



E-CONSULTATION WITH PUPILS – A PILOT STUDY

Key Findings

- ◆ Participation in e-consultation has the potential to provide genuine opportunities for children to engage with government on policy matters.
- ◆ E-consultation, based on a children's rights perspective, has the potential to provide children with a *safe and inclusive space* in which to *form and express* their own views and can convince children that their views will be *taken seriously*, thereby providing policy makers with an approach to consultation with young people which is compliant with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- ◆ E-consultation with children is particularly effective when its design is informed by a children's rights perspective and it involves children in all stages of the consultation process.
- ◆ Participation in e-consultation has a number of educational benefits: skills development, particularly in the context of the 'communication' aspect of

ICT; learning *about* citizenship issues such as aspects of the work of government; learning *for* citizenship by providing specific opportunities for pupils to take action on these issues by expressing their views directly to government.

- ◆ The study demonstrates the potential for the use of e-consultation as an internal mechanism for schools to consult with pupils on a range of pastoral and curriculum issues.
- ◆ The three e-consultation mechanisms piloted in the study (survey, chat room, storyboard) are each feasible in terms of design, maintenance and to some extent in terms of ease of analysis of data.
- ◆ In terms of classroom use, the mechanisms are accessible to the majority of pupils with respect to age appropriateness and the literacy level and ICT skills required by the pupils to complete the activities.
- ◆ All of the mechanisms offer potential to effectively engage children in consultation.

INTRODUCTION

1. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child requires government to ensure that children's views are given due weight in all matters affecting them insofar as this is compatible with the child's age and maturity. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has emphasised that, not only does this apply to children's participation in policy formation, but that government must develop direct relationships with children and not just rely on children's organisations to represent their views. In addition, the implementation of section 75(1) of the Northern Ireland Act, which places public bodies under an obligation to have regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity under a number of headings including "age", requires policy makers to consult with those who might be affected by proposed initiatives, including children. Consultation with children on educational policy is therefore not just a matter of good practice but a legal requirement which binds the public bodies which implement policy initiatives in education.

2. The design of the study was informed by a framework for analysis which is intended to provide a workable but legally-sound means of evaluating the extent to which children's participation in decision-making is compliant with Article 12 and other relevant provisions of the UNCRC. This model (Lundy, 2007, forthcoming) provides a framework for critiquing children's engagement in policy development based on the two key elements of Article 12: (a) children's right to express their views and (b) children's right to have their views given due weight. It has four key elements:
 - SPACE: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view
 - VOICE: Children must be facilitated to form and express their views
 - AUDIENCE: The view must be listened to
 - INFLUENCE: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate

This particular framing of the children's rights dimension informed the approach taken to the design of the e-consultation mechanisms, the research strategy and the analysis of the findings.

3. The imminent implementation of the Revised Curriculum presents both an impetus and opportunity for developing creative approaches to consulting with children and young people in schools in the context of citizenship education. The citizenship curriculum in Northern Ireland (as 'Local and Global Citizenship' in the post-primary curriculum and within the learning area 'Personal Development and Mutual Understanding' in the primary curriculum) places a strong emphasis on children as citizens *now* not citizens in the 'waiting', an approach which necessitates providing them with opportunities to express their views on matters affecting them and their society (Holden and Clough, 1998). The strong emphasis in the citizenship curriculum on human rights in general and children's rights in particular demands that children be given opportunities to not only learn about their rights but to learn within a rights compliant environment. The principles of effective citizenship education therefore would anticipate that schools, through the curriculum and in their daily operation, should consider mechanisms by which they could give effect to Article 12, as outlined above.
4. The Revised Curriculum for Northern Ireland further requires that young people be given opportunity to develop skills through learning experiences which are media rich, skills integrated, active and hands on and which take account of different learning styles. In sum the current context is ideal for developing an approach to consultation with children which will not only fulfil obligations placed on government but also enhance learning for citizenship and the development of transferable skills. Therefore this project sought to develop a children's rights compliant approach to e-consultation which has the added benefit of providing significant learning opportunities for pupils.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

5. The aim of the project was to pilot three e-consultation mechanisms (a survey, a chat facility, a storyboard interactive activity) with young people in order to:
 - i) provide an evidence base for the development of an effective e-consultation strategy for the Department of Education and other educational policy makers;

- ii) develop mechanisms for schools to incorporate active citizenship into the curriculum by providing pupils with real opportunities to shape policy;
- iii) identify opportunities for the enhancement of pupil key skills in relation to communication, ICT, managing information and self-management through e-consultation.

