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Four arenas of school-based participation: towards a heuristic for children's rights-informed educational practice

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There has been a long-standing call for the participation of young people in decision making in school. However, research to date has mostly focused on pupil councils and is rarely conducted in areas of socio-economic deprivation – the contexts for this study. In national examinations, the schools chosen had higher than average attainments given their catchments. The research sought to understand if and how young people would make a link between their participation rights and 'doing well' at school. Using mobile and visual methods, a situated, social-material approach was taken to data collection and analysis. We found participation opportunities were supportive in four arenas: formal curriculum, wider curriculum, decision making groups, and connections with the wider community. This framing provides a heuristic for rights-based participation in educational practice.

Keywords: poverty; participation; attainment; children's rights; arenas

Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) adopted in 1989 provides for the right of children to participate in decisions that affect them including in school (De Róiste et al., 2012; Lundy & McEvoy, 2009). In education, the provision of pupil councils has been the main response but these are often selective in membership and tend to focus on adult-led agendas (Cross, Hulme, & McKinney, 2014; Robinson, 2014). In general, school-based participation is seen as too tokenistic and lacking impact (Brown, Croxford, &

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Minty, 2017; Cook-Sather, Boville, & Felten, 2014; European Commission Directorate-General for Justice, 2015; Hulme et al., 2011; Kilkelly et al., 2005; Quennerstedt, 2011). In response, scholars have called for greater participation, advancing ‘radical collegiality’ between all ages (Cross et al., 2014; Fielding, 1999, 2001, 2007; Hulme et al., 2011).

Recent studies show that participation is connected to liking school, higher attainment and better wellbeing (De Róiste et al., 2012). Indeed, school pupils describe wellbeing as ‘having a say’, ‘having rights’, and ‘being respected’ (Anderson & Graham, 2016). For pupils, benefits include skills development, self-esteem, engagement, and empowerment (Czerniawski, 2012; Mager & Nowak, 2012; Mitra, 2004; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). However, rarely are studies located in areas of deprivation or concerned with the link to educational outcomes (see Covell, Howe, & Polegato, 2011; Hannam, 2001 for exceptions).

In Scotland, a contemporary policy concern is to address the ‘attainment gap’: this is where pupils from socio-economically deprived areas are sometimes years behind their peers in tests (Goodman & Burton, 2012; McCluskey, 2017; Pirrie & Hockings, 2012; see also Tisdall, 2015). In this study, in schools in disadvantaged areas, we explore how young people themselves experienced participation as a factor in their attainment and achievements. Whilst ‘education cannot be used, on its own, to eradicate social inequalities’ (Iannelli & Paterson, 2007, p. 15), the significance of the study lies in revealing how arenas of participation operate to support achievement and attainment in ‘odds-beating’ schools (Wilcox, Lawson, & Angelis, 2017). The research draws on a critical tradition within Childhood Studies that looks to ensure all young people’s voices are heard (Tisdall, 2013) and to understand young people’s experience as part of wider intergenerational ordering (Mannion, 2009; Punch, 2019).

Theorising participation

Intergenerational dialogues of consequence

In this study, we employ the term ‘participation’ (see Treseder, 1997) rather than ‘pupil voice’ (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Despite connotations of empowerment, pupil ‘voice’ is fraught with methodological and ethical limitations (I’Anson, 2013, 2016; Lundy, 2007; Mazzei & Jackson 2017). Commentators are rightly concerned that if pupils only have ‘voices’, the responsibility of adults is limited merely to ‘listening’ and one-way communication. Another concern is that ‘voice’ may be mobilised as a neoliberal policy tool for school improvement (Fielding, 2001; Raby, 2014) conveniently ignoring the need for meaningful dialogues with adults (Whitty & Wisby, 2007).

