North Yorkshire County Council
Children and Young People's Service

Case study: Student Voice as a School Improvement Tool
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Case study overview

An exploration of the steps we have taken to harness Student Voice and used it to inform whole school improvement through the creation of a Student Parliament.

School context

Graham School is a larger than average secondary school in the coastal town of Scarborough. It is split over two sites; a Lower School for Years 7 & 8 and an Upper School for Years 9, 10 & 11. There are currently 1364 students on role and 43% of those are Pupil Premium.

What was the issue/challenge?

In December 2013 an Ofsted inspection team found Graham School to be 'inadequate' in all four categories and the school was placed in 'special measures'. In January 2014 a new Headteacher took up post and developed a post-often plan centred on improving teaching and learning. A major part of the improvement plan was harnessing the views of students to inform our decision making process.

One of the Assistant Headteachers was given responsibility for Voice across a variety of contexts; students, parents and the local community. The Voice Improvement Plan identified the following projected outcomes:

- Engage students through voice work to encourage them to become active participants who contribute to the life of the wider school community.
- Develop student leadership to ensure that students have an impact on school improvement in a wide variety of contexts. E.g. behaviour, learning, environment.

Research shows that Student Voice work in schools can change attitudes to learning as students feel that they are having an impact on improvements being made. The result in increased student engagement, which is an issue that faced Graham School and was identified in the Ofsted report (see Fig 1).

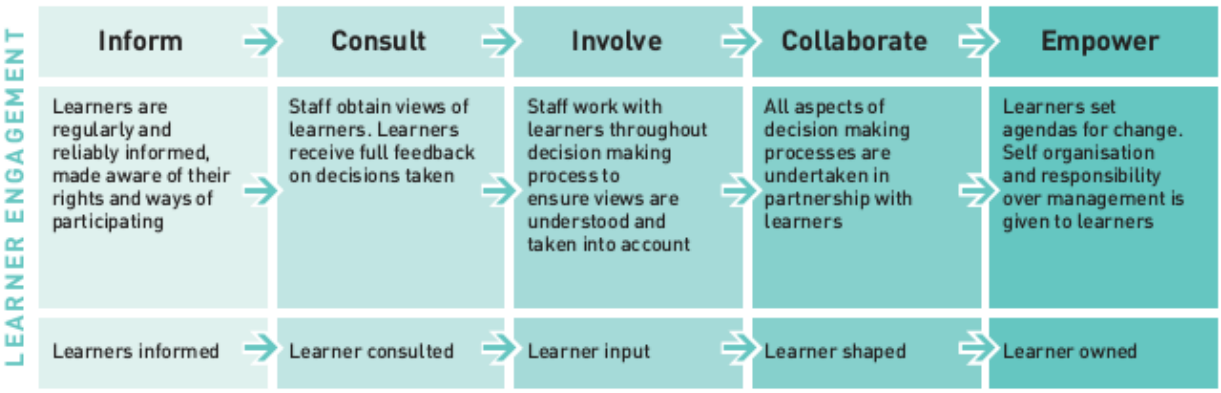

Fig 1: 'Learner Engagement' model - NFER Future Lab

A positive attitude to learning results in increased levels of achievement – fact. That's why one of our main priorities at Graham School was to make improvements to students' attitudes to school through improving teaching and making learning more engaging. The Voice Improvement plan identified how we were going to use Student Voice to help us achieve this.

What did we do?

The timescale for making improvements to teaching and learning was determined by the HMI monitoring visit when, as a school in special measures, we would be expected to have shown rapid progress towards our improvement priorities. This gave us six to eight weeks from Christmas.

Harnessing Student Voice

We began by auditing students' views of teaching and learning across the school and launched a student voice survey, which was completed by around 70% of the student body during tutor time. The survey asked six questions in each of four categories; teaching, learning, progress and marking and feedback. The students were asked to complete the survey honestly and anonymously. The form tutors were given instructions to help their tutees to complete the survey and the senior leadership team visited tutor groups to support with the completion of the survey.

The students responded very well and results were gathered within a week. The results provided some rich data that we could use straight away to help us redefine teaching and learning in our school. A report was produced for Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 and presented to the staff at a teacher training day by a group of students and the Assistant Headteacher, Voice. Faculties of subject areas met to write their own Voice Improvement Plan for their department using the results of the survey and a number of auditing tools and resources made available by the Local Authority Each department elected a Voice Rep who met with focus groups to 'drill down' into the responses in more detail. They used a questionnaire sheet to interview a group of students which included differing:

- Year groups (Ys 7-11)
- Ability ranges (gifted and talented, middle ability, lower ability)
- Educational needs (SEN, BESD)
- Social backgrounds (pupil premium, looked after children, at risk)

The results of the survey and the action plans resulting from it were then shared to all stakeholders: to the school governors at the Student Welfare Committee, to parents at the Parent Focus Group, to students during assemblies.

