INVOLVING PUPILS WITH COMPLEX NEEDS IN SCHOOL COUNCIL

Ideas for effective practice

Nicola Grove

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INTRODUCTION

By giving them control over small things, it helps with the big decisions.The more empowered they are here, the more they will be empowered to take the big decisions in their lives. They may not get very far (in school council) but they can be part of the decision making process. Class Teacher, 2013

This guide is based on a small action research project carried out at Three Ways School in Bath, an all age, mixed ability special school who were taking part in a programme to embed Storysharing across the school. The ideas developed through working with teachers and pupils who took part, especially Stacy Chalmers who facilitated and managed the School Council. The article was originally published by Special Children in 2014.

School Councils are defined as a formal group of pupils, elected by their peers, to represent them and their views https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-councils-and-pupil-participation#toc-0
Through the council, pupils are able to have a voice on matters that interest and concern them. The council can also provide a valuable preparation for citizenship when pupils leave the school for the wider world. School councils have been viewed as important elements in education by both Ofsted and by Government[1], although there is little information now online (2022) and very few research articles available.

First steps

The first thing to do is to take some time looking at how your school council works now. How often does it meet? How are pupils elected?

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[1] however, do read this thoughtprovoking article on the dangers of tokenism…
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01596306.2018.1488242

How broad is the representation? What are the differences between how it works with younger and older pupils? What preparation goes into each meeting?

Next, sit in (by invitation of course) and observe the process, looking at how members of the council are included, in discussion and voting, the information provided (easy read? film? Photos?); how decisions are presented, how votes are taken.

What happens as a result of the vote? Does the school management take notice? How are decisions conveyed back to all pupils? Where are records kept and are they accessible?

You also need to find out how pupils view the council. What do pupils understand about the school council? Does it matter to them?

Are there some obvious things that pupils, members of the council, staff and families would like to see happening at school council? What are the best things that should be kept? What needs to change?

The Challenges

It is of course vitally important that ALL pupils are represented and can contribute to the decisions that are made by the council. However, there is no doubt that there are real challenges when we try to meet the needs of young people who have severe and complex needs, and involve them in discussions. The difficulties they (and you!) face include the following:-

- Understanding is better for sensory, concrete, simple and immediate information; discussion involving abstract ideas or about future events is difficult.

- Hearing, visual, comprehension, memory and attention difficulties make it hard to follow a discussion involving many voices, and which lasts for a long period.

- Strong emotions and reactions mean that disagreements or alternative views can provoke negative responses.

- Pupils functioning at an early, egocentric level of development, or with social communication difficulties, may not understand the perspective of other people – or even that others have a different perspective.

Other issues that staff mentioned were:-

- Difficult to engage the whole class when there is a very broad range of ability.
- Needs more time to make and use the resources which would enable nonverbal pupils to take part: objects of reference, pictures/photos.
- Important to get the pupils to understand and keep them on "the same page"
- Some pupils need a lot of encouragement, they may be copying others, without really understanding what is going on.
- Some pupils have got used to non-participation, and so sitting back is more familiar.
- Puplls may drift off onto their own topics, need to be kept on track.

There are no perfect solutions, and no single approach that fits everyone – as with all teaching, it is a matter of being creative, having a range of options, and considering the learning styles, personality and preferences of individuals. But there do seem to be some strategies that are effective, and equally, some pitfalls to avoid. During the school year 2012-13, we experimented with different approaches, and observed how staff tackled the task of class discussion around the school council agenda, how representatives were briefed, and how they were supported to give feedback to the class. The following practical ideas are based on these experiences.

Our working principle for involving pupils is that:-
They may not be able to do or understand everything – but they can all be enabled to do/understand something[2].

The trick is to find out what that something is!

Participation in the council also works in different ways. Even if a pupil cannot grasp the issue, the fact that they are present in the discussion, and their experience is represented, means that their peer group start to consider their needs. This may be just as important as being able to advocate for yourself.

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[2] As some of you may recognise, this is the principle of "partial participation" fundamental to Storysharing® https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/154079699101600405

SCHOOL COUNCI PROJECT FINDINGS:

The process

There is one meeting per term for an hour, towards the end of the day.

Before the council meets, agenda items are sent out in advance, and time is set aside for the issues on the agenda to be explained and discussed with each class.

