

Young Researchers:

Can we use student observation to provide meaningful information for quality improvement?

Becky Barnes

INTRODUCTION

Context

In September 2010 NFER launched an international study which sought to provide expert guidelines to managers of students as co-researchers, (Young Researchers). Following our established relation with NFER I took on this role in Farnborough this year.

Young Researcher's is an action research style project which aims to celebrate student voice and promote and develop research skills among young people.

The value and significance of student voice in schools and colleges has been rising over the past few years and is now being incorporated into Government policy and directives. There are increasing research publications which support the view that listening to student's views about their learning and experience can improve teaching and learning.

Our project is therefore threefold in aims:

1. A group of students with an aspiration to teach, have spent a year leading a research project to learn the attributes and qualities needed to be an excellent teacher through lesson observations.
2. The college sought to explore if these student observations can provide meaningful information for teachers to act upon in lesson planning?
3. NFER are specifically interested in my role as a facilitator of group research; seeking a model of guidance to advise future facilitators on how best to carry out the role.

Background

During October 2010, an invitation was sent out in the student bulletin to all students with an interest in teaching as a career, in order to recruit a broad spectrum of Young Researchers. Interest was healthy and ten students volunteered 9 girls and 1 boy. Of the ten students, only one has a GCSE average of more than an A grade, three with averages between A and B grade averages, 6 with averages between C and B and one with a GCSE average of less than a C grade. All of these students attended state schools. 4 students were AS level and the other 6 A2.

In order to make the research into teaching as real as possible teachers were also asked to volunteer their expertise through allowing the YR to observe their lessons and carry out interviews. Staff openly engaged with the concept of students as researchers and were very willing to support their interest; their experience was also broad, ranging from NQT level to the vice principal, 10 volunteers in total.

"Children have not only the rights of provision and protection, but also those of participation – that is, rights to express views and to be heard, and to take part in activities and decisions that affect them." The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) Young Researchers offered an open opportunity to embrace this whole heartedly as the students were encouraged to decide what to research as a group, and lead in the research activities throughout the year.

Students as Researchers assumes a sense of responsibility and I witnessed both the students and the teachers involved in the project respectfully listening and accepting the skills and knowledge that students have about teaching and learning, based on their daily experience in the classroom. The notion of Students as Researchers also recognises the value in preparing young people to take on new roles and most importantly to develop leadership, communication and networking skills as equals in a teaching and learning environment.

The introduction of Young Researchers in Farnborough supports the aim to "seek values and act on pupils' views" OFSTED inspection guidelines; the findings were enlightening as you will see.

METHODS USED

Weekly meetings

Students met once a week throughout the year to share experiences, discuss opinions on teaching, collate information and write progress reports. Some sessions were directed and attended by me, however most were lead by students.

Online forums – Moodle

The YR elected early on to set up a YR group on Moodle in order to share documents and minutes from meetings, alongside this, I used discussion forums on Moodle to collate thoughts on particular issues and to encourage the researchers to share key findings and learning points with each other.

Lesson observations

The students were partnered with a teacher volunteer based on timetabling matches, this meant that students were observing lessons that they did not study. The potential issue of teacher's feeling that their teaching practice was being critiqued by a student was overcome by asking teachers to primarily volunteer, fill in permission forms, identify any YR they taught to avoid potential personality clashes and nominate the areas on which they would like feedback on. In liaison with teacher volunteers the YR observed 2-3 lessons throughout the year.

Lesson observation training

YR received the same formal training that NQT teachers receive for lesson observation, including:

- Theory and protocols of observing.
- Video clips of lessons to watch.
- Group and individual feedback through completing lesson observation reports.

Interviews

Students carried out pre observation interviews with their teacher to establish what the lesson would be about, and what the teacher was interested in receiving feedback on. They then carried out a post observation interview to formally deliver their findings through the lesson observation reports used in college. I used interviews in my role as a measure of what both the students and the teachers were experiencing periodically throughout the year.

Quia Surveys

Online surveys were used at the end of the project in order to gain hard data; these were supported with follow up group discussions and individual interviews.

FINDINGS

What insight can be gained from consultation with students?