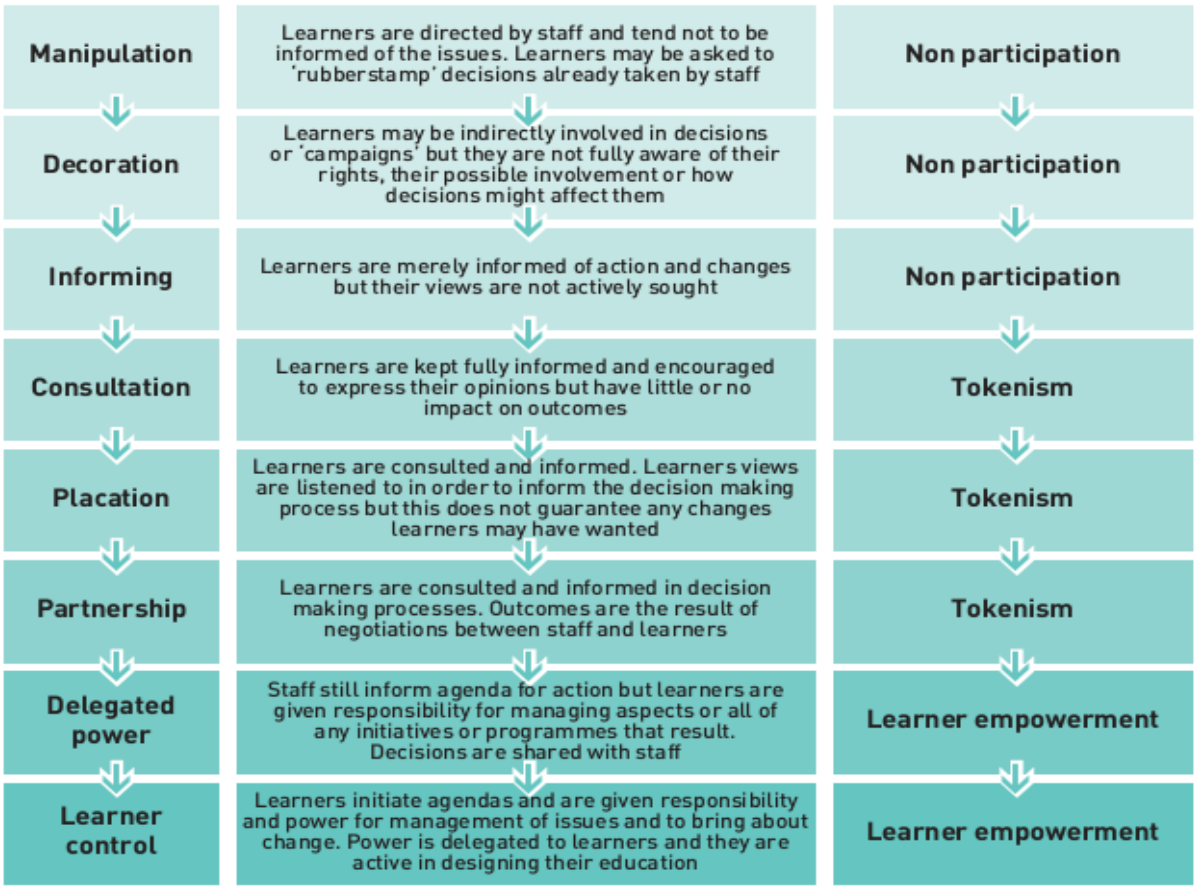

Fig 2: The Journey to Learner Empowerment: NFER Future Lab

Providing Student Leadership Opportunities

Graham School had before Christmas a traditional School Council with form reps who met to discuss a 'hot topic' each week. An audit of this showed that the Student Council members were un-challenged and, although their views were sought, they had little or no impact on whole school improvement as they weren't given the opportunity to make or contribute to decisions that contributed to change in school. The resulting behaviour of the school council was tokenism and where we wanted to be was empowerment (see Fig 2).