Ideas are gathered, and if necessary, a vote is taken.

The class representative (councillor) takes these ideas and decisions to the meeting.

It is important that the representatives understand that the job is about presenting the views of the class, not their own views.

After the council, the minutes are circulated and the representative shares these with the class. Sometimes, an issue needs to be revisited at the next meeting.

Voting

The practice of voting and majority views is fundamental to the way a democracy functions[3]. The ballot can be secret – everyone writes down what they want on their own (or tells someone to do it for them) and the votes are then counted, or can be done on a show of hands. Voting is a good example of how understanding comes not primarily through explanations, but by doing. The more that pupils can experience taking a vote, the more likely they are to participate actively and come to understand what is involved.

We can break down the concept into the following steps:-

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[3] It should be stated here that there are other ways of decision making: a concensus approach as practised by Quakers and the Occupy movement, for example, means that no decision is taken until everyone is in agreement.

- There is a choice to be made.

- You can make a choice.

- You can say yes, no, or don't know/don't want to choose

- Everyone has their say

- We count up how many people have made each choice.

- The one with the most people choosing wins.

There are lots of opportunities to vote in class about issues that come up; we recommend regular practice with small, fun choices.

Here are some ideas for introducing the idea of choice and voting for pupils who would find it hard to understand an explanation. Note also that saying **yes** and saying **no** or **don't know**, are really important communication goals for many of our pupils, so these activities will feed into learning goals. Likewise the concept of majority/more/less/ can be reinforced in Maths and Science.

1. *Voting cards:*   YES   NO   DON'T KNOW
A set of these cards is provided for each class. It's helpful if everyone uses them to provide a really good model.

2. *Preparation for expressing yes and no.* In one class smells and tastes were used to get the pupils used to the cards, voting and being ok with saying no. This certainly got through to the class rep, who said "you can say no", and enabled a profoundly Deaf student to understand the meaning of refusal.

It's really important when you are practising to make sure the choices are real. So use smells that are really disgusting, or a colour that is grey and boring, or music that is very dull to contrast with lovely

smells, bright colours and fun music. This way you will be sure to encourage pupils in saying no.

Drama: Exaggerate the yes and no with body language, signs, and intonation. Dramatise saying **yes** and saying **no** and **don't know.**

Photos: Make a note of how pupils who communicate nonverbally express agreement/positive choice and refusal/denial in other settings. Take photographs and put them up on the wall. This will help you to "read" the pupils' reactions.

Jenny says YES!!   Ravendra says NO!!

3. *Mobile voting:* getting up and physically moving from one place to another (marked by your YES, NO, Don't KNOW cards)
This really helps to give a sense of what majority voting means.
Count the numbers of people at each location.

Consistent language. Keep your language the same with phrases like.
3 people said yes
7 people said no
7 is more than 3
So this class says NO.

Alternatives to voting
Voting is of course majority rule, but this can lead to minorities feeling very devalued and excluded.
A different way of making decisions is through consensus where discussion continues until people feel that a good choice has been made for everyone. Quakers use this method, as did the Occupy movement. But it can take a long time.

Some other approaches can be found here

http://meetingsift.com/5-useful-methods-for-group-decision-making/

Looking for ways that minority views can be valued is very important, perhaps by recording them, and by agreeing to review the decision later.

Presenting the question

Sometimes the question at issue is quite simple. For example, deciding what to do for a money raising fun day for charity involved showing some photos of the options (eg. Throwing a wet sponge at a teacher; covering a picture with penny coins) – and these options could also be acted out.

However, other questions are more difficult, and here the art is to present them at different levels of complexity. The model we used was based on "Blank levels"[4] .

- Level 4 questions

Abstract – hypothetical questions, if –then. relate to the future and to general concepts
For pupils who use abstract language and can clearly understand concepts at an abstract level.

- Level 3 questions

How, when, why questions
For pupils who can answer questions about the past or future, and understand the connections between cause and effect. Make basic predictions, generalise and take on other roles.

- Level 2 questions

What, who, where, what happens? Involves some understanding of how things go together, are the same and different,

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[4] Marion Blank developed 4 levels of questioning from concrete to abstract https://planningwithkids.com/2010/03/18/blanks-levels-of-questioning-stimulating-childrens-language-development/

Single word – present alternatives:
For pupils who can point or gaze reliably to pictures, or use single words or signs, or reliably answer with yes or no when asked what they would like.