As teachers we feel we have a clear vision of what is happening in class, and indeed this may be very accurate, however is it only accurate to us as these are our perceptions of the environment. Flutter and Ruddock (2004) say that people's perceptions of the world around them are profoundly significant, both to themselves and others. In which case it is very likely that students perceptions of that same class may be very different, and in turn will affect their perceived learning.

The project offered therefore some fascinating potential insights....

- Can a student identify key strengths in teaching and indeed any issues?
- Can they offer suggestions and comment on these issues?
- Will students perception of teaching change when invited to observe as a teacher?

What do students feel are the qualities of an excellent teacher?

As a team building exercise at the start of the project and without any prior discussion, students discussed this statement in small groups relying solely on their personal experience, I was quite taken back by the depth, accuracy and attention to detail they applied to this exercise. Here are the most popular qualities identified in order of their importance:

1	Patience	5.88	4.33
2	Respect between students and teachers	4.29	6.25
3	Sense of humour	8.0	5.0
4	Understanding and Reasonable	4.43	6.5
5	Organised	4.88	3.8
6	Set clear aims	5.62	5.75
7	Meet all students needs	6.0	5.0
8	Knowledge	3.62	
9	Confident	7.5	4.75
10	Inspiring	5.88	6.0
11	Smart appearance	9.25	6.0

What seems most noticeable here, are the top 4 qualities, all of which are about us as people and not about skill.

Student participation in research

At an early stage in the project I had a SOW, lesson plans, goals and realised.....

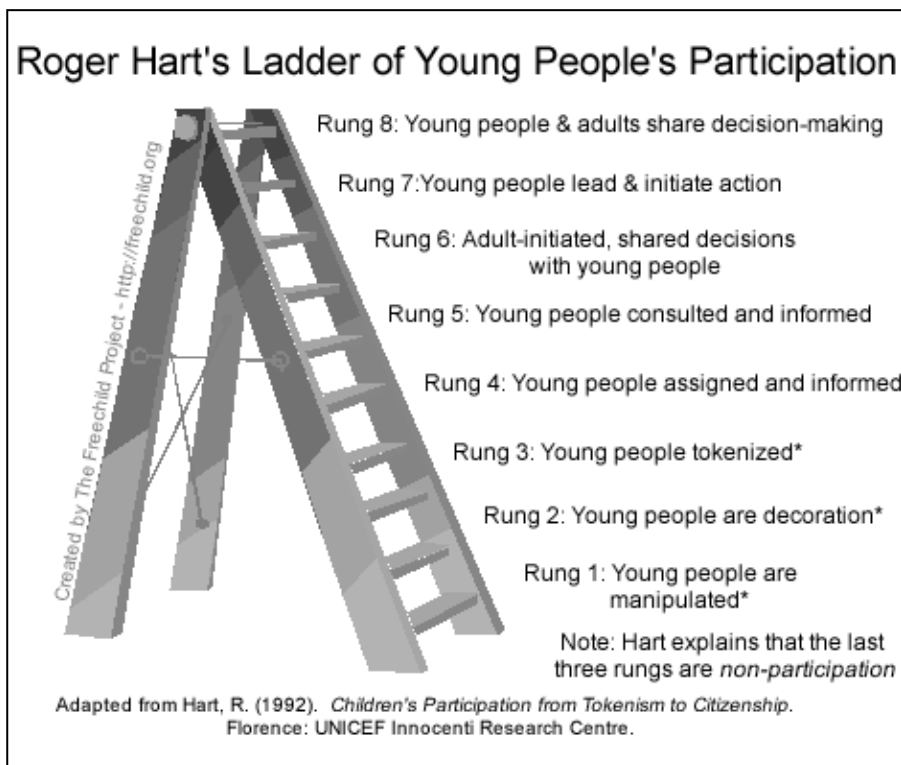
Diary excerpt – The need to plan!

'Letting go of the leadership skills I use as a teacher is very challenging. Planning and delivering the project is a vital role of the student researcher. I need to consider how to create opportunities for students to take the lead in sessions. I feel out of my comfort zone not knowing how the project will end, however it is key for the students to discover this as action researchers.'

Identifying early on in the year a need for students to lead and initiate actions, I removed myself from sessions periodically for a few weeks at a time. Amy Grandvoinet, the student rep for Teaching and Learning, adopted a leadership role within the group and quickly established email, moodle and hotmail as modes of communication and the group assigned each other roles and a time plan. From here on students shared decision making with their teacher, evidenced from the feedback by both parties on the Quia surveys.