The first change that the Assistant Headteacher made to the Council was to restructure so that the two councils that were formed for Lower School and Upper School became one group operating across the whole school. This had an impact straight away as the Year 11 Officers and Year 8 Officers worked together and were able to look at issues facing students across the whole rather than individual sites.

The School Council with the Assistant Headteacher then took part in some Logo Visual Thinking, which encouraged them to think about all of the issues facing the school that they would like to discuss and what might be a more effective way of doing this. They came up with the idea of creating committees to discuss various different areas of whole school improvement.

Logo Visual Thinking with the School Council

The School Officers wanted to make the School Council more accessible to a wider group of students and so decided to rebrand it as the Student Parliament. Lead by a Student Leadership Team made up of the Head and Deputy Head Boys and Girls from Upper and Lower schools, the students then created their own structure that showed how they were going to address each area of school improvement and have representation from a range of student groups on the parliament (see Figs 3 & 4). Committee groups include teaching and learning, behaviour and safety, social events, environment for learning, healthy lifestyles and community liaison. Application forms were sent to all students with a letter inviting them to be a part of the Student Parliament. Applicants were shortlisted by the Student Leadership Team and interviews were held to fill positions on the most popular committees.

Once the committees all had representative sitting on them the students developed a meetings schedule so that each committee meets every fortnight followed by a Student Leadership Team meeting. Feedback points when they would meet the senior leadership team and governing body have also been built in to the meetings schedule. They also discussed how best to ensure that their voices were heard and opinions acted upon, having a link teacher working with each committee.