We initially used the UN’s General Comment (2009) as a definition of ‘participation’:

This term [participation] has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes. (p. 5)

Drawing on Pearce and Wood (2016), we framed participation as dialogic, intergenerational, collective, inclusive and capable of making a difference through being ‘transgressive’. In line with Emerson and Lloyd (2017), we took rights-based participation as more than ‘taking part’: some engagement in decision making *with consequence* is needed. Linking ideas from Mannion (2007, 2009), Fielding (2007, 2011), and Mockler and Groundwater-Smith (2014), we theorised participation as requiring dialogue and intergenerational practices based on trust and ethical responsibility.

Arenas of participation

Building on Nolas (2015), Mahoney, Newman, and Barnett (2010), and Percy-Smith (2015), we defined the term ‘arenas of participation’ to help us explore the importance of relevant situated, emergent, everyday places and practices across school life. Drawing on grounded theory (Clarke, 2005), situated learning (Henning, 2004), and sociology of ‘public space’ (Cornwall & Coelho, 2007; Fielding, 2007; Mahoney et al., 2010), we see ‘arenas’ as generalised types of settings instantiated in everyday places in physical, social, cultural and discursive ways. In participation arenas in educational settings, people, activities and contexts co-shape each other and learning ensues (Henning, 2004; Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Vasconcelos et al. (2012) show that arenas of participation are comprised of material and social worlds in relational tension wherein *participation* and *learning* are encouraged or constrained by relationally assembled features (see also Mannion, 2019).

As reported elsewhere (Mannion, Sowerby, & I’Anson, 2015), four overlapping *arenas of participation* were initially proposed:

- 1 Formal timetabled lessons: participation happening in and through the processes of teaching and assessment in traditional classrooms and spaces such as laboratories, sports halls;
- 2 The wider curriculum: participation as opportunities for taking part and shaping school life outside of formal lessons – for example, clubs, societies, trips, fundraising, competitions, and awards;
- 3 Decision making groups: participation in formal or structured groups such as pupil councils but also groups such as Eco-school;
- 4 ‘Other’: our fourth category was deliberately left open to capture pupils’ evidence of participation not relevant to the aforementioned categories. We later came to call this arena ‘In connection with community’.

Research design

Overall design

We employed a qualitative, mixed methods approach using a multiple case study design (Yin, 2003). We characterized the approach as a form of assemblage ethnography (Youdell, 2015). This meant field researchers sought to ‘plug into’ on-going intersubjective and socio-material flows of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Youdell & McGimpsey, 2015). It also meant ‘context’ was more than a backdrop to the action – diverse sites were implicated in the researched events. In practice, this assemblage approach involved using a variety of participatory methods. A key method involved pupils taking photographs of the school environments identified as relevant to participation. Arising datasets included visual and transcribed data sensitive to context.

In the research, the images had an immanent quality since they were taken in the midst of materials, practices, and people (see Mannion, 2019; Springgay & Truman, 2018). Young people took photographs *en route* in guided walks to be discussed later in focus groups. We used a non-representational approach (Thrift, 2008) particularly in relation to image creation and use. We have included a small number of photographs (see montage, figure 1) as illustrative of the varied points of interest young people identified. These images were not separately analysed since they formed only part of a much wider enfolding of elements

(Kind, 2013) – both material and discursive – that together evoked meanings. The photographs helped us explore the ‘self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds’ (Lorimer, 2005, p. 83) of participation. The conversations prompted by these photographs helped give insight into the lived experiences of young people’s participation both in and outside of class and governance groups.



Figure 1. Montage of pupil-taken photographs. Copyright retained by the pupil photographers. (Names of pupils withheld by agreement. Images used with permission.)

Research questions

At the outset, we knew nothing about the cultures of participation in the schools. Our working hypothesis was that participation cultures would likely play some part in these schools’ raised attainments.

Two research questions were posed:

- 1 In secondary schools in areas of deprivation, how do students participate in influencing and determining school-based practices in classroom activity, in the wider curriculum, in governance groups, and in relation to the wider community?
- 2 When and how do students in these schools account for how experiences of participation make a difference to their sense of themselves, their relationships, their roles in the wider community and civil society, and, “doing well” at school?