87.5% students felt that they shared in the decision making process with adults, while 60% teacher volunteers agreed.

Hart's ladder of participation was a useful model to refer to when trying to establish the balance I was achieving during different stages of the year. From experience I found that we often moved between rungs on the ladder.



At the start of the project the topic 'Teaching as a career' was assigned to any student who wished to participate, placing their leadership of the project on rung 4 perhaps, however during phase 1 and the training exercise; I initiated training and co-ordinated the partnerships between teacher and researcher, while students formulated their own roles and established communication with their teacher moving the ownership of the project to rung 6.

Lesson observation training

In response to student's early concerns that giving feedback to teachers would be "*daunting*" and carrying out interviews equally "*nerve wracking*" the students were assigned to work in pairs with their designated teacher to encourage new relationships to blossom between them, and to ensure quality assurance when feeding back to teachers.

Students received lesson observation training in January, I adapted the NQT training day into 3 short lunchtime sessions, however this process delayed the project considerably due to the time restraints of lunchtime and the quantity of information required to ensure that students were equipped enough to carry out the task with professional assurance.

Please see appendix 1 – A sample of the 1st lesson report students wrote.

After delivering training to the group, I identified three potential training needs:

- Note taking skills needed developing in recording key information during the process of observation, students were writing reams of notes.
- Their comments were in places, emotive in content rather than factual, not always in a negative way I may add, e.g.
“Student’s seemed happy and appeared to be learning a lot.”
They had not yet grasped how to record factual information, and support with evidence.
- A fear about feeding back to teachers appropriately was recorded by most.

At this point in the project I was very concerned how I would facilitate the delicate balance of communication needed between student and teacher and wondered if students would be able to convey their thoughts without aggravating the relationship with their teacher.

Diary exert – playing an equal

“I need to remove myself from the teacher/ student relationship to that of facilitator if I am to let the students discuss ideas freely without prejudice.”

“For teachers there is a potential conflict between their role as a teacher and that of a researcher. A researcher is classically expected to be a detached and impartial observer, encouraging voluntary rather than enforced participation, who records rather than challenges opinions.” (Kirby, 2001: 75)

Thankfully my experience as a teacher enabled me to move forward as a researcher with the group, when I realised that the same issue arises in teacher training when teachers use emotive language rather than objective observations and the solution seemed to be in asking the students, as we do teachers, to view the lesson from the learner perspective.

Following the observations above, it was agreed by all that the first observation would be a practice exercise and only last 30 minutes. The feedback was initially delivered to me in confidence as a training activity before students met with their teacher. This change proved invaluable, students gained real confidence as did I in their ability to will provide quality feedback. The reports that followed were incredibly different.

Please see appendix 2 – A sample from the 30 minute training observations.

Lesson observations

At this stage in the project (I like to refer to it as Phase 1), deeply rooted in my perception of student voice as a teacher, I assumed that students would have identified areas which they felt could have been delivered in a different way from their lesson observations, and a rich conversation would start to take place about the learner perspective on a lesson.

This did not happen.....

Young Researcher feedback:

“The lesson was really good and successful in my opinion.”

“The lesson observations have confirmed what we already thought about good teachers – and have reinforced the points we originally predicted.”

They continued to say.....

Although the actual content of the lesson in terms of ‘what makes a good teacher’ did not change our original views as to ‘what makes a good teacher’, the experience in actually observing a lesson was a learning curve in many ways. Our main findings in phase one included:

- Altered perspectives – Prior to training, we found it easier and more natural to pick out negative points of a lesson, though after training this reversed, and it became difficult to fault teaching.
- Note taking – Need to maintain an objective approach to note-taking as opposed to subjective, refraining from making judgements along the way.
- Teacher interest – Surprised at how highly teachers valued our voice through the observation-feedback process, reinforcing the significance of our project and highlighted the growing importance of student voice in education

“We would really like to gain a more hands on experience of teaching; it would be good to know how to plan a lesson.”

This feedback reiterated that their focus on the project was very pragmatic and steered to learning skills to teach, and that the interest in learner voice had come from us.

