 2003; James et al. 2005). It has been defined as: "the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers, to identify where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there" (ARG, 2002).With the inherent shift in attention to the learner and the implications for the development of 'learner autonomy' at the heart of AfL (James et al, 2005; Dearden, 1975), CPAL saw a potential link to a children's rights framework. This resulted in research concerns on how the scope and potential of these learning processes and practices might facilitate (or not) the 'voice of the child'. CPAL, therefore, aimed to examine the ways in which pupils: (a) might be appropriately consulted in an assessment initiative, such as the development of the Pupil Profile and (b) participate in the learning and assessment processes in AfL classrooms within a children's rights framework.

Pupil Voice: Evidence from the Rudduck et al. (2003) studies has provided argument and evidence for the educational benefits perspective of engaging pupil voice about teaching and learning, in which pupil participation has been closely associated with the school improvement agenda. Whilst the Cambridge team found that consulting pupils about teaching and learning proved to be difficult for pupils, teachers and schools to manage, the derived pupil participation model indicated a primarily enhanced commitment by students to

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[1] *Note: The term 'pupil' and 'student' are both commonly used by teachers and within research reports in the UK – we therefore decided to use both.*

their schooling, coupled with improved pupil self-esteem (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Highlighting concerns regarding the 'transformative potential' of pupil voice, Rudduck called for consultation between teachers and pupils to move beyond organizational and housekeeping matters to more substantial learning and teaching issues. Although smaller in scope, and of short duration, CPAL took up the challenge by focusing on the importance of pupil consultation in the assessment arena – an area where, to date, there has been relatively little research (Duffield et al., 2000).

*Children's Rights Perspective***:** With few exceptions (notably Smith, 2001; 2005), children's rights in assessment remains a relatively under-researched area. CPAL conceptualized pupil consultation on assessment specifically within a children's rights framework. Lundy (2005, 2007) has argued that the concept of 'voice' is necessary but not sufficient - and that shorthand metaphors such as 'pupil voice' have the potential to dilute the impact of one of the most relevant children's rights provisions – namely, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Unpacking the full text of Article 12 from a critical legal perspective, Lundy (2007) identified Article 12 as holding two key elements: (i) the right to express a view and (ii) the right to have the view given due weight. These have been further conceptualized as:
- 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.
From the outset, this conceptualization of Article 12 informed the design of the research strategy for all CPAL studies. It acted as a template for the evaluation of the e-consultation strategies deployed in Study 1; provided an analytic frame for classroom observation in Study 2; and was used as an audit mechanism regarding teachers' beliefs and practices on children's rights in aspects of Study 3.

CPAL Aims and Research objectives

CPAL was designed around the twin aims of:
- focusing on pupil participation in assessment as an extension to the work on teaching and learning;
- to consider the issue of pupil consultation through the lens of children's rights using a model of 'pupil voice';

The overall objectives for CPAL study 2 and study 3 were to:

1. Consult with pupils and understand pupils' perspectives on various assessment practices and the implications of these for their learning;

2. Identify the ways in which pupils at KS3 talk about assessment, including how they think about achievement, feedback etc.

3. Understand what pupils would need to understand and what skills they would need to become more involved in and benefit from Assessment for Learning (AfL);

4. Explore pupil attitudes to and ideas on self and peer- assessment as prospective elements in 'AfL' classrooms

5. Identify teachers' and parents' views on AfL highlighting any tensions and remedies regarding these and children's entitlement.

CPAL methodology

CPAL comprises three independent but interrelated studies, each of which has a particular focus on children's rights and pupil participation in relation to the Assessment of the Learning at key stage 3 (11-14 years) and obtaining their teachers' and parents' perspectives on children's rights, participation and assessment.

STUDY 1
Pupil Profiles at KS2

Pupil Rights and Pupil Participation

STUDY 2
Assessment for Learning at KS3

STUDY 3
Teachers' and Parents' Perspectives
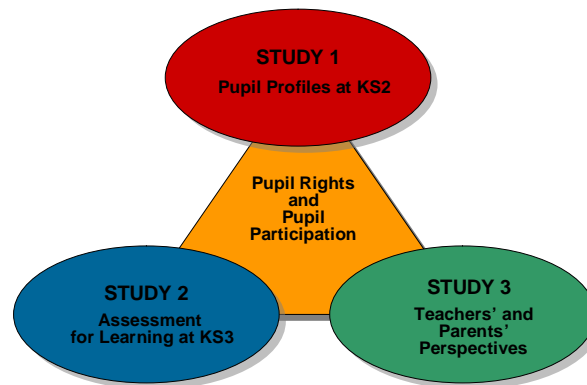
Consulting Pupils on the Assessment of their Learning

Students at Key Stage 3 (11-14 years) were consulted in a sample of six post-primary schools whose teachers are engaged in the introduction of 'AfL' pedagogy and practices (Leitch et al., 2006). The sample of schools was selected to take account of differing school type in Northern Ireland and, in consultation with the local education bodies, known to have teachers who were attending the organised training and dissemination days on AfL and thus were demonstrably in the process of introducing AfL classroom practices and pedagogy.

