



## GATEWAY DOCUMENT 2.14

# Student Voice

### WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

'Student voice' (or 'pupil voice') has, over the last ten years or so, become the accepted term within schools for efforts to allow and encourage students to participate in dialogue and decisions about their education and other aspects of life within and beyond the school. Probably the most widespread vehicle in schools for student voice is the school council, but other initiatives run from the use of questionnaires to gather student opinions about aspects of school life, to the inclusion of students directly within school decision-making processes such as the appointment of staff.

Two important principles underpin an emphasis on student voice. The first is a belief that young people in education are not merely preparing for adult life, but are living already, and should therefore be able to express their views on issues that affect them. Secondly there is the understanding that students should be more than passive receivers of educational provision. Their perspectives and insights are likely to help to improve the quality of what is provided and should be welcomed. These two points root 'student voice' firmly in the rights and well-being of young people and in the contribution they can make to school improvement.

A major driver in the increasing inclusion of students within school decision-making has been the development, in English schools, of the citizenship curriculum which explicitly encourages students' understanding of, and interest and involvement in, democratic processes. Lessons which feature discussion, and which promote skills of rational argument, advocacy, negotiation and compromise do not in themselves constitute manifestations of student voice unless they feed into a decision-making process. However, such lessons are important in their own right as opportunities for students to develop the skills of democratic participation. The *REsilience* programme is intrinsically an attempt to encourage students to think through important issues in a rational way after being exposed to accurate information and a wide range of viewpoints. As such it both draws on, and develops, skills that are central to student voice initiatives. However, there may also be opportunities for student engagement with the *REsilience* subject matter to have a practical outcome. This might involve influencing school policies, for example in the development of a code of conduct for RE and citizenship lessons, or in feeding into a wider and more public decision making process, for example by putting forward proposals to a local SACRE.

A significant connection between the affirmation of student voice and the *REsilience* programme is the value both put on dialogue and negotiation even when there is no immediate consensus. Where students feel their opinions and responses are heard and

considered seriously, there is more likely to be a climate of inclusion and cohesion rather than one of exclusion and marginalization. In an RE classroom, the decision-making which takes place will not be of the same order as participation in the school council or serving on a committee about use of outdoor space; it may be something as simple as students choosing a question to mark out for further investigation, selected from a range previously identified by the class. Another example might be the opportunity to contribute to the planning of a forthcoming thorny topic where class members were aware of strong feelings and likely disagreement; they might ask the teacher to include opportunities to express their views in writing rather than orally in front of others.

A second less specific but nonetheless widespread understanding of 'student voice' is the belief that all young people should have consistent opportunities to express their own views and perspectives on issues of importance. This broader use of the term is especially relevant in the context of RE in general and *REsilience* in particular. The second attainment target for RE, 'Learning from religion', includes the expectation that students should 'reflect on and respond to their own experiences and learning about religion, communicating their responses'<sup>1</sup> and that they should articulate personal responses to questions of meaning, purpose and truth and ethical issues. The *REsilience* programme gives many opportunities for this both in terms of process (see Gateways section 2) and content (Gateways section 4).

## KEY QUESTIONS

### How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

In establishments where the student voice is taken seriously, the topics covered by *REsilience* are likely to hold few anxieties for teachers in terms of the processes of exploration, questioning and challenge. Where consultation with young people and their regular participation in decision making are part of the fabric of school life, it is more likely that a school will find it relatively easy to work with contentious material and issues. This is because students who feel included and listened to are learning the habit of attending to the ideas of others as well as being reassured that their own views count. If the school actively fosters a climate of dialogue, contentious topics in RE will be much easier for teachers and students alike to handle in the classroom.

A checklist of school contexts in which student voice can be encouraged is included in the publication 'Working Together: Listening to the voices of children and young people' listed in the *Signposts* below.

Such practices may also improve relationships between staff and students. A school in which there is a strong culture of actively seeking the opinions of all members of the school community, and taking these opinions into account within decision-making processes, often develops enhanced relationships and awareness of, and increased respect for, a wide range of views. When students are able to express opinions within lessons, about lessons, and about the wider school community, the school is more likely to have motivated students.

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<sup>1</sup> *Non statutory national framework for religious education*, DfES and QCA, 2004.