Sampling

An earlier study (Hinchcliff & Bradshaw, 2014) used data on attainment, attendance, and disadvantage to identify 24 schools in ‘challenging circumstances’ with better results than others in similar settings. We sampled seven schools from these 24 using size, location, and denominational nature as criteria to reflect the wider sample. All schools were state-maintained in urban areas of Scotland where deprivation is often prevalent (Table 1).

Table 1. The participant schools

	Non-denominational	Denominational (Catholic)
Schools (Better than average for catchments)	14	10
Schools approached	5	4
Participating schools	3	4

For focus groups with governance group members, we purposively sampled members (Table 2) and this resulted in a higher proportion of girls. Across focus groups, there were expectedly a number of participants in receipt of free school meals, some with support needs, and a number who self-identified as struggling with school work at times. Among the 130+ participants, there was representation of diverse backgrounds and gender identities. (In Scotland, 83.9% of pupils are recorded as ‘White-Scottish’ or ‘White-other British’ with other ethnic backgrounds being White-Other (5.6%), Asian Pakistani (2.0%) and mixed (1.4%) (Scottish Government, 2019).

Table 2. Participants in the research

	Boys		Girls	
Governance members interviewed	16		48	
<i>by year groups</i>	<i>S1-3</i>	<i>S4-6</i>	<i>S1-3</i>	<i>S4-6</i>
	5	11	21	27
Randomly sampled for interview	19		40	
<i>by year groups</i>	<i>S1-3</i>	<i>S4-6</i>	<i>S1-3</i>	<i>S4-6</i>
	9	10	20	20
Participating in arts-based	4		9	
Totals	39		97	
Grand Total	136			

Note 1: S1 in Scotland is the first year of secondary school, for pupils aged 11–12.

Note 2: 13 pupils participated in arts-based activities facilitated by visiting facilitators who explored participation through different media; space does not permit reporting on that aspect here.

Methods

Methods were chosen to enable young people to explain how participation helped them ‘do well at school’. This phrase is often used by young people as a catch-all term to include both attainment (as captured in test scores, examination grades, and formal qualifications) and achievement (wider success and development).

There were two principal methods: ‘walk-along’ interviews (Carpiano, 2009; Lynch & Mannion, 2016) and focus groups using photo-elicitation (Briggs, Stedman, & Krasny, 2014). Data collection events were audio recorded and later transcribed. We categorized data using themes across the four identified arenas.

Researchers directly spoke to over 136 young people from S1 to S6 in over 50 interviews in small groups (Table 3). We spoke to members of pupil councils, other governance groups, and to non-council members. The latter were randomly selected.

Table 3. Interviews

	Non-Denominational	Denominational (Catholic)
Number of focus groups	6	8
Governance interviews	6	8
Walking interviews	12	16
Total	56	

Ethics

A rights-based approach shaped the work from inception through to impact on policy . Initially, we strove to ensure respondents had multiple opportunities to give informed consent by orally explaining the tasks, using child-friendly information sheets, explaining consent in terms of outputs and anonymization. In reporting, we also ensured a high degree of non-traceability through not including age and stage of individuals and through the use of generic categories, such as ‘all’, or ‘some pupils’.

Young people were invited to take photographs during the walk-along interviews with a project iPad which was retained by the research staff. This approach ensured the security and non-traceability of images in line with our university ethical approval. For under 16 year olds, we gained both the child and parent / carer’s consent. Above 16, young people’s consent was deemed sufficient but parents also received communications. This research was subject to scrutiny of the university ethics committee, Disclosure Scotland clearance, and the British Educational Research Association’s (BERA) ethical code. Across these considerations, a rights-based, participatory design (Emerson & Lloyd, 2017) was enacted which sought evidence on children’s own lived experience. We discussed with young people how the project afforded them opportunities for collaboration in research, and invited them to consider their role as co-researchers. In practice, this included child-led guided walks and child-taken photography (both of which functioned as a form of shared data collection). Young people engaged in other forms of collaborative sense making with researchers through participation in focus groups. We also note that young people’s contributions have also impacted on policy and practice (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. This four-arena framework is the heuristic now used in the official guidance for participation of learners aged 3-18 (Education Scotland, 2018).