Teacher Volunteer feedback:

Opinions were somewhat divided

“I was astounded at the professional, perceptive quality of the information that I received.”

“It has been very nice to get nice comments however they are not particularly useful in teaching terms. It is difficult to take the information and apply it. “

“I would really love student advice on lesson delivery, however they seem resistant to write anything in the key issues section, maybe changing the form cutting out key issues and replacing with suggestions for improvements would help?”

“What is the purpose of them feeding back? What will happen to the feedback they provide?”

Alternatively here it seemed clear that the teachers had moved from that of a facilitator role to one where they could see value in what the students had to say. My role then became essential in liaising between both groups of people and trying to see how both needs could be addressed without compromising the essence of the project. Extremely challenging!!

One conception of student voice is a ‘transformative’ one whereby, through the joint venture into research by students alongside teachers, there can be space for a dialogue about teaching and learning. (Fielding, 2004)

Framing the discourse in the language of ‘research’, rather than ‘feedback’ or ‘evaluation’ seemed to open up a more meaningful dialog between the students and teachers, as Phase 2 of the project began to emerge.

- Teachers identified an area they wished to improve upon and asked students to observe and provide suggestions on this specifically during a full 90 minute lesson.

Please see appendix 3 – Altered lesson observation report.

- The suggestions would then be discussed and if appropriate, these would then be planned into a new lesson with the help of the student.
- The student would then be asked to see this lesson taught again.

Phase 2 did not start until March and one biggest challenges for me running the project was not to be too unrealistic about what could be achieved in the year, unfortunately I did not succeed with overcoming this and we ran out of time to complete the full cycle of tasks planned in this phase. All students observed a full lesson focusing on a suggested area of practice; however most of the YR did not manage to plan lessons with their teachers.

An extraordinary Journey

One student did however make an extraordinary journey with her teacher volunteer. With genuine interest in developing Rachel's ability to teach Anna asked what else we can do to stretch Rachel in the project, and decided to let her teach an AS Sociology lesson on her own and mentored the process of Rachel planning the session.

"The experience of planning a lesson really showed me how much time and energy goes into each lesson, I was extremely nervous about teaching the lesson but wanted to push myself. I think that the lesson went quite well, however I found it hard as the group were so quiet. The experience of this has confirmed my wish to teach in the future and I have now applied onto a teacher training degree." Rachel, Young Researcher.

Excerpt from feedback to Rachel

"It was such a difficult task and you handled it amazingly well. Your lesson was perfectly prepared, varied and interesting. You appeared clear and confident in the lesson. An outsider would not have been able to tell that you have no sociology degree and no teacher training!" Anna White, Teacher Volunteer.

Did you make any suggestions for change in your feedback during phase 2?

Only 2 sets of YR made suggestions for improvement, these were.....

"At times students were slightly off task for example when the paper was being passed round, however this was instantly stopped before it caused too much of a distraction. Maybe it could have been better if the paper was already on the desk so the students could complete the task promptly." Rachel, Young Researcher.

"For me personally one section of the lesson went quickly, and I was not able to keep up with the work, so my only area for improvement is to slow down a little and make sure the students are keeping up." Natalie, Young Researcher.

I think that most teachers would agree that the quality and professional content of these suggestions are illuminating, as was picked up by the teachers themselves.....

"It was valuable for non-law students to observe my lesson as during one part of the lesson, she felt I went too quickly. Our focus was differentiation so this was particularly useful to know when planning a lesson on a similar topic next time, with regard to students who might need more time to take in the information." Becky, Teacher Volunteer.

In terms of results however it was disappointing to see that only 2 out of 8 students had made suggestions, a multitude of reasons surfaced from this exercise; all very valuable and will be considered in the planning for next year's project:

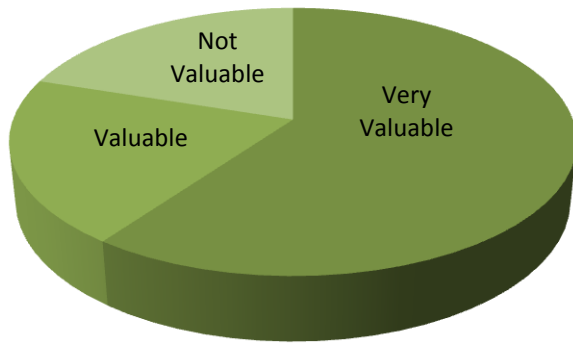
Why didn't you make any suggestions?