Formal agreements to participate by the schools were followed by individual, collaborative agreements and informed consent by each AfL classroom teacher whose students' experiences of learning and assessment were the main focus of the study. In total, the study consulted just under 200 pupils (male, 98; female, 94) in classrooms across five curriculum subject areas, engaging over 90 students in focus groups and over 50 students as co-researchers actively contributing to the research process.

CPAL's research methods comprised classroom observations, group activities, pupil focus groups and image-based pupil activities (as well as interviews with the key teachers). The main capacities in which students were involved in the research process were as:

- Research advisers

As a preliminary, two student research advisory groups (SRAG) were organized in two of the sample schools (single-sex male and co-educational) prior to the main study. The purposes of these were to advise on the process of engagement with students in all schools, provide feedback on the materials for and process of informed consent and provide guidance on the research methods to be used including the involvement of students in videotaping classroom observations.

- Data gatherers

By agreement with the students and participating teachers, students in each school organized and undertook the videotaping of a number of their AfL classroom lessons from a student perspective and, additionally, distributed and collected end-of lesson reflection sheets.

- Co-interpreters of data

Here, there were two main aspects: (i) students were invited to co-interpret excerpts of videotaped classroom observations and (ii) to narrate, in focus groups, the meanings of their individual drawings illustrating their experiences of learning in AfL classrooms.

These students as co-researcher roles were integrated within the overall research design in order to be student-centred and also to counterbalance the more adult-driven aspects of the research within the restrictions of the pre-defined study, such that these aspects would be 'something carried out by flesh and blood figures who are engaged in real-life activities'. (Jacubowicz, 1991: 5). The ethical guidelines by BERA (2004) and ESRC REF (2005) were considered when designing the methodology. Full details of the methodology in relation to using students as co-researchers are reported in Leitch et al. (2007).

Capturing Teachers and Parents' Perspectives (Study 3)

Teachers: The CPAL team held an in-service day for the 'AfL' teachers from the participating schools in Study 2. This permitted exploratory discussions and creative activities about beliefs and practice (see www.cpal.qub.ac.uk for report). The process formed the basis for five of the eleven 'AfL' teachers to participate further in in-depth individual interviews using a life-history approach.

Parents: 180 of the 204 KS3 pupils who participated in the study were surveyed by means of a short questionnaire, leading to 44% return rate. Themes elicited through NVivo analysis of pupil focus group data formed the basis of the parental questionnaire. Parents were invited (i) to indicate their strength of agreement to indicative pupil quotations illustrating seven main themes and (ii) to offer any commentary on their child's assessment in these 'AfL' classes.

Analysis of qualitative data

For a small-scale project, CPAL generated an extensive and rich series of data sets. For each study, we drew on available, fit-for-purpose qualitative data analyses coupled with basic

survey analysis. To date, we have used statistical packages (SPSS) for the parental questionnaire. KS3 pupil focus group data were analysed using a grounded approach. Content analysis of the transcripts of KS3 student focus group data (273 pages) was carried out using NVivo and involved a process of categorizing, refining and testing until all categories were compared against all pupil responses. The analysis was validated amongst the CPAL team by engaging in a process akin to shared connoisseurship (Eisner, 1991).

For analysis of classroom data, we drew on Marshal and Drummond's (2006) work supplemented by a schedule based on Lundy's (2005) conceptualization of Article 12 (see Appendix 2 for a sample). This process involved intensive, multiple and group viewing of video excerpts, again drawing on notions of shared connoisseurship (Eisner, 1991). Narrative analysis based on Clough's (2002) approach and MacAdam's (1993) systematic use of narrative tone, imagery and themes was adopted for the life history teacher interviews. While the analysis to date has served the main objectives of the study there remains considerable scope for developing the analysis of the classroom observation data and teacher life narratives and forms a key element of our future planning.