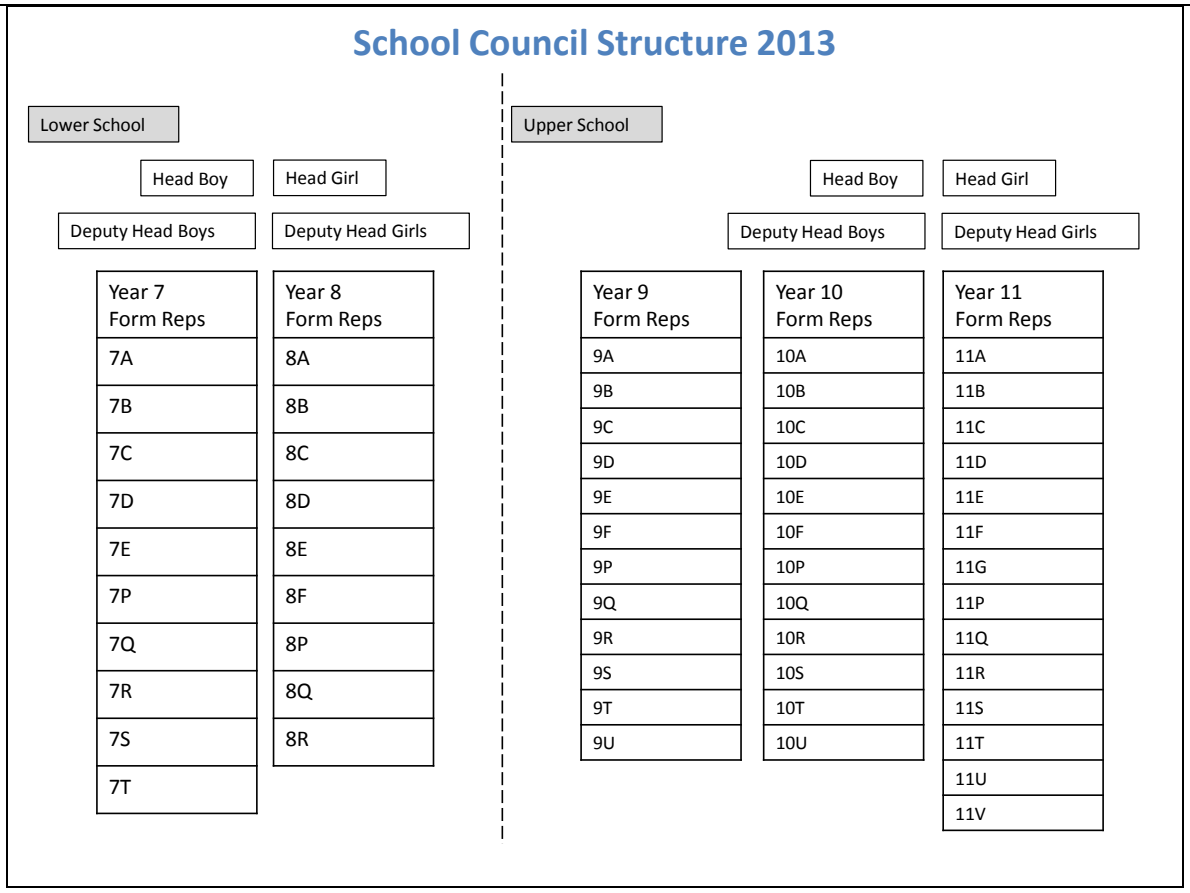

Fig 3: School Council Structure (2013) – Graham School

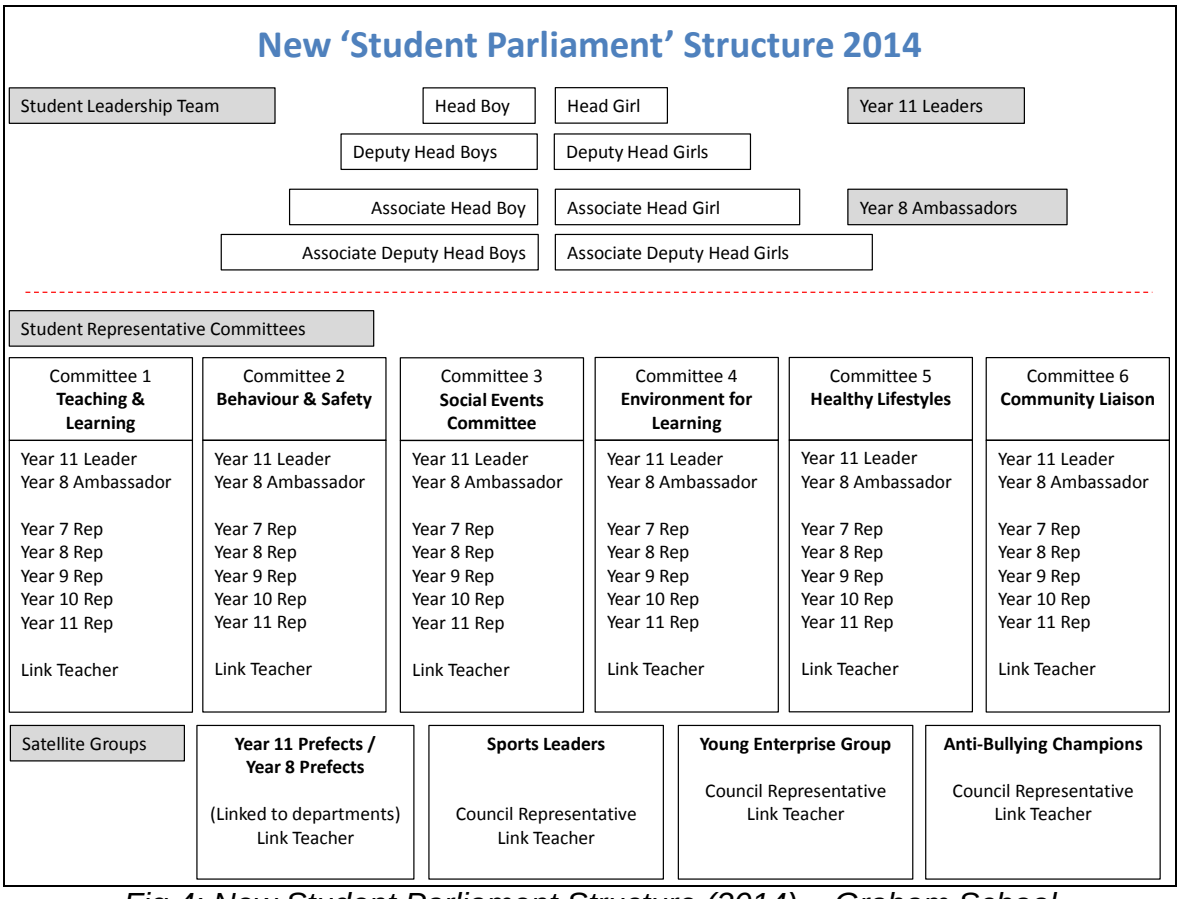

Fig 4: New Student Parliament Structure (2014) – Graham School

The Student Parliament has introduced suggestion boxes around both school sites and committees will regularly seek the voice of the wider school through the comments boxes. One of the most important elements of student voice is feeding back to the student body to ensure that they can see the impact of their actions and contributions. The Student Leadership Team has now got a regular assembly slot to keep students updated of their contributions to whole school improvement. We are currently looking into how we may make good use of social media and newsletters to assist in feeding back to students.