- Level 1b

Understand and use language related to the present immediate and concrete experience: what is this? Is this a…?

1a. provide a sensory or concrete experience and read the student's reactions.
For pupils who communicate using body language only, who may understand a few words in context, but mostly react to tone of voice, and who need object cues to understand what is going to happen.

So for each question we need to break down the issue so that we can present the right level of information.

During the project our continuing topic of discussion was:

How can we make the dining hall a nice place to be when we are eating lunch?

Stacking chairs is really noisy and that upsets many pupils.

Should we have a rota or a volunteer system for staying behind to stack the chairs.?

At Level 4, pupils were able to understand the concept of rota and volunteers, and the implications of choosing one or another.

At Level 3, pupils could understand volunteers as "we choose to help by stacking the chairs" and rota as " we all have to take turns, we don't have a choice".

At Level 2, pupils were understanding: noisy/quiet dining room; noisy/ quiet actions; "stacking chairs is noisy"; "who will help?" (given photos to choose; and being shown the act of chair stacking.

At Level 1 pupils could react to the noise of chair stacking and indicate that they preferred quiet to noisy. Here the best way was to actually do some banging around with chairs, then act out waiting and saying shh.

Supporting Discussion

In discussion, pupils are invited to communicate their views and reactions to the topic. As well as breaking down the topic so that you can present it at the 4 levels (which may not be necessary in every class), here are some of the effective ways that staff enabled pupils to join in.

1. *Sit in a semicircle*. This arrangement felt more natural than sitting in lines, and meant that pupils with hearing impairments could see and react to what others were saying (facing the front meant that they could not hear their friends who were behind them, it also meant they focused a lot on the teacher).

2. *Use powerpoint presentation and props* (get these ready beforehand if you can!). It will help if you can circulate powerpoints with the questions broken down at the different levels in good time for class discussions.

3. *Use a system for taking turns in discussion* – eg a talking stick.

4. *Break up into small groups*. This is really helpful for maintaining attention and meant that all pupils had an opportunity to join in. Start all together, explain the issue, ask the question(s) then have a group discussion then feed back.

5. Use of photographs and film of the dining hall and the dining experience

Broken down into sections; queuing up, getting dinner, sitting down and eating, tidying up. This really engaged pupils' attention, especially good for deaf pupils. They related to what they saw, and it kept them on track.

6. Location visit

Going into the dining hall as a class meant that pupils could look round and consider the questions in situ. Lots of ideas were sparked off.

7. Have the discussion in situ: in this case actually at the dining table

8. Writing up on board using yellow on black; enabled visually impaired pupils who could read to see clearly what was written up.

9. Presenting alternatives

Offering alternatives; eg: pop music **or** calm music, with discussion about what each might mean. This helped pupils to focus down on manageable alternatives.

10. Selecting one question/topic for each person .

This worked especially well for pupils with complex needs, meaning that they could just make a choice of one idea to put forward.

11. Tell your story: Use your own experience:

Bring in the direct experience of pupils – for example, how the noise in the hall affects someone who is likely to go into spasm. Telling the story is a particularly good way for pupils with profound and complex needs to represent themselves.

Briefing the Class Representative

Reports can be written in easy read, symbols or presented with photographs for the representative to share with the class. reports of Encourage reps to think about the views of their classmates who are nonverbal – they could bring a photo or an object, or a short piece of film (eg on an ipad) to demonstrate a reaction or opinion.

If your representative communicates nonverbally or in sign language, they will probably need to be supported in the council. It's essential to take time beforehand to talk through the agenda and the report with the student so they are well prepared.

During the council itself, make sure that others do make space and time for this representative to join in. They may not be able to understand and follow everything, so it's a good idea to ask the council chair to summarise at key points.

AND LASTLY…. TRY TO AVOID….

Rushing the preparation and discussion;. Trying to fit it in at the last minute creates lots of anxieties. Make sure the dates are with you in good time and that you have the agenda and powerpoints well before the meeting. If necessary, just choose one key issue.

Do let us know if this guide is helpful!

Based on
Grove, N & Chalmers, S. (2014) Come on feel the noise! Or, who will stack the chairs?: a year in the life of a special school council. *Special Children, 217 ,* 18-19.