MAIN FINDINGS

The Potential of E-Consultation: The Children's Rights Dimension

6. Participation in e-consultation has the potential to provide genuine opportunities for children to engage with government on policy matters. All participants agreed that the mechanisms they piloted provided good opportunities to express views *freely*.
7. E-consultation in general provides a very effective way to *engage* children in policy consultations: through facilitating direct contact between children and government; through employing a medium which children clearly enjoy using; through ensuring anonymity. In particular, a model for e-consultation based on a children's rights perspective, such as the models piloted in this study, ensures that such consultations are also compliant with children's rights.
8. Such e-consultation mechanisms have the potential to provide children with a *safe and inclusive space* in which to *form and express* their own views. First, using other children's views in the mechanisms assisted children in forming views on issues they may not have considered before. Secondly, the process by which the mechanisms were developed ensured that they used language which the children understood. Furthermore, e-consultation mechanisms can be tailored to meet the particular needs of individual children by appealing to a range of learning styles and through adaptations such as voice files, larger font etc. for children with special educational needs. Also since all schools have ICT facilities, all children, through schools, have access to the consultation mechanism.

9. E-consultation, developed using a children's rights perspective, can convince children that their views will be *taken seriously*. The children and teachers who participated in the study considered that the direct contact with government itself would help convince children that their views would be given due weight. The children in particular were overwhelmingly positive when asked whether they thought that their views would be taken seriously by government.
10. The study underlines the need to be mindful that children have a right (not a duty) to express their views and as such their participation must always be on a voluntary basis. Any 'learning potential' of e-consultation, discussed below, should therefore take cognisance of this point.

The Potential of E-Consultation: The Educational Benefits

11. E-consultation in general provides opportunities for skills development. The teachers in the study indicated an appreciation of any opportunity to use ICT in the classroom but in particular identified e-consultation as a safe means of developing the use of ICT in the context of 'communication', an aspect of ICT use in primary schools which is somewhat limited. Pupils similarly indicated that this had been a new learning experience for them.
12. Participation in e-consultation provides an opportunity for children to learn *about* citizenship issues such as aspects of the work of government and to discover with which issues affecting them government are currently engaged. In addition it assists learning *for* citizenship by providing specific opportunities for pupils to take action on these issues by expressing their views directly to government.
13. The study demonstrates the potential for the use of e-consultation as an internal mechanism for schools to consult with pupils on a range of pastoral and curriculum issues.
14. The study also indicates a number of specific educational benefits associated with an e-consultation strategy based on a children's rights perspective. First, the mechanisms designed for this project provided pupils with opportunities to process a range of views from outside their own experience. Secondly, teachers and pupils identified that the approach taken illustrated to the children that they 'had rights'.

15. In sum the study demonstrates the potential for e-consultation to provide opportunities for development of cross-curricular skills, and indicates possibilities for e-consultation to be integrated appropriately into the curriculum as a mechanism whereby children can extend their knowledge of relevant citizenship issues and develop skills for active citizen participation. However such curriculum based activities need to operate within the principle of voluntary participation outlined above.

Developing an effective e-consultation strategy

16. E-consultation with children is particularly effective when its design is informed by a children's rights perspective and it involves children in all stages of the consultation process (see Appendix 1). The benefits of involving children in the entire process were accrued with relatively little additional cost in terms of time.
17. The three e-consultation mechanisms piloted in the study are each feasible in terms of *design*. All of the mechanisms can be facilitated easily within any virtual learning environment, provided the tools are available. Once set up the mechanisms are also relatively straightforward to *maintain*. In terms of ease of *analysis*, the survey is the most practicable, generating substantial data in a manageable format. Data generated from the 'chat' yielded insufficient insight into the issue chosen for consultation. This may be due to the 'age appropriateness' of the mechanism as a primary tool for collecting views of younger children who are less familiar with the use of 'chat rooms'. The 'storyboard' yielded some substance in terms of the quality of data collected but the data would be very time-consuming to analyse.
18. In terms of *classroom* use the e-consultation mechanisms piloted in this study were appropriate and accessible to the majority of their pupils in terms of age appropriateness and the literacy level and ICT skills required by the pupils to complete the activity.
19. The teachers were positive about the practicalities of facilitating pupil participation in e-consultation. For schools with ICT suites providing opportunity to complete the activities is relatively straightforward. For schools who did not have access to an ICT suite the teachers stated that

this would be no more problematic than any other use of ICT in the classroom and would merely require a managed rotation of smaller groups of children participating in the e-consultation.