What pupils are saying about participation and consultation in Assessment for Learning classrooms at KS3

Analysis of pupil dialogue demonstrated distinctions between their experiences in classrooms that could be designated as manifesting much of 'AfL philosophy and practices' and those that were merely a venue for the incorporation of 'AfL-like tools' in a traditional teacher-led/directed context. This resonates with James et al's (2005: 9) findings in which only 20% of the lessons observed in their LHTL study possessed what they termed the 'spirit of AfL' at the heart of which is the promotion of learner autonomy. Although there remains great difficulty in precisely defining essential differences between these categories of 'AfL', the analysis of CPAL classroom observation data corroborates this estimated percentage of classes that embodied the 'spirit of AfL' and those that enacted the 'letter'. KS3 pupils did not conceive assessment as central to their classroom learning experiences unless assessment principles were consistently and genuinely embedded in lessons.

From the analysis of focus group data, 17 initial categories were subsequently clustered into eight broader ones: *Assessment; Classroom climate; Learning goals; Participation and practical learning; Student motivation; Student influence; Teacher style; and, Teacher-student relationships*. KS3 pupils' main concerns focused on what helped and hindered their learning in these 'AfL' classroom contexts, most notably – *classroom climate; participation and practical learning activities*; and *teacher style*. Where 'AfL' classroom pedagogy afforded practical/experiential learning activities, KS3 pupils identified themselves as actively engaged and motivated to learn *in situ* but 'AfL' techniques *per se* did not necessarily increase pupils' expressed sense of learner agency.

Although there had been an early intention by the CPAL team to tease out potential differences in attitudes to assessment practices and learner agency according to gender or school type (given Arnot's analysis (2004)), this has been difficult to achieve given the qualitative nature of the pupil consultation data. Surface analysis suggests that pupil group variables appear less significant than pupils' perceptions of teacher style and teacher-student relationship, but this begs further attention. Having a teacher who holds positive and fair attitudes to all pupils and who demonstrates practical commitment to pupils' improvements

in learning, through engagement in meaningful learning and assessment activities, was considered by far the most important factor in pupils' assertions about participation and engagement in their learning.

Understanding the language of assessment and how this affects pupil participation
Where AfL principles (ARG, 2002) were more embedded in practice, pupils could more readily articulate their understanding of the purposes of differing forms of assessment practices, such as self- and peer-assessment. In such instances, there was evidence of authentic participation by pupils and a sense of self-agency. By contrast, where AfL principles were not embedded, pupils referred more frequently to assessment in the form of examinations, grades and homework and with little sense of agency. In the latter contexts, assessment was not viewed by pupils as integral to their learning.

Pupils, in general (80%), felt they were over-assessed (tests and homework) and those that experienced 'comments-only' marking (25%) held a range of views on its value; the majority preferring teacher grading plus comments. Knowing 'how to improve' was unanimously considered important but over 50% of pupils still wanted to know how they have achieved in relation to a mark and/or in relation to the rest of the group. Significant numbers of KS3 pupils expressed concerns regarding the value and reliability of peer assessment.

TWELVE main points about pupils' Learning

Pupils felt most involved in their **Learning** when…

1. the teacher let them have a say
2. their teacher listened
3. they knew clearly what they were supposed to be learning
4. lessons involved practical work or active learning
5. the lesson would not move on until everyone understood
6. they could ask questions and would get answers
7. the atmosphere was positive and everyone was treated fairly
8. they felt safe to get things wrong
9. the teacher was interested in everyone in the class
10. the teacher explained things until everyone 'got it'
11. the teacher cared about their individual progress
12. the teacher saw them as having a role as teachers in the lesson too.

TWELVE
main points about pupils' Assessment

Pupils felt most positive about their **Assessment** in classes when...

1. they knew what they were supposed to do in any task, test or homework
2. the teacher discussed with them how their work would be assessed
3. their teacher would let them know what was good about their work
4. positive feedback came before any criticism
5. they were told how to improve individually and could work out what they needed to do
6. they could ask for help individually on how to improve
7. feedback was clear, structured and immediate
8. they got detailed comments along with a mark
9. they could look at a classmate's work and tell them how to improve
10. the teacher gave them feedback as well as their classmates' comments
11. they were not made to feel embarrassed about their work
12. they knew how to assess their own work

Across the range of 'AfL' classrooms, there was little evidence of *pupil consultation* (e.g. being engaged in pedagogical decision-making and feedback on lessons) as opposed to *pupil participation,* where, in the best examples of 'AfL' pedagogy, pupils are actively encouraged to engage 'as authors of their own understanding and assessors of their own learning' (after Cook-Sather, 2002: 46). Presently, in terms of Article 12, classrooms, with more embedded approaches to 'AfL', were found to create opportunities for *Space* and *Voice* ('the right to express a view') with some opportunities for *Audience* but little in terms of *Influence* ('given due weight').

Skills that pupils identified in order to become more fully participants in their own assessment processes were: greater opportunities to understand teachers' expectations about success, marking and grades; having assessment practices explained to them and being coached in how to give feedback orally and in written form so that it would be genuinely helpful for their peers, teachers and themselves.