"We feel the teaching at Farnborough is genuinely really good."

"We wondered if because the teachers involved were enthusiastic about the project that naturally they would put a lot into the planning of a lesson, and this was why we couldn't find anything to criticise."

"We think that we needed to observe more lessons throughout the year in order to build the relationship with the teacher."

"Even though we didn't find anything to comment on, Phase 2 enabled us to learn more, because the fact that teachers have identified these areas to focus on means that they are likely to be things we would find difficult in teaching."

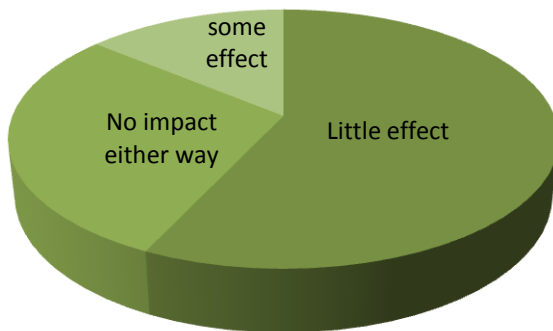


"I felt I could have an honest conversation with them about what I felt I needed to do in my lessons to make them better. I was able to share my anxieties in a way that I am reluctant to do with colleagues. I felt the whole process was free of judgement."

"It is important that we understand our job from the point of view of those who we teach."

"It may be judged by others to be a risk and it probably was but it was an important risk to take."

By the end of the project did you feel that your role as a student observer was contributing to the development of your teacher's practice?



I found this really disappointing and perhaps for me one of the low points of the project, when probed further, there was a genuine scepticism about their feeling on how influential they could be, in contrast to the teacher's perspective on student voice.

Did any difficulties arise from working with a student researcher?

Confidentiality and student organisation

Would you recommend future YR to observe lessons as an effective way of learning about teaching?

100% Young Researchers said YES

"The observations helped you to be an active researcher and see firsthand what teaching involves." Amy, Young Researcher.

Would you recommend other teachers to work with student researchers next year?

100% Teacher volunteers said YES

“Having a student voice helps the teacher identify with and reflect on the experiences of a student. This in itself is valuable. The project will grow and develop and become more successful and it's an innovative and fantastic opportunity for the students involved, as well as the teachers.” Vince Scanella (Deputy Principal)

Has your opinion of teaching changed throughout the year? As a measure of this change I asked students to rank their initial top 10 attributes of a teacher, and then asked teachers to do the same task the results show a clear shift in thought.

Young Researcher perspective AFTER

Teacher Volunteer perspective

1	Knowledge	1	Meet all students needs
2	Respect between students and teachers	2	Knowledge
3	Understanding and Reasonable	3	Respect between students and teachers
4	Organised	4	Inspiring
5	Set clear aims	5	Set clear aims
6	Inspiring	6	Understanding and Reasonable
7	Patience	7	Organised
8	Meet all students needs	8	Confident
9	Confident	9	Patience
10	Sense of humour	10	Sense of humour
11	Smart appearance	11	Smart appearance

“Before the project, I thought that teaching should be quite strict, with lots of writing. However when I observed Lesley, I learned how important it is to be active and play around with facts that you have learned, in order to exercise what you know. The hard working should be in your own time.” Amy, Young Researcher.

“You have to consider lots of aspects when teaching, preparation of a lesson, the resources you wish to use, when teaching, your time management and student participation.” Sidrah, Young Researcher.

“Teachers care about our learning experience.” Rachel, Young Researcher.

CONCLUSION

To ensure that the consultation lead to something meaningful we tapped into specific student interest and likewise asked for teacher volunteers with an equal interest. The process of consultation “suggests that the parties involved have been invited to contribute because they have relevant and important views and information to share” (Fielding 2003) I don't know how successful the project would be if teachers were selected at random to participate and students were likewise – an interesting future project perhaps?

It is difficult to summarise such a complex project, however there were some key turning points throughout the year which may aid future facilitators. My advice is offered as purely this.

