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Title: Involving pupils in school design: a guide for local authorities and architects


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Involving pupils in school design

A guide for local authorities and architects

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Pupil participation

This guide has been written for local authorities and architects involved in the design, rehabilitation or construction of school buildings and estates in the UK, such as those funded under the Building Schools for the Future, Primary Capital and Academy programmes.

The statutory requirement to consult pupils in school design projects in the UK

- the statutory requirement to consult pupils in school design projects in the UK;
- the benefits of involving pupils in school design and refurbishment;
- top tips and lessons learnt from recent attempts to involve pupils in school design projects.

The guide is based upon evidence from a major research project undertaken in 2007-9 investigating how pupil participation in school design was taking place.

The trans-used methods such as participant observation, and interviews with school-users, stakeholders, local authorities and architects and the design and refurbishment projects of ten diverse schools in the East Midlands over a 24 month period. These developments varied in scale from complete reconstruction to modest refurbishment.

The guide is based on evidence gathered during the research project. We have produced it (and a companion one for teachers) because many of the LEAs and architects we consulted said that such a guide would be useful. We have illustrated it with quotations from interviews with pupils, staff, governors and local authorities.

About this guide

A full set of guidelines for all stakeholders is available from the project website at:

http://www.coventry.ac.uk/researchnet/d/699

This includes a set of ideas for activities and techniques that schools may wish to adopt when developing a participatory strategy.

All change! Developing 'schools for the 21st century'

During the last decade, the UK Government has instituted three flagship programmes of school building (development).

- Academy Schools (2004-present). A strategy to refurbish or rebuild all English secondary schools
- Building Schools for the Future (BSF) (2004-present). A strategy to refurbish or rebuild all English secondary schools
- Primary Capital Programmes (PCP) (2008-present). A strategy to refurbish or rebuild all English primary schools

Box 1 – From the Education Act 2002[6]

“(1) It shall be the duty –
(a) of a local education authority in the exercise of any of its schools functions, and
(b) of the governing body of a maintained school, in the exercise of any function relating to the conduct of the school, to have regard to any guidance given from time to time by the Secretary of State (in relation to England) or the National Assembly for Wales (in relation to Wales) about consultation with pupils in connection with the taking of decisions affecting them.

(2) Any guidance under this section must provide for a pupil’s views to be considered in the light of his age and understanding.”

The Education Act 2002 also requires of UK schools and local authorities to consider the DfES (2004) guidance document Working Together (including pupils in school design and refurbishment). This guidance stresses that consultation should not be tokenistic, but should take the form of meaningful pupil participation. Box 3 shows the DfES (2004) definition of ‘pupil participation’.

Box 2 – Defining pupil participation[7]

By pupil participation we mean adults working with children and young people to develop ways of ensuring that their views are heard and valued and encouraging them to:

- become more active participants in their education, including planning and evaluation of their own learning;
- participate in creating building and improving services to make them more responsive to their needs and those of the wider community;
- make a difference in their schools, neighbourhoods and communities;
- contribute to a cohesive community;
- learn from an early age to balance their rights as individuals with their responsibilities as citizens;
- develop, through the way they are involved, the knowledge, understanding and skills they will need in adult life.

Box 3 – The expectation of pupil participation (our emphasis)[8]

- in Academy school projects:
  “We want Academies to be at the heart of their communities, and expect them to be established in consultation with local stakeholders.”
- in Building Schools for the Future projects:
  “Pupils have the chance to see improvements to school buildings, pupils and staff need to have an active role in the development of the design brief – from the repurposing for the whole school to the design of what is needed in each room.”
- in Primary Capital Programme projects:
  “There is now much good practice on how to involve and build the skills of schools, pupils and local communities. School building projects are an opportunity to involve the pupils and the local community in the design process.”

Box 4 – ‘Participatory design’

“Participatory design’ is a term which is used to refer to a process where the people who will be affected by the design of something are involved in the design process. This can take place at any stage of the design process, from the initial idea to the final implementation. It can involve a wide range of stakeholders, including pupils, teachers, parents, local communities, and other experts. The aim of participatory design is to involve these stakeholders in the decision-making process, rather than simply consulting them or making decisions on their behalf.”

The statutory requirement for pupil involvement

Section 176 of the Education Act 2002 requires all UK schools and local authorities to demonstrably consult with pupils in the exercise of any function relating to a school’s conduct (See box 1). This statutory requirement should apply to any local education authorities or maintenance of school buildings or estates. After all, such actions are important events in a school’s life, function and conduct.

The background

The expectation of pupil participation (our emphasis)

1. In Academy school projects:
   “We want Academies to be at the heart of their communities, and expect them to be established in consultation with local stakeholders.”

2. In Building Schools for the Future projects:
   “Pupils have the chance to see improvements to school buildings, pupils and staff need to have an active role in the development of the design brief – from the repurposing for the whole school to the design of what is needed in each room.”

3. In Primary Capital Programme projects:
   “There is now much good practice on how to involve and build the skills of schools, pupils and local communities. School building projects are an opportunity to involve the pupils and the local community in the design process.”

4. Interacting with this guide...

   Please write a note... any thoughts you have about pupil participation while reading this guide... please get something in the margins...
Why pupil participation is worthwhile

Greater user satisfaction with school environment.

Pupils are frequently aware of issues and opportunities which are unseen by adult onlookers in school environments.

"[Head teacher]""When pupils are involved then that's a kind of bridge between the building and the users and they take care of it and maintain it better."

"[Architect]""Getting the pupils involved was crucial – they're the ones who've really helped us to bring a local ‘stamp’ to a school and positively to design and redevelopment."

Fostering a culture of trust and collaboration.

Pupils are the people who use the school on a day to day basis… they've got the knowledge. For all of our so-called specialists, us teachers can miss simple things… when it comes to thinking about the design." (Head teacher)

"[Assistant Head teacher]""Familiarising pupils with new school environments."

Reduced vandalism and ‘anti-social’ behaviour.

"[Head teacher]""It is clear, from our research, that pupil participation in even modest school design and redevelopment projects produces numerous positive outcomes, such as..."

Pragmatic improvements to the spaces and day-to-day running of school buildings.

"[Teacher]""When pupils are involved then that's a kind of bridge between the building and the users and they go home and tell their parents, so you're starting to get a bridge into the community too." (Teacher)

Additional opportunities for teaching and learning.

"[Deputy Head teacher]""When pupils are involved then that's a kind of bridge between the building and the users and they go home and tell their parents, so you're starting to get a bridge into the community too." (Teacher)

"[Teacher]""When pupils are involved then that's a kind of bridge between the building and the users and they go home and tell their parents, so you're starting to get a bridge into the community too." (Teacher)

Raising learners' self-esteem.

"[Architect]""Familiarising pupils with new school environments."

Enhanced design literacy.

"[Architect]""Involving pupils can result in bonding and effective collaborative working between groups of pupils, and between pupils and staff in a school. This can be for the benefit of wider educational opportunities for all year groups in subjects such as design, numeracy, art, drama and music."

"[Architect]""Fostering a culture of trust and collaboration. Illustrated pupils can result in bonding and effective collaborative working between groups of pupils, and between pupils and staff in a school. This can be for the benefit of wider educational opportunities for all year groups in subjects such as design, numeracy, art, drama and music." "[Head teacher]""In terms of the ethos of the place, I'd say [pupil participation] has been a big success." (Special needs teacher)

"[Assistant Head teacher]""Pupils become more familiar and comfortable with their school building, were prepared to move into a new environment, because they already knew a lot about the new building, were prepared to move." (Head teacher)

"[Teacher]""When you have opportunities for staff and pupils to work together on a project like this, you immediately notice the atmosphere changing – like breaking the ice." (Teacher)

"[Architect]""Pupils are frequently aware of issues and opportunities which are unseen by adult onlookers in school environments."

"[Assistant Head teacher]""Pupils are frequently aware of issues and opportunities which are unseen by adult onlookers in school environments." (Teacher)
In this section, we present a range of ‘lessons learnt’ about the planning for pupil participation. These lessons are presented as two sets of ‘top tips’: for local authorities and architects.

For local authorities

- Ensure that all pupil participation projects are evaluated shortly after completion. Use this evidence base and portfolio to document examples of good practice in pupil participation.
- Ensure that examples of good practice in pupil participation are recognised and rewarded. This could take the form of certificates, awards or ‘good news’ items in local media.
- Provide templates and training opportunities to support pupil participation in practice. For example, teachers and architects could benefit from training in participatory consultation techniques, whereas pupils could benefit from training to support them in making effective contributions to these techniques.
- Define a person, or several persons, within the local authority the role of ‘pupil participation champion’. This role should also link pupil participation projects to other salient ongoing agendas and agencies within the local community (e.g. Children and Young People’s Plans, extended schools, youth parliaments, statutory services for younger children, Sure Start children’s centres, Connexions, etc.).
- Contact officers from other local authorities responsible for overseeing pupil participation in school redevelopment.
- Work with schools, communities and policy-makers to establish a set of ‘local design values’ encapsulating what matters, and what is distinctive. For example the use of local stone, or brick. Ensure that these values are fed into all school redevelopment projects, especially at the design brief stage.
- Do not create superfluous, unstructured, ill defined meetings which are just tick box exercises, and which do not lead to real engagement or participation.
- Create an audit trail to assess the level and extent of pupil and teacher participation in the project.
- Create a portfolio of different solutions to known problems (such as toilet areas) to provide pictorial material for replication.
- Provide opportunities for representatives of schools which have recently undergone redevelopment to share their experiences with representatives from schools about to undergo the process. This could take the form of regular workshops and/or an online mailing list or discussion board.
- Provide a realistic time frame for pupil and staff participation.
Tips for architects preparing for pupil participation projects

• Work closely with school users and stakeholders to carry out an initial scoping exercise at the outset of the project. Use this to identify issues and spaces within the school which really matter to users of the building. Identify any features and spaces which are particularly problematic and which can be radically addressed in the design process. Also identify any features of the school which are particularly well-loved and distinctive. Spaces that users should be invited to in pupil participation projects during school redevelopment, which should, in turn, feed strongly into the design process.

• Spend time getting to know the school and how it is used and the people in it – it’s not a visit tour.

• Clearly brief school users on how they can most usefully contribute to the design process. Establish very clearly what kind of information you need (or don’t). For instance, there is sometimes a presumption amongst teachers and policy-makers that pupil participation is principally useful in designing ornamented features in a school. By contrast, our research suggests that easy school architects find this kind of assumption frustrating as it predisposes information which is essentially superficial and unnecessary. Much more valuable information is obtained when pupils are approached as experts in the everyday issues and needs within a school.

• Seek guidance from school staff and users regarding existing forms of pupil participation (for example school councils). Use this existing infrastructure as a basis for pupil participation in the design process.

• Seek guidance from the relevant Local Authority regarding existing good practice in pupil participation within the local area. Use appropriate local exemplars to inform your approach in the present project.

• Ensure that pupil participation is not a one-off ‘shock and grab’ activity such an approach invariably produces little useful information and produces a problematic ‘distance’ between architects and school users. Pupil participation should be an ongoing, iterative process, in which school users have faith that their ideas and concerns are valued.

• Share your enthusiasm with school pupils and staff. Be willing to talk about your job, techniques, tools, motivations, career and – especially – your top tips for pupils interested in pursuing a design-led career.

• Ensure that pupils and staff can see tangible evidence of how their contributions have been added to the design process. Provide accessible forms of feedback to enable this.

• Make participatory activities inclusive. Ensure that pupil participation activities do not solely involve a small group of staff (e.g. only the senior management team) or pupils (e.g. only ‘gifted and talented’ pupils or School Council members). Provide opportunities for work experience, career advice, field trips (e.g. to projects previously designed by your practice), or workshops and assemblies relating to design careers and/or the design process.

• Provide opportunities for pupils to learn about the broad spectrum of professions available in relation to design, architecture, conservation, logistics etc. Consider offered opportunities for work experience, career advice, field trips (e.g. to projects previously designed by your practice), or workshops and assemblies relating to design careers and/or the design process.

• Note that the design literacy of pupils and staff can be limited or clichéd; it may be useful to provide an introductory guide to design processes and jargon.

Tips for architects

• Try to avoid activities which pressure pupils with a nasty blank canvas – this can be intimidating and unproductive. Also avoid putting individual pupils ‘on the spot’. Rather, facilitate activities which enable pupils to work collaboratively and gradually to relate to a small number of specific issues as identified in the initial scoping stage.

• Evaluate your pupil participation activities, and their outcomes. Share your findings and experiences with others and/or architectural practices about to embark on a school redevelopment project.

• Don’t uphold participating pupils just for being pupils participating!

• Hi-tech design tools and projects may not be the most effective for focusing pupil participation: some of the best ideas come from conversations around simple panel sketches.

• Understand and try to dispense with young people’s frequent cynicism about participation projects: many young people feel disenfranchised within school contexts, and are used to their voices and needs going unheard.

• Do not ‘showboat’, architecturally or in any terminology which the school will not understand.

• Help young people – especially those who may feel disenfranchised within school – to have belief in their ideas and opinions.

• Be generous in providing materials and experiences which can afford valuable teaching/learning opportunities. Discuss how your work, and pupil participation in the design process, might be embedded in curricular activities (e.g. in lessons as diverse as design, citizenship, art, sciences, numeracy, English, history, etc.).

• Seek guidance from the relevant Local Authority regarding existing good practice in pupil participation within the local area. Use appropriate local exemplars to inform your approach in the present project.

• Consult with staff and pupils to establish the most effective ways in which to foster participation. Develop a range of participatory activities, such as design workshops or focus groups, to cater for the diverse groups and needs of school users, based on this initial consultation. Prepare to be very accommodating and patient throughout the participation process, and especially at this initial stage: be mindful of the fact that design processes are an ongoing, iterative process, in which school users have faith that their ideas and concerns are valued.

• Be open about the design process – the constraints, the time line, what will be possible in order to manage expectations and gain meaningful information.

• Provide opportunities for pupils and staff to see your other projects and talk to users of them.

• Always thank pupils and staff for their contributions to the design process. Consider giving small tokens of appreciation (e.g. certificates, stationary, copies of plans) for their contributions.

• Provide resources, support and guidance for pupils and staff to conduct activity-based, collaborative exercise in relation to the school’s key design issues (See online guide for a set of example activities.)
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Useful resources for pupil participation projects

An excellent ‘cookbook’ of practical activities for involving younger people in decision-making, providing pragmatic details about the appropriateness and logistics of each activity.

Provides guidance and tools to evaluate the effectiveness of participation projects involving younger people.

A useful ‘how-to’ guide for those approaching the process of involving pupils in a school redevelopment project.

An accessible guide providing evidence-based ‘food for thought’ intended to inform and prompt reflection around school redevelopment projects.

Identifies a range of common issues and concerns commonly held by pupils about their school spaces.

Provides examples of previous projects which have involved pupils in school design.

Cool Crew Come to School – A post occupancy evaluation toolkit for all stakeholders in Primary Schools. For details please contact Michelle Newman by e-mail mc307@coventry.ac.uk.