What the teachers are saying

Consultation and children's rights: Data from differing groups of teachers, involved in AfL initiatives, were pooled and subjected to thematic analysis to create a baseline picture of teachers' positioning on children's rights. In principle, teachers and school leaders were supportive of children's rights, as expressed by Article 12, UNCRC, within their schools and classrooms and in terms of learning and assessment. Teachers found the concepts of *Space* and *Voice* helpful and explanatory in terms of their practices but tended to misconstrue the concepts of *Audience* and *Influence,* identifying the issues of *time, class size, accountability* and *curricular constraints* as barriers to these and thus full implementation of Article 12. One interesting incongruity highlighted by the responses was that few of the project schools in Study 2, according to pupils, had well-established cultures of pupil consultation despite their espoused commitment to the development of AfL.

Narrative analysis Evidence from the cross-thematic analysis of the five focal 'AfL' teachers' biographical and creative image-based data indicated how personal conviction concerning the role of pupil voice in learning and assessment is ascribed to child-centred values and having been afforded 'a say' (or not) in their own childhoods. Gaps identified between their espoused views on pupil consultation and what was observed in classroom practice were attributed by them to their *needs for control; lack of reflexivity in situ; school culture; and restrictions associated with subject areas.* James et al (2005) identified the importance of this affinity between espoused values and actual practice in defining those teachers who characterized the practice 'sprit of AfL' thus promoting pupil autonomy in learning. We are keen to illuminate further the relationship between these teachers' beliefs about learning, assessment and pupil agency and their own biographies as student and child. The analysis is continuing with a view to forming case study material for further publications.

What the parents are saying:
 Early discussions with the staff in the project schools found that the range of questions that could be asked of parents had to be restricted due to schools' concerns that they may have insufficiently informed parents about moves towards 'AfL' practices. Analysis of the survey data of parents of KS3 pupils, subsequently, established large measures of corroboration (<90%) of their children's emergent views on aspects of 'AfL' pedagogical practices (e.g. teacher's sharing of learning objectives, success criteria, think time, no hands up and 'two stars and a wish') and thus we are left with some indicative but limited findings from parents at this stage which would need further elucidation. One distinctive issue was the lack of parental confidence in peer assessment. Only 22% felt that peer assessment was desirable in these classes and peer group learning was also considered contentious.

Brief synthesis
Regarding the realization of children's rights, CPAL has demonstrated how children can be consulted directly by government on significant matters of assessment policy, such as Pupil Profiles in Study 1 (Lundy & McEvoy, 2007). It has also established that, where principles of AfL are embedded in practice, pupils can experience high levels of participation in their learning and assessment. The relationship between consultation and participation, however, requires further clarification and there is a need to promote greater consistency amongst teachers in understanding what consultation means from a rights-based perspective. CPAL data have raised issues about the exact nature of consultation within a rights-based perspective.

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Appendix 1 : Study 2 Pupil sample breakdown

Table1: summarising Study 2: schools pupils and subjects

School	n	Year Group	School Type	Subject
School A				
Class 1	28	Y10	Co-educational	English
Class 2	18	Y9	Secondary	Science
School B				
Class 1	41	Y8	Co-educational	Art
(observed over 3 subjects)		Y8	Grammar	English
		Y8		Maths
School C				
Class 1 (all girls)	20	Y9	Co-educational Secondary	Science
School D				
Class 1	22	Y9	Co-educational	English
Class 2	23	Y10	Secondary	Geography
School E				
Class 1	30	Y9	All-male Grammar	English
School F				
Class 1	28	*Y8*	All-male Grammar	Maths

Total N=210

Appendix 2: Classroom Video Observation Schedule (based on Lundy, 2005)

School……   Subject…… … Class   … Teacher…………Focus of lesson……………………..

THE RIGHT TO EXPRESS A VIEW   THE RIGHT TO HAVE VIEW GIVEN DUE WEIGHT

SPACE	VOICE	AUDIENCE	INFLUENCE
How is classroom organised? Lay-out, teacher positioning, grouping during lesson	How does teacher facilitate (*verbal, non-verbal)* students to express their views?	How are students responded to?	In what ways does teacher act on students' views/feedback?
How is lesson structured to give space for students to express their ideas/ask questions?	Through what methods/means are students encouraged to contribute to their learning?	What levels and types of student response are encouraged?	How do students influence future learning?
Identify the 'emotional climate' of the classroom? How created?	How are <u>all</u> students encouraged to participate in learning? .	Is student feedback sought during/after lesson?	Describe power balance in classroom lesson? (e.g. % of teacher talk, %of pupils talk; students initiating)
Notes			

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