

School environment

The group of young people who worked on the 'What about us?' project in one school came from a range of year groups (they were aged 12 to 15) and did not really know each other previously. Initially we spoke to the group to introduce the project and to ask them about their experiences of life at their present school and at their previous schools. Several young people had a long history of school changes when placements had not been successful. Initially they were not very confident in sharing their views and did not even appear to be sure what their views were on issues that should have mattered to them. As individuals, these young people viewed themselves as powerless and felt that no one would listen to them. They were self-deprecating about their abilities and very unsure of their capacity to make any kind of difference.

As we were shown around the school by these young people, they began to highlight the good features, things that were not so good and, importantly, those aspects of school life that they would like to change. This practical approach to accessing their ideas proved to be more productive than the earlier discussion. It was useful as a process for eliciting their views because it provided real time, real life prompts for their responses. As we visited different locations and facilities in the school, the young people were prompted by the situational cues to express their opinions and to begin to explore some insightful ideas for improvements.

As the project developed, these young people became very clear about what was important to them and excited about their potential for making changes happen. The school environment emerged as one clear priority that they wanted to change. They told us that they experienced difficulties each day at school that caused them great anxiety. They had nowhere to store personal belongings (such as a school bag or a coat) safely so they had to carry all their possessions around all day to avoid things getting taken or misplaced. This made for some very practical difficulties – including getting through the very heavy double doors around school carrying heavy loads. Many parts of the school got very busy; it was crowded and noisy and, in particular, some students felt unsafe on the narrow stairs when loaded with belongings.

The young people wanted safer and more pleasant social areas for year groups to use. Each year had their own area designed for break time use but these areas were unpleasant. The students described them as dingy and old, dirty and uncared for. The young people told us that lunch times were a particularly difficult time of the day, because they had nothing to do in these spaces and no staff supervision. As a result, students often felt vulnerable to bullying. Some students also felt vulnerable at break times and wanted somewhere to go; some wanted to have adults around in case they needed help. They said the toilets were smelly and people did not want to use them – in part, because pupils were only allowed to use them at busy break times when these young people felt particularly anxious and vulnerable.

It emerged that this group did not always feel part of the school and they had strong views on the limited extent of their inclusion. They often felt unfairly treated, for example, in comparison with those who displayed challenging behaviour and who, in the perceptions of the students we spoke to, got rewards for little effort. The students we were involved with felt that their huge efforts – and their potential contributions to the life of the school – went largely unnoticed.