Support from Our Improvement Partner
Throughout the process of redefining the Student Parliament we have been supported by Phoenix Education who run www.studentvoice.co.uk

We have paid a small subscription fee to become a recognised Student Voice school and have made use of access to an audit tool called 'Questions for Change', which gathers opinion from students, staff, governors and parents on the democratic structure within your school. This then leads to a report which can be used to plan improvement.

Phoenix Education visited our school to train the Student Leadership Team and helped us to restructure our Student Parliament. They also took part in the whole staff training day. Since then our Student Leadership Team have visited Phoenix Education in London for another training session and have been invited to the National Student Voice Conference in July to lead a workshop on the work that we have done so far.

Involving Students in Decision Making
Another major issue affecting Graham School, as it does many schools placed in a category, is recruitment. Since January, students have been involved in all appointments made to the school through either touring and talking to candidates or, in the case of middle and senior leadership positions, on a student interview panel.

Students who sit on a panel write their own questions and take part in a very formal process which includes interviewing, scoring and feeding back to the SLT their opinions of candidates' suitability for post. In all cases so far the recommendations from the student panels have contributed to the appointment of their preferred candidate.

What was the impact?

The main impact that we have seen so far has been a change in the attitudes to school from the group of students who have been involved in the Student Parliament. They have become 'Influencing Learners' (see Fig 5) who are interested in school improvement and can see the benefits of talking about problems with teaching and learning and how it can be improved. They want to understand frameworks and policies. They want to organise things and take responsibility. They want to help other students.

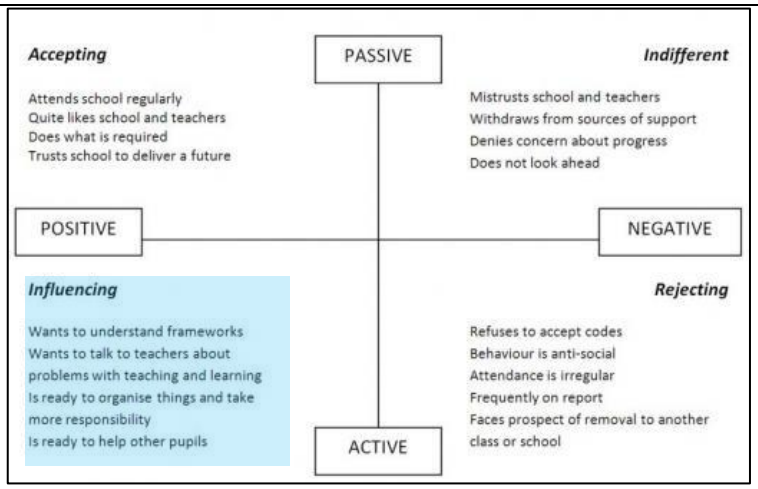

Fig 5: What Type of Learner Do We Want? - Rudduck & Flutter, 2004

We have also seen students across the school talking about teaching and learning and how it can be improved to help them. This is a huge change in attitudes since December and shows an increased awareness and focus on teaching and learning not only by school leaders and teachers but also by the students.

A greater cross section of the student body are now involved in student voice and leadership activities (G&T, PP, SEN, BESD etc.) This will result in increased engagement in school.

All staff now have an awareness of how Student Voice can be used to inform whole school improvement and there has been a buy in from all subject areas to develop a Voice Improvement Plan.

What next?

If we can achieve this in six weeks with a small group of students involved what will we be able to achieve in a year with a major proportion of students involved? It is an exciting time for Graham School.

The next steps are:

- Continue to develop the Student Parliament and increase the number of opportunities available to students to become leaders as this has a huge impact on engagement.
- Repeat the Student Voice survey at the end of the summer term to gauge what has improved and where we still need to complete work.
- Train students to become observers of lessons so that they can provide feedback to teachers on what could be improved within the classroom.
- Provide CPD opportunities for more staff to be involved in the use of student voice to inform whole school improvement.
- Use the Parent Focus Group to seek similar improvements from parents and carers.
- Build links with the local community and seek their voice to rebuild confidence sine the Ofsted inspection.

The long term aim is for all students to have been involved in some form of student voice activity by the time they leave Lower School and for them to have been involved in some form of student leadership during their time at Upper School.

What would you do differently if you were doing it again?

Started much earlier! Any school not harnessing the views of students should not under estimate the impact that it can have.

Don’t let your school council be a tokenistic group – harness their views and use their thoughts and opinions to drive improvement throughout your school.