Findings

In focus groups, respondents were regularly reminded to explain purposefully when and how participation supported ‘doing well’ at school. Next, we exemplify what young people expressed as relevant to ‘doing well’ in each arena.

Arena 1: The formal curriculum

This arena comprised formal places expressly dedicated to teaching and learning wherein participation occurred. Spaces included classrooms, sports and performance spaces, laboratories, libraries, outdoor settings, and workshops.

In all schools, pupils spoke about how they valued participation as part of the process of formal learning. They valued opportunities to engage actively in classes through participatory and collaborative tasks.

- Pupil 1: It’s really hands-on.
 Pupil 2: There’s a lot of learnin’ where the teacher actually gets you to go up and sometimes actually try and teach the class. And there’s a lot of collaborative learning. *[School C]*

Some pupils spoke about how they valued having the freedom to make decisions and take responsibility for their own learning in formal lessons.

- Pupil 1: They give you responsibility but you have to do most of the work.
 Pupil 2: [...] In geography when we were studying for our test, [...] you had to take your own responsibility in helping each other in the group. I remember that. *[School B]*

In two of the schools, pupils spoke of how they had formal opportunities to participate in influencing the design of the curriculum and choice of teaching approaches.

- Researcher: Can pupils influence learning and teaching?
 Pupil 1: I think upper school – the higher you get up. I think so, yeah. Because in English last year, the teacher said, ‘what do you feel you want to go over? ... And that comes back again to the respect thing. I feel that I keep saying it ... but it’s a key thing ... *[School D]*

Pupils were aware that there were systems in place that sought to capture how each pupil was doing. They felt efforts were made in a number of ways to ensure pupils were ‘not forgotten’ and were helped to ‘stay on track’ in order to ‘do well’:

Pupil: Our maths teacher asks how we are with things, and if we’d like it taught a different way, or she’ll go over things for us. *[School G]*

Pupil 2: They take a lot of care to remind us that we’re all included. *[School E]*

Pupil-teacher relationships based on respect were identified by a number of pupils as key to improving learning and engagement within the curriculum when they found school work challenging:

Pupil 1: The good relationship with the teacher makes you feel comfortable asking for extra help. Because sometimes it can kinda seem a wee bit dauntin’ especially when you’re in a classroom environment. You don’t always want to put your hand up in front o’ your kinda peer group and say ‘I don’t get this’.

Pupil 2: The whole school is a group of friends. We obviously have our disagreements ... but we are all friends. We all have laughs; [it] creates a good vibe, a good atmosphere. *[School E]*

The more senior pupils, especially, were aware of the ways in which the formal curricular arena was impacted by broader qualification regimes: they accepted that much of what had to be done was heavily prescribed by national curriculum and examination requirements. Across all year groups, pupils tended to be aware of their school’s achievement and attainment record and reputation. Several explained how in-class dialogues based on mutual respect supported this.

Researcher: What happens in class that makes your school distinctive in its achievement and attainment?

Pupil 1: I feel there’s a really high level of mutual respect, that pupils listen to the teachers, but the teachers listen – and value – the pupils’ points of view and things to say, so it makes you more confident and you’re open with your ideas.

Pupil 2: A teacher will never pass a pupil off – they don’t give up, or anything like that. They’ll always push you ...

Group: Yeah. *[General agreement]*

Pupil 2: [...] I’d say, you don’t just see teachers as teachers, you see them as people.