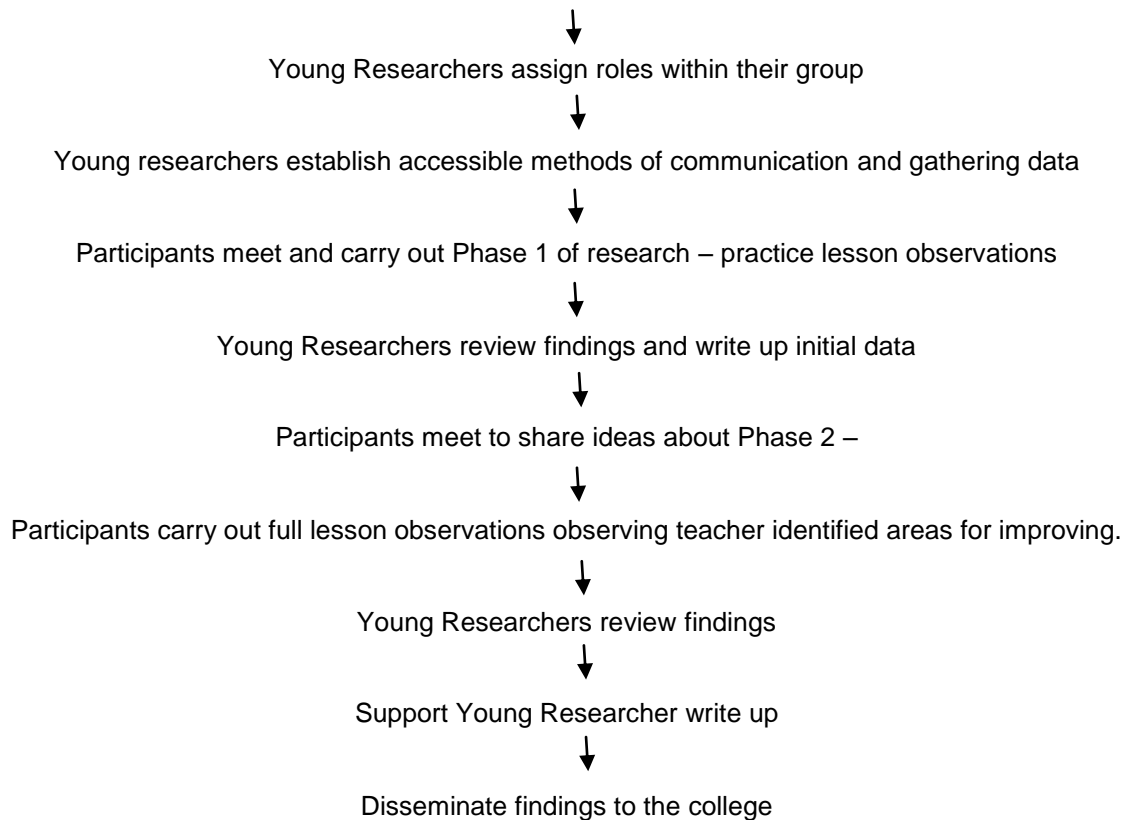
In order for Young Researchers to fully engage in a project it is important that the topic is of value and interest to them, our topic ‘Teaching as a profession’ provided an open platform for both our students and teachers to feel that they were equally supporting each other.

As a facilitator it is very difficult to remain objective and facilitate rather than lead the project, to help with this, it is vital to have a critical friend to offer support and to fairly critique your progress. Secondly and most importantly both the researchers and you need a clear model of delivery in order to effectively manage a large group research project. This was mine:

Promote project through tutorial system and staff briefings



Provide a timeline for all participants in the project outlining key dates and training



If you choose to implement the lesson observation process, my advice would be to train the students during October and move to Phase 2 as early as possible, the feedback from both the teacher volunteers and Young Researchers verified that the more lesson observations you carry out the richer the findings and the more open your relationship becomes.

Future plans:

We hope very much to role the project out again next year and will put into practice the advice from our YR: To ensure that the consultation lead to something meaningful we tapped into specific student interest and likewise asked for teacher volunteers with an equal interest. The College plans to offer this opportunity to AS students next year who will be able to use the experience for UCAS applications. The lesson observation training will be delivered much earlier in order for Young Researchers to build the skills, confidence and time needed to offer more suggestions and plan more effectively with their teacher volunteer; as time did become an issue this year.