20. Each of the mechanisms piloted has particular strengths and each presents particular challenges to developing an effective e-consultation strategy. The *chat* mechanism had a high engagement factor. It was relatively simple to set up and maintain. However it did not generate 'quality' data and would require some time for analysis. The *survey* on the other hand rated highly in terms of quality of data captured and ease of analysis and has potential for accessing a much larger sample of children than the other mechanisms. The children could have been more engaged if it had incorporated elements of the storyboard mechanism. The *storyboard* too was successful in engaging the children and has the potential to be made more appropriate for children with literacy difficulties. However it would present challenges in terms of ease of analysis of the data.
21. In sum all of the mechanisms offer potential to effectively engage children in consultation. As such they should be selected appropriately to fulfil the needs of the particular consultation being designed. The following criteria could be applied when selecting a mechanism: level/detail of information required; scope of the consultation; age and ability of the target population for the consultation. The pilot study would suggest that the advantages of the survey mechanism make it the most effective tool for e-consultation. An ideal approach would be to combine the advantages of the survey with the benefits from the other two mechanisms.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

22. Based on the findings of this pilot study it is recommended that the Department of Education and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment should:
 - i) consider using e-consultation as an effective strategy for meeting their obligations to consult with children;
 - ii) consider developing e-consultation strategies which are children's rights compliant by:

- a. involving children in the design of the consultation strategy and in the analysis of results
 - b. including mechanisms tailored to meet the needs of children
 - c. ensuring that the mechanisms developed assist children in forming their views
 - d. providing a safe and inclusive space in which children can express their views
 - e. including strategies to assure children that their views are taken seriously
- iii) promote e-consultation as an effective activity for enhancing learning in terms of cross-curricular skills and thinking skills and personal capabilities and in terms of education for active citizenship;
 - iv) encourage schools to consider incorporating e-consultation on real policy issues into the citizenship curriculum as an opportunity for children to take action on matters affecting them;
 - v) encourage schools to make use of e-consultation with children on internal policy issues and as part of the school's self-evaluation process;
 - vi) explore the possibility of hosting a wide range of e-consultation tools (including a survey tool) on the 'Learning Northern Ireland' online learning environment;
 - vii) encourage existing ICT training programmes to include the development of teachers' skills in relation to design and implementing e-consultation strategies.

METHODOLOGY

23. There were four components to the research strategy: a children's Research Advisory Group (RAG); piloting the e-consultation mechanisms;

focus groups with pupils following the pilot e-consultation; semi-structured interviews with the class teacher following each pilot e-consultation.

24. The Research Advisory Group (RAG), composed of eight pupils from a Year 7 primary class, participated in the research during three stages of the project: in the design of the research strategy; testing the proposed e-consultation mechanisms and research instruments; and in the analysis of the findings.
25. Three primary schools (one controlled, one maintained and one integrated) were involved in piloting the e-consultation strategies. Eight children from Year 7 classes were selected in each of the schools to pilot *one* of the e-consultation strategies outlined below:
 - i) An online survey - this included a range of multiple-choice and free-text response questions based on the views of the children in the RAG.
 - ii) Focused 'chat' sessions - four separate chat rooms were set up each of which required participants to answer a number of questions based on the views of children in the RAG. Prompt statements based on the views of other children were also used to provide a stimulus for discussion.
 - iii) 'Storyboard' activity - participants used the 'click and drag' facility to create illustrative responses to a series of questions. Free response text boxes were also included to allow participants to explain or add to their responses.
26. Following the pilot e-consultation each group of pupils were engaged in discussion in small focus groups. These discussions were used to ascertain the pupils' assessment of their experience in terms of: ease of access; level of engagement and enjoyment; and their views of the level of participation offered to them.
27. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the class teachers in order to ascertain their perspective on the method, classroom management issues and potential contribution of pupil engagement in e-consultations to the development of citizenship skills.

THE PROJECT

28. The Project was undertaken by NFER at Queen's University, Belfast. The cost of the project was £15,750. The project was jointly funded by the Department of Education and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

FULL REPORT

29. The full report entitled "E-consultation with pupils - a pilot study" by Laura Lundy and Lesley McEvoy, is available on the Department of Education website at http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg.htm

This paper is a summary of the research report and as such any views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Education.