## What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

Students may be reluctant to express their ideas openly for fear of not being taken seriously or of being mocked or subjected to hostility outside the lesson. If there is a topic (for example same-sex relationships) where students may take very strongly oppositional positions, some young people may be reluctant to speak their minds publicly.

Another particular challenge is that a teacher of RE may encounter so many different classes and pupils in the course of a school week that it is difficult for him or her to know the students well enough to anticipate potential fears or anxieties sensitively.

## How can teachers address such challenges?

The ideal RE classroom is a place of safety where students feel able to speak about their most profound beliefs, concerns and insights without fear of ridicule or rejection. The foundation stone for this is the teacher's knowledge of the young people in the class. This may seem like a counsel of perfection for a teacher who encounters 300 or more different students in a week, but regular opportunities for young people to express their personal views will in fact help their teacher to know them as individuals.

To achieve a feeling that the RE classroom being a place of safety and trust, teachers will need to include a variety of approaches for obtaining students' views, adapting where necessary to suit students' age and confidence in reading, writing and speaking. The culture of the classroom needs to be such that all voices can be heard; consultation should not simply favour the more articulate. The use of a variety of means for hearing student voices will facilitate this (for example, written responses, questionnaires, anonymised comment and small group conversation as well as whole class discussion). Small group exploration of an issue will allow all students a voice, but not one that needs to be given publicly in front of the whole class. Students and teachers alike may feel more comfortable if there is agreement on ground rules for discussion and response to the views of others, including expectations about respect for the right of each individual to be heard and taken seriously.

These are not the central concerns of 'student voice' in terms of representation and decision making but they are important in terms of creating the climate of respectful interaction which is a necessary foundation for worthwhile consultation and effective giving of feedback. Students can be encouraged to use 'owning and grounding' language, making it clear when they are speaking for themselves and when they feel they are representing the views of a larger group (their religious community, their gender, their class, young people in general and so on).

It should be relatively easy for teachers of RE compared with those of other subjects to enable students to connect a topic to their own experience and to see its relevance for them. Attention to attainment target 2 (Learning from religion) throughout the RE curriculum helps young people to develop the ability to talk about things that matter to them in a way that also takes into account the feelings and beliefs of others. They will understand the process of 'looking inwards, looking outwards' that is at the heart of good RE, and will have some years of practice in reflecting on the meaning or significance of issues under discussion in relation to their own beliefs.

Good RE teaching encourages pupils to raise questions about contentious issues. The more confident teachers feel, in dealing with these questions in the classroom, the more likely it is that such study will lead to ignorance being dispelled and barriers between

communities removed. The recent Ofsted report on religious education, *Transforming Religious Education* (2010), states that 'RE plays a major role in helping pupils understand diversity and develop respect for the beliefs and cultures of others.' ( p5)

## NEXT STEPS

### Signposts for further reading

Thomson, P and Holdsworth, R (2003) Theorising change in the educational 'field': re-readings of 'student participation' projects. *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 6 (4) 371–391

Macbeath, J, Demetriou, H, Rudduck, J, Myers, K (2003) *Consulting Pupils : A Toolkit for Teachers*. Cambridge, Pearson Publishing

### Signposts for further resources

<http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/8399/1/DCSF-00410-2008.pdf> The most recent government guidance is '*Working Together. Listening to the voices of children and young people*' (2008) which can be downloaded from the above link. Very useful checklist for effective participation as well as a list of websites with relevant research, case studies and organizations with an interest in pupil voice.

<http://www.pupil-voice.org.uk/background.html> University of Nottingham website on research and projects related to pupil voice.

<http://www.consultingpupils.co.uk> " [www.consultingpupils.co.uk](http://www.consultingpupils.co.uk) Jean Rudduck's website with refs to her work and that of people she's worked with

<http://www.citizenshipfoundation.org.uk/> Still there, still useful – lots of examples

<http://www.teachersmedia.co.uk/videos/action-pupil-video-look-what-you-ve-started>

The above two programmes illustrate how the schools involved have implemented student dialogue and the benefits this has brought.

### Signposts for further action

The school may wish to work at an inter school level with other establishments which have similar foci from their *REsilience* action plans.