Group: Ah-ha. *[General approval]*

Pupil 2: You wouldn’t treat someone badly – so you wouldn’t treat a teacher badly. *[School D]*

Evidence here exemplifies how many pupils valued opportunities for participation embedded in experiences of formal learning. Participation was seen as deeply connected to supportive teacher-pupil relationships rooted in mutual respect which appeared to be presumed rather than earned (see Mayes, 2018). As one pupil put it: ‘We all do actually have kind of good relationships with the teachers in here’ *[School C]*. Across the schools, pupils valued approaches that were based on supportive relationships, promoted shared decision-making and were experiential, hands on, and collaborative. This marries with findings from other empirical studies that have shown a correlation between increased democratic participation on the one hand, and better relationships and improved learning, on the other (see De Róiste et al., 2012 for a summary). Rudduck and Flutter (2004) also found that supporting pupil voice in relation to activities in class enhances relationships and learning. Our analysis supports Mayes’ (2018) empirical finding that a felt sense of mutual respect was key to supporting in-class cultures of participatory practice. Pupils valued environments

where mutual respect and reciprocity underpinned rights-based participation in formal learning experiences.

However, most pupils also noted they would have liked more extensive opportunities for taking responsibilities and having greater say in formal curriculum making. They acknowledged that the prescribed curriculum created conditions that worked against taking participation much further. Indeed, it was noticeable that only two of the schools had structures and processes in place that actively involved pupils in giving formal feedback about teaching and learning. In two schools, young people were encouraged to observe teachers' lessons, and regularly gave feedback to staff on what they identified as effective. Other studies have noted that pupil feedback tends to be restricted to 'non-core' school issues (Robinson, 2014). Hence, evidence here shows the importance of attention to the core issues of teaching and learning via this arena.

Arena 2: The wider curriculum

In the 'Wider Curriculum', all schools routinely offered a diverse range of learning experiences such as: volunteering, award schemes, trips, and visiting speakers. The young people identified valued these opportunities to participate in sports events, enterprise activities, fund-raising, and initiatives concerned with developing the young workforce. Pupils also mentioned the value of performances of music, dance, theatre, competitions, and other school or school-community events.

Our data analysis from all seven schools showed that participatory experiences in this arena enhanced and extended those found via the formal academic curriculum. Young people felt they were able to influence school ethos and culture significantly through their participation which also raised self-esteem, engendered confidence, skill learning, and other achievements. We expect these had knock-on effects in terms of supporting 'doing well' (see also Mager & Nowak, 2012 on this link).

Researcher: Does participating in sport and participating in plays and music have an impact on your achievement? ...

Pupil 2: More experience, means more confidence. You're more likely to maybe try different things that you've not tried before. *[School E]*

Self-confidence was also perceived as being built through public speaking opportunities in the wider curriculum.

Pupil: We do a lot of public speakin' in this school. *[School C]*

Pupil 1: It gets you involved with current affairs.

Pupil 2: It makes you more confident 'cause you speak out. *[School B]*

Moreover, experiences of participation in the wider curriculum were valued since these often allowed for more agency on the part of young people.

Pupil: 'Cause you're going from having teachers telling you exactly what to do and just having to work from a book to being told ... And then working it out on your own. *[School A]*

According to pupils, wider curriculum participation provided opportunities to take responsibility and to try things out. As the analysis indicates, young people found that participation in shaping these activities fed into their development as people, enhancing their confidence, skills, and widening their horizons through, for example, managing events such as a sponsored walk. Reciprocally, a number of pupils stated that it was important that the

school acknowledged and valued their participation. Thus, having participatory achievements recognised by the school appeared to boost young people's overall commitment to 'doing well' across all school life.

Whilst teachers commonly played a key role in instigating and catalyzing projects in the wider curriculum, there was much less evidence of opportunities for young people themselves to initiate, or lead wider curriculum activities:

Pupil: They don't push us into it, but they push us to try and be the best that we can be. *[School C]*

Pupil: Like they give us the best benefits we can like they'll look for every single thing that can help us out and try and push us to achieve it ...

Researcher: How do you mean?

Pupil: Like different trips as well. Like they went to Italy ... Stuff like that that's really good for the school as well and a lot of clubs as well like football clubs ... achieving more. *[School B]*

In line with others (Mager & Nowak, 2012), in each of these seven schools, there was evidence that participation in the wider curriculum resulted in improved interpersonal relations with teachers, greater mutual respect, and opportunities for pupils to take responsibility in decision making. According to Menzies (2013), learners identified as disadvantaged may face barriers that derive from a lack of knowledge and the social capital necessary to achieve their aspirations. Evidence here suggests participation in the wider curriculum may distinctively afford disadvantaged pupils opportunities that supports their achievement (see also Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012). Therefore, participation is linked with gains in confidence, improved achievement, which also appear to impact on 'doing well' at school generally.

Arena 3: Decision-making groups

All seven schools had active pupil councils and other active governance groups which usually involved some pupils from each class. Whilst participants valued these governance fora, pupils often wished for greater degrees of involvement and greater impacts. We encountered a variety of pupil-led groups including pupil councils and 'Eco-School' groups. Some groups worked with Parent-Teacher Associations, school grounds and estates teams, and in conjunction with a variety of other school steering committees.

Some decision making in these groups involved more directly shaping school strategy or determining school effectiveness and accountability. Young people described forms of intergenerational decision-making at the level of school strategy as the most valued since power sharing felt 'real', consistent, and sustained, rather than simply being ad hoc. Experiences of power sharing and 'dialogic encounter' were at times characterised by 'creative disagreement' (see Fielding, 2004b), tensions, and struggle for resources:

Pupil 1: It's just ultimately, a' think the decisions lie wi' the teachers ...

Pupil 2: Yeah.

Pupil 1: ... but we still get our own input in it.

Pupil 3: We still get our say like even if they ... might not agree with our opinion but we're certainly entitled to what we think should happen. But whether that happens or not it's just completely up to like ... obviously like the staffin' and the, the money [and resources] in the school.

Pupil 2: Finance.

Pupil 1: But at the end o' the day the decisions do come down to like the Senior Management Team and your Guidance Department and [the Head Teacher]. *[School C]*

As evidence above indicates, most pupils took the view that power would ultimately lie with adults when it came to final decisions. Less commonly, when important school matters were discussed young people's views were taken on board. Such occasions were highly valued.

Pupil: We have a big influence 'cause recently we've been asked to give them feedback on the way that teachers teach and things that are good and things that are bad. *[School F]*

Young people also perceived the work of pupil councils to be more effective when they were more representative:

Pupil: I'd like to think it's that the pupil involvement that the school gives us and responsibility ... not just at the pupil council, it's not just us who gets that. It's every single pupil. *[School F]*

Ironically perhaps, but in line with literature (see Cross et al., 2014), it was in this arena where a significant number of pupils felt their views were unheard, deferred, or routinely ignored as is apparent in the following exchange:

Researcher: And you mentioned disillusionment, I'd like to explore – it's difficult, so take time to think – what is the effect of not being listened to, on you?

Pupil 1: You stop caring.

Pupil 2: Yeah. That's the main thing.

Pupil 4: It's like you're not respected.

Pupil 1: Like, unless you're, like, insanely passionate about something, if you think that every time you're just gonna get overruled about what you say. *[School A]*

Feelings of powerlessness were frequently associated with a sense that adults within the school made the decisions without pupil consultation and involvement:

Pupil: I think a lot of the time there's points where there could be significantly more input from the pupils than there is. *[School A]*

Some wished for greater monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of decision making groups. In the majority of schools, we encountered considerable skepticism with regard to the ability of pupil governance groups to have any meaningful impact on decision making. Consequently, pupils expressed mixed feelings about this:

Pupil 1: Being able to change things. I've been in it a few years. And whenever I've been in it they've changed almost nothing. They don't really have any power at all. *[School A]*

Researcher: What does [the council] do?

Pupil 1: We just go and say stuff, and usually it never happens. *[School C]*

Bearing in mind that we specifically asked pupils to discuss how participation was connected to a sense of 'doing well', our analysis suggests that unless complemented by wider practices, formal governance groups often had little perceived influence. Greater potential came when agendas were less restricted and participation was relational in nature (see Gazit & Perry-Hazan, 2020). In particular, impacts on achievement and attainment were palpable when decision making in formal governance groups was based on mutual intergenerational respect and dialogue and when it centred on school strategy in relation to

learning and teaching (though this was not a widespread experience). Whilst disagreements and tensions were common, valued participation resulted when decision making was strategically oriented, representative, contextualised, and connected to the everyday experience of school life.

Arena 4: Linking with the wider community

The fourth arena – initially a generic category termed ‘other’ – came to be termed ‘linking with the wider community’. All seven schools engaged in reciprocal relations with their wider communities sometimes in ways that were unexpected. Here, opportunities for participation included engagement with other services, parent bodies, carers, and the wider public too. Several pupils spoke about how they valued the opportunity to learn from and with people beyond their school gates.

Pupil 1: I think every department now is actually kind of takin’ that approach.

Pupil 2: [...] It’s not just always about bein’ in school we have visitors all the time doin’ different stuff. [School C]

Students provided examples of valued activities with the community. For example, in one school, located in a public-sector housing scheme, pupils attended the local residents’ association meetings. In another school, pupils raised money for charities or for school trips.

Social media and the internet provided another avenue for linking with communities. Pupils spoke about the use of digital or virtual places where formal curricula and social media provided a conduit for communication, engagement and dialogue.

Researcher: What do you think about schools using social media?

Pupil: I think you get more involved. You feel as if you know a bit more – they’re trying to connect with you a bit more. I don’t think it’s necessary. But it’s quite a good step. [School D]

Respondents appeared to value opportunities to meet and engage with a range of community members at local, national and international levels through different projects.

Pupil: We had a whole campaign to try and win this competition ... And now all that money is going towards restoring that [local community] area, making it into a park to reuse the land ... for the community. [School G]

However, contact with adult community members beyond the school horizon was not a widespread experience for all pupils in these schools. Interestingly, evidence suggests that participatory practices in this arena were not narrowly focused on attainment but worked to *reciprocally* connect school and community to support ‘doing well’. Participation in this arena was driven by a desire to work collaboratively with a wide variety of adult and intergenerational groups to impact local and international communities, extending curriculum making into the public sphere. There have been longstanding calls for parent and community engagement in school pedagogies (Formosinho & Passos, 2019) and, separately, for young people’s greater collaboration with adults to transform society (Mannion, 2009; Percy-Smith, 2015). Our finding is that young people felt *both* of these goals supported activity that advanced young people’s achievement and attainment.

Discussion

Across arenas, the word ‘respect’ was frequently used in accounts. Many initiatives were characterised by a focus on respectful relationships, the valuation and acknowledgement of wider achievement, and the promotion of a school-community ethos. Most pupils regarded these schools as inclusive communities that actively promoted shared visions about the need for young people to grow and flourish as people through relations with each other, with staff and with the community. In no school in this study did pupils suggest there was a narrow focus on attainment. For some, school had become a place with very positive associations. As one put it: ‘School reminds me of warmth and happiness. I enjoy going to school ’cause I see my friends. It’s kind of a home in school’. Even if many young people were less enthusiastic than this about school, there was a general sense that staff were mostly proactive in including pupils in respectful ways, which, in turn, appeared to have significant effects on attainments and achievements.

There were no ‘counter cases’: in no school was the participation agenda ignored but attainment was high given each school’s catchment profile. Whilst there was considerable variation between settings, each school had attuned their approaches to take cognisance of local opportunities and cultural contexts, and all seven schools offered substantial opportunities for participation *within and across all four arenas*. Our analysis suggests that meaningful participation that supported ‘doing well’ was founded upon mutually respectful intergenerational dialogue, shared decision making and mutual respect in child-adult relations.

In line with Keddie (2019), we certainly see how adult-centric schooling persisted, at times diluting participation’s transformative potential. However, not all aspects of these participatory cultures were instrumentalised or controlled to the degree that they lost their impact. Our relational, arenas-based approach has shown empirically how participation was indeed ‘schoolified’ (to use Keddie’s term). Within and across arenas, participation was bounded and contextualised, yet, when based on respectful intergenerational dialogue, it supported young people’s development and learning. After Mannion (2007, 2009) and Moran-Ellis and Süner (2018), we too argue that young people’s participation is generationally interdependent, and is fraught with degrees of tokenism (Lundy, 2018).

Key findings are that, firstly, more valued participation occurred when *respectful intergenerational dialogue* was present, when topics addressed were relevant, and when representative decisions led to impacts. Secondly, valued participatory activities were present *across all four arenas* – governance groups alone are insufficient as a form of participation. Thirdly, pupils’ accounts point to the *significance of many mundane forms of participation about everyday matters in school*. Researchers and policy makers must continue to advance a more nuanced understanding of participation that extends well *beyond the work of pupil councils*.

In tune with studies of ‘odds-beating schools’ (Angelis et al., 2017), we found young people valued *reciprocal and relational trust across school and community life*. As in other studies (Anderson & Graham, 2016; De Róiste et al., 2012), we have shown that participation was associated with improved pupil wellbeing and confidence, and, additionally, we show that it supported learners’ sense of making progress at school. Lastly, this study’s contribution is based on young people’s views: pupils notice and value that teachers set high expectations, and value that they recognise their participatory achievements.

In Scotland, this study has helped shape current guidance on participation (Education Scotland, 2018). The national curriculum making body advances a more relational and dialogical approach to decision making in educational settings within and across the four identified arenas across school life. (See Figure 2 above.) Further research is needed to understand the efficacy of such policy guidance for different educational sectors (for

example, primary or early years), different catchment types and for different pupils (in terms of class, ethnicity and gender).

Conclusion

Fielding (2004b) noted that relational reciprocity and mutuality are a necessary and vital condition for transformative dialogue in education. There was evidence here that pupils and staff shared commitments to – and took responsibility for – the ‘common good’ in schools. Some practices afforded intergenerational dialogue, learning, and, arguably, emergent forms of participatory ‘lived democracy’ (Fielding, 2011, p. 67). There were also glimpses of the struggle for ‘radical collegiality’ (Fielding, 2004b). In these schools, there were identifiable gaps and young people looked for more opportunities to participate more equally with adults. Lastly, it is necessary to recognise that other young people may indeed have held different views from those reported here.

This study suggests a radical, rights-based agenda for young people’s participation *need not be incompatible with advancing young people’s* achievement and attainment. ‘Relations of domination and subjugation [can be] masked within discourses of self-empowerment’ (Raby, 2014, p. 82), but evidence here suggests that when participation is appropriately situated and enacted across school life, young people find it supportive of ‘doing well’.

Pupil participation and children’s rights in education are often too narrowly focused on pupil council membership and non-dialogical consultations and are often absent in discussions of school improvement interventions (see Epstein et al., 2018). This study adds to growing evidence (Covell et al., 2011; De Róiste et al., 2012; Graham et al., 2018; Hannam, 2001) reporting a link between child-adult relations, wider cultures of children’s participation, and achievement / attainment. Fielding (2004a) challenges formal education to ‘create shared practices where we can be attentive and open with one another in ways which encourage our mutual responsibility for the quality of our lives together’ (p. 213). For new forms of democracy to emerge in education, we recommend advancing a relational and situated approach to participation in decision making based on intergenerational dialogue, respectful relationships, power sharing, within and between the four arenas identified.

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