REFERENCES

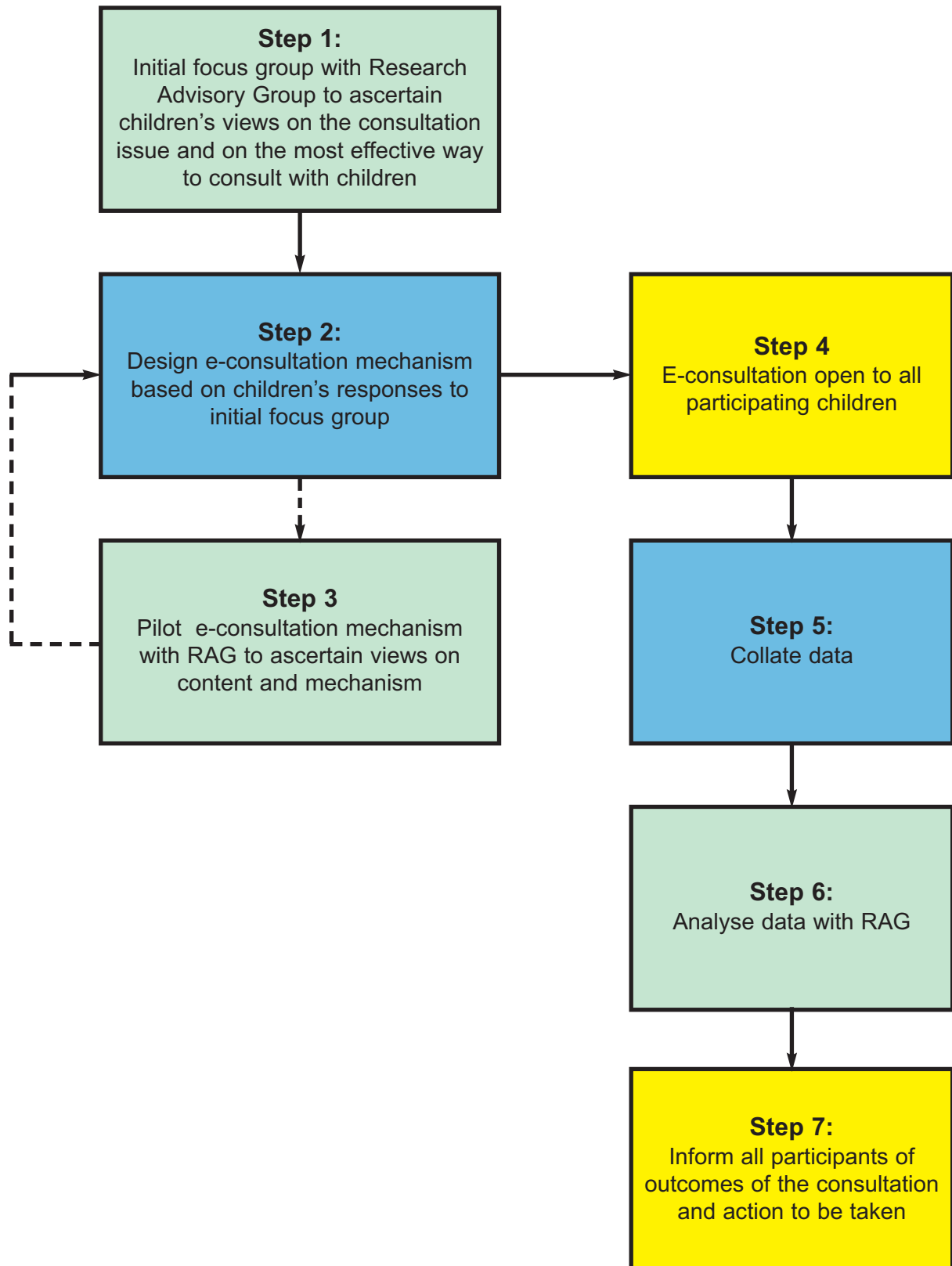
Education and Training Inspectorate (2004) *Information and Communication Technology in Post-Primary Schools* (Inspection Services Branch, Department of Education: Bangor)

Education and Training Inspectorate (2006) *An Evaluation by the Education and Training Inspectorate: Information and Communication Technology in Primary Schools* (Inspection Services Branch, Department of Education: Bangor)

Holden, C. and Clough, N. (1998) *Children as Citizens: Education for Participation* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers)

Lundy, L. (2007, Forthcoming), "Voice is not Enough: The implications of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for Education", *British Education Research Journal*.