We have initiated a project which could offer a valuable resource to both students and teachers for years to come, perhaps we have 'lit the slow fuse of possibility' (Fielding 2003).

REFERENCES

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*, Pearson Publishing.

BRAGG, S. AND FIELDING, M. (2003) *Students as Researchers: Making a Difference*, Pearson Publishing.

KIRBY, P. (2001) 'Participatory research in schools', *Forum*, 43.2: 74-7

Hart's ladder of participation <http://freechild.org/ladder.htm>

<http://www.nasuwat.org.uk/InformationandAdvice/NASUWTPolicyStatements/StudentVoice/index.htm>

Pupil voice is here to stay!

Professor Jean Rudduck, Director of the ESRC/TLRP Project: Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning, University of Cambridge Cambridge

http://www.serviceschoolsmobilitytoolkit.com/resourcedownloads/staffroom/bpv_theneedtoinvolvepupilvoice.pdf

LSIS Research Conference 2011, 1st March 2011. Victoria Suite, Park Plaza Victoria, London.

Office for Public Management

Annie Hedges – Head of Creative influence.

www.opm.co.uk Creative Influence, Research led by young people, Public interest report.

APPENDIX 1

Lesson Observation Record

Teacher: Xxxxx

Subject: Training

Course:

Venue: Date:

Observation

Xxxxx

Session length (mins):

Students on Register: male: 11 female: 8 Students present: male: 11 female: 6 Observation time:

Summary of lesson activity: Going over some of the ideas around protein synthesis

The effectiveness of the teaching and learning

What key features of the classroom activities did you observe that were either good or outstanding in how they impacted upon student learning? (Consider the answers to this to be 'key strengths')

- Class recap to start with, everyone participating
- Some students were easily distracted
- Teacher refocuses them quickly
- Asks a vary of people questions to check understanding
- Key points written on the board
- Drawing a diagram on the board to help people understand
- Gives the class 5 minutes to recap transcription
- Uses equipment to demonstrate
- Some off focus and talking amongst themselves
- Teacher notices and gets their focus back to the lesson
- Asks a 'quiet' person a question to check understanding
- Checks the whole class understands
- Uses everyday examples to help understanding

What key issues (or weaknesses) did you observe that required further consideration and development?

- Some students were very easily distracted
- Had to quickly go out of the room to get some equipment
- 3 people were late but nothing picked up with the students
- Lesson started a little late, as some people were late

Observer: Rachel Clark and Sophie George

Date:

Signature:

APPENDIX 2

The Sixth Form College Farnborough

Lesson Observation

Teacher: Lesley Xxxxx Subject: Sociology Course: GCSE Venue: Soc/Sci Date: 07/02/2011

Students on Register: male [] female [] Students present: male [] female []

Observation Time: 30 minutes

Summary of Lesson Activity: Crime and the labelling of young people in society

The Effectiveness of Teaching and Learning

What key features of the classroom activities did you observe that were either good or outstanding in how they impacted upon student learning?

- The majority of students were focused in tasks set, with minor talking about the activity
- All students responded well to post-it note task, focussing for rest of session
- The teacher created a friendly, purposeful atmosphere in which students felt both safe and confident to engage with activities prepared
- Lesson was well prepared, with experiential activity introduced straight away after starter
- Pace of the lesson was excellent, with set time guideline allowing for sufficient time to complete tasks but not drag on, as prompted by teacher (e.g. "5 minutes!" and "1, 2, 3..."), as well as enabling individuals to seek clarification from mobile teacher
- Majority of students made active contributions to task/debate, and if not, did so willingly on prompt from teacher
- Students respond well to and engage with visual and physical resources as a means to complete set task
- All students very engaged in role play activity, listening to each other with maturity and sincerity

What key issues did you observe that required further consideration and development?

- Teacher refers to previous lesson content, but students have blank faces
- Minor weekend-conversation during group work activities when teacher occupied with other students
- One student arrived ten minutes late and though appropriately dealt with by teacher, played a largely passive role in remainder of session (however, another late student was very actively engaged)

Observer: Amy Grandvoinet

Date: 07/02/2011

Signature:

