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Monograph

Title: Involving pupils in school design: a guide for schools


Version: Published version

http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/2505/
Involving pupils in school design

A guide for schools

If you would like to comment on this or would like more information, please contact:

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Date: 2009

Who should read this guide

You should read this guide if your school is in the process of, or just starting any design or refurbishment, where you want pupils and as much of the school to be included as possible.

But first, let’s look at the benefits of pupil participation...

Why pupil participation is worthwhile

The Education Act 2002 requires all UK schools and local authorities to consult with pupils in the exercise of any function relating to a school’s conduct. This applies to any kind of redesign, refurbishment, or reorganisation of school buildings. After all, such activities are typically important events in a school’s life, ‘function’ and ‘conduct’.

As an easing requirement, pupil participation in school design and redevelopment projects can produce many positive results. Although the AHRC project from which these guidelines are derived focused on pupil participation, our findings show that when students are involved the whole school benefits, including teachers and school management.

This guide was produced by a team of researchers from the AHRC project from which these guidelines are derived. We want to show you how to read this guide

How to read this guide

This guide was produced by a team of researchers from the experiences of a two year funded project. We want to show you the benefits of involving as large a range of pupils in the process as possible, and suggest some relatively quick and easy ways to move this forward so that they can start planning how to involve as wide and fair a group of people in the process as possible. We have sent companion guides to LEAs and architects, but if the people you are working with have not seen one, then feel free to share and discuss the contents of this with them. We have found that LEAs and architects are eager to engage young people but may not know the best way to do this.

Our experience is… that pupils come up with really perceptive ideas, that can genuinely improve a space. And a lot of things that come from the pupils are mostly cost neutral. They are not asking for the earth – they are very realistic in what they want.”

(Head teacher)

The benefits

Improvements to the spaces and day-to-day running of school buildings

“Getting the pupils involved was crucial – they’re the ones we really trusted to bring a local ‘stamp’ to the project.”

(Head teacher)

School buildings with local ‘character’

“Fostering a culture of trust and collaboration”

(Head teacher)

Greater user satisfaction with the school environment

Reduced vandalism and ‘anti-social behaviour’

Opportunities for teaching and learning

Enhanced design literacy

Raising learners’ self-esteem

Familiarising pupils with new school environments

“Getting the pupils involved was crucial – they’re the ones we really trusted to bring a local ‘stamp’ to the project.”

(Head teacher)

“Giving the pupils something new, something they have a stake in – it’s treating them with respect. It’s saying ‘we trust you’.”

(Head teacher)

“[Involving pupils in school design] gives them a bit of an insight into different parts of the process – design, budgeting, strategic decision, a much broader perspective and hopefully helps them to understand things in a different way.”

(Architect)

“[A group of disaffected students] realised perhaps for the first time that they could have a voice and they could come up with ideas and that people could listen to them.”

(Deputy Head teacher)

For the first time, lots of the benefits of pupil participation...
Techniques for involving pupils

The following techniques are ones which we have found or believe could be used in the pupil participation process. Do not rely on the architects or the LEAs to necessarily provide you with methods. Also, the most important thing to remember is that you, or the person(s) in charge of the process at the school should:

- try to engage as many pupils as possible in some way - it is an exciting time and - you and your pupils are the ones that know most about your school
- manage pupils’ expectations, by telling them the constraints the design process is under - restricted budgets and long time scale
- follow your school’s ideas to ensure the requirements you have gathered find a place in the final design.

A full set of guidelines for teachers, pupils, LEAs and architects, along with more details of our project is available from the project web site at: http://www.coventry.ac.uk/researchnet/d/699

Show of hands

A collective vote on predetermined issues.

Advantages
- Getting opinions on a small number of clear-cut issues.
- Choosing from a wide range of pupils.
- Establishing short-term collective opinions.
- Gathering a range of ideas from pupils.

Disadvantages
- Difficult if 50/50 split.
- If the problems require debate and are complex.
- Used without any other form of participation.
- No follow up actions taken on the back of the vote.

Focus groups

A group of pupils or adults, which may include pupils or others, perhaps from the wider community, gathered for a focused discussion or brainstorming session.

In this case consultation with pupils is embedded in the school day perhaps in PSHE or Design and Technology lessons, in tutor groups, assemblies or whole day events. These can be facilitated by teaching staff, outside professionals such as the Sorrell Foundation or the architects who will be involved in the final design. Scheduling events into the school time table may require more organisation, but can achieve greater awareness and inclusivity.

Advantages
- Focus on consultation and discussion upon the school redevelopment project.
- Coordinating consultation activities.
- Getting a snapshot of opinions and debates from a cross-section of pupils.
- Getting all the school talking, thinking and working collaboratively in relation to the school redevelopment.

Disadvantages
- Activities are excellently delivered or poorly coordinated.
- Particular groups feel disfranchised and/or disengaged.
- No mechanisms through which pupil activities contribute to decision-making process.
- May become tokenistic (e.g. the gifted and talented).
- A few voices may dominate.

Focus group exercises

Focus group exercises are a form of consultation that relies on the creativity, spontaneity and interaction of pupils. These can contain open questions (which limit the responses e.g. to agree, disagree or uncertain).

Advantages
- Quick and reactive.
- Gathering of ideas and comments from a wide range of pupils.
- Pupil contributions can be summed up or ‘zoomed in’.
- A range of ideas and concerns about the school redevelopment.
- If this is just a one-off activity which is ignored in the mainstream planning.
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Disadvantages
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Questionnaire survey

Surveys can be designed to ask pupils (or adults) opinions on key issues such as the design of different areas of the school.

These can contain open and closed questions (which limit the responses e.g. to agree, disagree or uncertain).

Advantages
- Gathering broader opinion on opinions.
- Consulting widely with a range of stakeholders.
- Ease of disseminating, presenting and analysing decisions.

Disadvantages
- Questionnaire design can be difficult.
- Response rate may be low or biased.
- May be non-inclusive.
- More appropriate for secondary schools.
- Time to design, administer and analyse results.
- Findings may be quickly filed and forgotten.

Ballot box

Pupils are provided with a secret ballot box in an accessible part of the school allowing pupils to vote on particular issues. Prior to such a poll, pupils would need to be briefed on the voting process and the issues at stake. This could be done in assembly or in PSHE lessons.

Advantages
- Pupils receive no feedback.
- Follow up discussions are not managed.
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Disadvantages
- Pupils’ contributions could be unfocused, ‘irrelevant’ or ‘irrelevant’.
- Particular groups of pupils ‘opt out’ of or dominate, voting.
- There is limited staff time to count and analyse the vote.
- The vote is the only way in which pupils are involved pupils receive no feedback and/or do not see action taken on the basis of their vote.

Focus groups

A group of pupils or adults, which may include pupils or others, perhaps from the wider community, gathered for a focused discussion or brainstorming session.

Advantages
- Understanding in-depth opinions.
- Allowing pupils to fully outline their concerns.
- Encouraging ‘blue skies’ thinking.

Disadvantages
- God facilitate is essential.
- Time to organise, run and write up results.
- Good facilitator is essential.
- No follow up actions taken on the back of the vote.
- Ideas may not be representative or inclusive.
- Pupils need sufficient time to express problems.
- May become tokenistic (e.g. the gifted and talented).
- A few voices may dominate.

Idea board / tree / box

A collective vote on predetermined issues.

Advantages
- Encouraging ‘blue skies thinking’.
- Establishing a tangible focus for enthusiasm and opinions.
- Gathering a range of ideas and concerns about the school environment.

Disadvantages
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Drop in sessions

Advantages
• Providing access to ideas and possibilities beyond the everyday school environment.
• Provides a dedicated opportunity for staff and pupil discussion.
• Provides opportunities for pupils to contribute opinions and debates.
• Enables pupils and staff to articulate the pros and cons of diverse facets of design and architecture.
• Generates excitement and enthusiasm.

Disadvantages
• Only a small, nonrepresentative group of pupils can go.
• Confrontational atmospheres occur between pupils and staff, and vice versa.
• This is a one-off experience.

Unrealistic expectations are built up.

Model based activities

Advantages
• Using pupil-generated ideas and involve pupils in decision and design making; creates excitement and enthusiasm.
• Allows opportunities for development of visualization, drawing and model making skills.
• Embeds participation as an everyday practice in the school.

Disadvantages
• Only a small, nonrepresentative group of pupils are invited.
• Limited staff commitment to building on the exercise.
• No buy-in from the developers.

Design competitions

Advantages
• Establishes excitement and anticipation for a school redevelopment project.
• Provides a tangible, realistic focus for decision and anticipation of school design.
• Provides a focused opportunity for staff and pupils to discuss school design and redevelopment.
• Provides opportunity for pupils to make creative contributions.
• Increases excitement and enthusiasm.

Disadvantages
• Only a small, nonrepresentative group of pupils are invited.
• Limited staff commitment to building on the exercise.
• Pupils’ concepts are not taken seriously.
• Designs cannot be reviewed and redesigned by future cohorts.
• ‘Ability if pupils to create models and drawings.

Role-play activities

These activities could be used to simulate scenarios such as planning meetings, council meetings or boardroom discussions. Pupils could act as ‘key players’ in these scenarios. They could also involve local decision-makers (e.g. a school governors, architect, councillors). These could allow pupils to voice concerns and debate and vote upon key decisions relating to the school redevelopment project.

Advantages
• Enables pupils to voice concerns and issues to decision-makers.
• Provides a dedicated opportunity for staff and pupil discussion.
• Provides opportunities for pupils to contribute opinions and debates.
• Enables pupils and staff to articulate the pros and cons of diverse facets of design and architecture.
• Generates excitement and enthusiasm.
• Prompts pupils’ reflection on participation in democratic processes.

Disadvantages
• Only a small, nonrepresentative group of pupils can take part.
• Pupils feel intimidated and/or receive inadequate preparation.
• This is a one-off experience.
• There is little consensus on an issue.
• This is not taken seriously.

Unrealistic expectations are built up.

Peer research

Here, pupils are given the role of researchers; to develop a set of questions/issue – find out the background information and then discuss ideas with their friends colleagues or the planners. Taking on a journalistic approach, the students can create articles, and newsletters for the school parents and the design team.

Advantages
• Gives a hands-on experience of gathering information and communicating with different audiences.
• Increases the pupils’ awareness of their school environment.

Disadvantages
• May become daunting, with only gifted and talented contributing.
• May just become a cosmetic exercise, with ideas ignored or not discussed forward.
• Pupils’ concepts are not taken seriously.
• Designs cannot be reviewed and redesigned by future cohorts.
• Research may not be taken seriously.
• Peer researchers are given insufficient praise or thanks for their work.
• Pupils receive no feedback and/or do not see evidence of action taken on the basis of peer research.
### On-line activities

- **Advantages**
  - Enables diverse, interactive, collaborative discussions around key issues.
  - Provides an updated forum for participation outside of the formal classroom environment.
  - Provides documentation and dissemination of issues to the school community.
  - Enables complex, iterative, collaborative discussions.
  - Sustain interest in the progress of a design and construction project.

- **Disadvantages**
  - Only by an unrepresentative sample of pupils participate.
  - Online materials need to be regularly moderated.
  - No mechanism through which pupils' discussions feed into decision-making processes.
  - Pupils receive no feedback and do not see evidence of action taken on the basis of peer research.

- **Advantages**
  - Enables pupils to critically question and 'speak up' to adults.
  - Provides pupils with insight into, and experience of, decision-making processes.
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- **Disadvantages**
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### Trialling / field testing

- **Advantages**
  - Involves pupils directly in decision-making relating to aspects of the school building.
  - Provides a robust testing procedure for furniture, fittings and fittings.
  - Provides pupils with insight into, and experience of, decision-making processes.

- **Disadvantages**
  - Involves pupils directly in decision-making relating to aspects of the school building.
  - Provides a robust testing procedure for furniture, fittings and fittings.
  - Provides pupils with insight into, and experience of, decision-making processes.

### World cafe activity

- **Advantages**
  - Gather a range of ideas and comments about a wide range of aspects of the school environment.
  - Enables pupils to discuss issues amongst themselves, with relatively little staff involvement.

- **Disadvantages**
  - Particular groups of pupils ‘nap out’ or dominate the activity.
  - It is not taken seriously by pupils.
  - No mechanism through which pupils’ comments contribute to decision-making processes.
  - Pupils receive no feedback.

### Using existing participatory structures

- **Advantages**
  - Provides pupils with insight into, and experience of, decision-making processes.

- **Disadvantages**
  - Only an unrepresentative sample of pupils participate.
  - Pupils are inadequately prepared for, or supported in, the fulfilment of this kind of function.

### Pupil representation on decision-making fora

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Tips for helping teachers prepare for effective pupil participation in school redesign projects

In this section, we present a range of ‘lessons learnt’ about the broader issues involved in planning for pupil participation. You need:

• To establish a clear, transparent, accountable system for gathering and acting on pupils’ contributions, a way of accounting for different opinions and providing feedback.

• A member of staff to take ‘ownership’ of the participatory process before it commences. They should proactively build up a client-partner relationship of equals with the architects and designers prior to any participatory activities. They should be responsible for planning and facilitating engagement with students, and be given time out to do this.

• To understand and relate the constraints and the length of the process to the school so that they can be realistic in what they ask for: this will prevent the building up of false hopes and lessen students’ cynicism.

• To establish a contract between the school and the design team to confirm how and when pupil participation will be dealt with and that this is an integral part of the process.

• To use a ‘multi-method’ approach, tailoring it to suit your situation, resources and practicalities.

• To find out other local schools’ (staff and pupils) experiences.

• To make ‘pupil voices’ a standing agenda item for meetings relating to school redevelopment. Ensure that this dedicated time is used to reflect upon pupils’ opinions, issues and needs, and that this is minuted.

• To find ways of engaging as many pupils as possible in the projects.

• To not underestimate pupils capacity to understand financial issues.

• As a very early stage, to consult with pupils to identify issues which really matter to them and how these can be addressed.

• Remember to always thank pupils for their contributions and provide them with feedback about how and when their contributions will be discussed and/or used.

• To encourage situations where both students and architects can work together so figure out what we are going to do, and what needs to be done for us to get there. Collaboration needs to proceed in a mutually respectful, open and comfortable manner. For example, where teachers relax their teacherly authority and collaborate with pupils, or where pupils are granted meaningful decision-making responsibilities. It may be appropriate and useful for a third party (e.g. an architect) to facilitate this kind of situation.

• To ensure that the school development project, and pupils’ participation in it, is well-documented and exhibited in a variety of ways, e.g. project, a book, newsletter, website or blog, or as a poem or artist-in-residence.

• To consider how the redevelopment of the school might be linked to the curriculum e.g. design, PSHE, citizenship, art, creative writing, local history, maths, science, ecology, archaeology.

• To find ways of involving primary school pupils in the redevelopment of their future secondary school, and secondary school pupils in the redevelopment of their old primary school.

• To provide opportunities for pupils to go on site visits to see progress on the redevelopment of their school and to celebrate breaking ground, laying foundation stones, ‘topping out’ and official opening should be treated as exciting historic moments in the life of your school.

• To ensure that pupil contributions to the design are made explicit during and after the build.

• To make sure that pupil participation is not lost in the process.

• To create situations where staff students and architects can work together to figure out what we are going to do, and what needs to be done for us to get there. Collaboration needs to proceed in a mutually respectful, open and comfortable manner. For example, where teachers relax their teacherly authority and collaborate with pupils, or where pupils are granted meaningful decision-making responsibilities. It may be appropriate and useful for a third party (e.g. an architect) to facilitate this kind of situation.

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Tips for secondary pupils approaching pupil participation projects

Your school is about to enter what could be a long process of redesign and redevelopment. Written into this is the requirement to gain your views about the design and use of the school. You are experts in knowing the building, its good and bad points. Now is the time for you to use this, to make the design better for students who have to come to the school in the future. You should be given various opportunities to get your views across. The following points give you a starting point for thinking about how you might do this.

• If you are interested in design, ask your teachers how you can get more involved in the design of your school.

• Find out who is working with the architects and designers and how they are doing this, and when you can have an input into this.

• Tell them about any things about your school that you and your friends really like or really don't like. Back up this up with evidence.

• Ask teachers and architects questions. If you don't understand some of the technical words, or why they are doing things, ask them to explain.

• If you enjoy getting involved in the design of your school, ask the teachers and designers about work experience or jobs relating to design.

• All designers go through lots of ideas. When working on a design project, don't be afraid to try lots of ideas. Don't be disappointed if you don't get it right first time. Or, if your idea does not seem to be noticed.

• There are lots of constraints which the school design process must meet. These may mean that some of the more creative and costly ideas can't be used. Find out how your design may be limited. Are you asking for something that is not possible? Ask why it is not possible, or if there is a different solution to the problem you are trying to solve.

• Designers use lots of different techniques. Work out how which is best for you to put across your ideas – sketches, chatting, presenting models or computers. If you are asked a question, but find it difficult to put your ideas into words, try doing a sketch or a plan. Explain it is the idea that is important.

• When working on a design project, be open to ideas and respect different opinions. Think how you would feel if someone made negative comments about your idea.

• If you are asked to make models, sketches or ideas for a design project, find out how they will be used and who will see them.

• Ask to be kept up to date about how your ideas have been used. If no one takes notice of your ideas, ask why not.

• Think about this every time you make a model or drawing. It is not the finished product, but the start of a new idea. Every sketch, model or idea is potentially valuable.

• Designers might be experts at drawing things and buildings, but they might not have much experience of working with younger people, and will have to experience of your school or what is to like to attend your school. Help them by listening to their instructions, contributing to discussions, or making suggestions about how you and your friends could make a difference in a design project. Invite them into the school to spend a day going round with you.

• Keep asking "why" and what is happening now? and "what stage are we at?" If you feel you are being patronised or "talked down to", say so. If you do not feel your ideas are being taken seriously say so. If you want to ask the point, or about how much things cost, then ask.

• Some people think that school councils are 'nerdy' or 'teacher's pets', but it might be the best way to get your opinions heard. If you don't feel your school council represents you, then it's up to you to get involved!

Top tips for primary pupils asked to take part in school design projects

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• Think about this every time you make a model or drawing. It is not the finished product, but the start of a new idea. Every sketch, model or idea is potentially valuable.

• Designers might be experts at drawing things and buildings, but they might not have much experience of working with younger people, and will have to experience of your school or what is to like to attend your school. Help them by listening to their instructions, contributing to discussions, or making suggestions about how you and your friends could make a difference in a design project. Invite them into the school to spend a day going round with you.

• Keep asking "why" and what is happening now? and "what stage are we at?" If you feel you are being patronised or "talked down to", say so. If you do not feel your ideas are being taken seriously say so. If you want to ask the point, or about how much things cost, then ask.

• Some people think that school councils are 'nerdy' or 'teacher's pets', but it might be the best way to get your opinions heard. If you don't feel your school council represents you, then it's up to you to get involved!

Top tips for pupils

• Look around the school. What do you love about it? What do you have about it? Why? Talk to your mates and decide on what matters to you about the school building and focus on these when you're asked your opinions about your school.

• If you get involved in a school design project, don’t stop there! Look into other ways you can have a say in making decisions about your school. Investigate other ways you can make a difference you can have a say in your school or community.

Tips for primary pupils asked to take part in school design projects

If you get involved in a school design project, don’t stop there! Look into other ways you can have a say in making decisions about your school. Investigate other ways you can make a difference you can have a say in your school or community.

• Don't be afraid to ask teachers and architects (the people who design new buildings) questions. If you don't understand a word or question, ask.

• You can explain your ideas about your school in lots of different ways, so choose the one that you like doing best. For example you may want to share your idea by:

  • telling someone,
  • drawing pictures,
  • writing ideas down,
  • making models.

• Remember everyone’s ideas are important, so don’t be shy even if you think you are no good at drawing or writing.

• Listen to other people and remember they might have good ideas too.

• Find out who will see your drawings or models and what they will do with them.

• If no-one takes notice of your ideas, ask why not.

• If you have good idea about your school’s school councilor to tell everyone about it.

• Look around the school.

  • What do you love about it?
  • What-do you hate about it?
  • Why?

• Talk to your mates and decide on what matters to you about the school building.

• Tell your teacher all the things you really love and really hate. When you’re asked for your opinions about your school these are the things you need to think about.
For further information about the project go to our website:

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

In completing the research project, and compiling this guide, the authors gratefully acknowledge the support of Arts and Humanities Research Council grant number AH/E507026/1.

Other useful resources for pupil participation projects