PROPOSED STRATEGY FOR EFFECTIVE E-CONSULTATION WITH CHILDREN



DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RESEARCH BRIEFINGS (2000 TO DATE)

Three years later: a follow-up survey of teachers who qualified in 1995	RB 1/2000
Immersion education: a literature review	RB 2/2000
From pre-school to school: a review of the research literature	RB 3/2000
The effects of the selective system of secondary education in Northern Ireland	RB 4/2000
Department of Education Funded Research 2000/01	RB 1/2001
Assessment of the effectiveness of the Youth Service Community Relations Support Scheme (YSCRSS) during 1998/1999 and 1999/2000, in relation to the needs of youth and community groups	RB 2/2001
An investigation of the provision for health education in schools during 1998/99	RB 3/2001
Careers provision in schools at Key Stages 3 and 4	RB 1/2002
Evaluation of Raising School Standards Initiative (RSSI) using Value Added measures of school performance	RB 2/2002
Literature review: effectiveness of different forms of interventions in the schools and youth sectors	RB 3/2002
Outcomes for pupils who received an Irish-Medium education	RB 4/2002
Multiply-suspended pupils: their educational career and support projects available to them	RB 5/2002
Reducing the bureaucratic burden on schools	RB 6/2002
Developing linguistic accuracy in Irish-Medium primary schools	RB 7/2002
Bullying in schools: a Northern Ireland study	RB 8/2002
Community use of schools: an international literature review	RB 1/2003
Department of Education Funded Research 2002/03	RB 2/2003
A study of Careers Education and Guidance	RB 1/2004
Out of School Hours Learning Provision and School Improvement in Northern Ireland	RB 2/2004

The Professional Development of Teachers and Principals in Irish-Medium Education	RB 3/2004
Traveller children's experiences in mainstream post-primary schools in Northern Ireland: a qualitative study	RB 1/2005
The nature of Youth Work in Northern Ireland: purpose, contribution and challenges	RB 2/2005
Parental attitudes to the statutory assessment and statementing procedures on Special Educational Needs	RB 3/2005
A study into current practice and potential models for the effective teaching of Personal Development at Key Stage 3 in Northern Ireland curriculum	RB 4/2005
Evaluating the potential for virtual learning environments: a VLE for teaching Citizenship	RB 5/2005
Language Development Programmes – coverage and effectiveness of provision in Northern Ireland (0-36 months)	RB 1/2006
Attitudes of the Socially Disadvantaged towards Education in Northern Ireland	RB 2/2006
Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI)	RB 3/2006
The Development of Inclusive Schools in Northern Ireland: A Model of Best Practice	RB 4/2006
Department of Education Funded Research 2005/06	RB 5/2006
The recruitment and retention of teachers in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland	RB 6/2006
An evaluation of the need and early intervention support for children (aged 2-4 years) with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder in Northern Ireland	RB 1/2007
Alternative Education Provision (AEP) in Northern Ireland	RB 2/2007
The Nature and Extent of Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland	RB 3/2007
Department of Education Funded Research 2006/07	RB 4/2007
An Investigation of Youth Work, as a process of informal learning, in formal settings	RB 1/2008

PURPOSE OF DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION RESEARCH BRIEFINGS

The Department of Education (DE) places a high value on the wide circulation of research results to ensure that research has the maximum impact on policy and practice in education. DE Research Briefings are designed to provide attractive, interesting and easy access to research findings for policy makers, researchers, teachers, lecturers, employers and the public to facilitate informed discussion of education issues. Research cannot make decisions for policy makers and others concerned with improving the quality of education. Nor can it by itself bring about change. But it can create a better basis for decisions, by providing information and explanation about educational practice and by clarifying and challenging ideas and assumptions.

The full range of DE Research Briefings can be accessed at the DE Internet site -

www.deni.gov.uk/index/32-statisticsandresearch_pg.htm

DE Research Briefings may be photocopied for use within your own institution.

If you have difficulty getting access to DE Research on the DE website please contact us at:

Statistics and Research Branch
Room G2, New Building
Department of Education
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR
Co Down
BT19 7PR

Telephone: 028 9127 9391
Fax: 028 9127 9594
e-mail: statistics@deni.gov.uk

**Edited and produced by Statistics and Research Branch,
Department of Education**