E-Consultation with Pupils - A Pilot Study

by Laura Lundy and Lesley McEvoy

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Laura Lundy
Lesley McEvoy

Queen’s University, Belfast

with technical assistance provided by

Patrick Carmichael
Harriet Truscott

at
Centre for Applied Research in Educational Technologies
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1. Context

1.1 Consultation with Pupils on Government Policy: the Children's Rights Dimension

1.1.1 The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The United Kingdom ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (‘UNCRC’) in 1990. One of the cornerstones of the UNCRC is Article 12(1), a right which is referred to but rarely cited in its entirety. The full text reads as follows:

‘States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.’

Article 12 was ratified by the United Kingdom (‘UK’) government without reservation. Government departments and other public bodies involved in education are therefore legally obliged to give effect to it in full. In spite of this, there is a recognised gap between the UK’s international commitments and what often happens in practice in relation to educational decision-making.

Compliance with the CRC is monitored by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (‘The Committee’), a group of independent international experts on children’s rights (Lansdown, 2000). The Committee publishes periodic reports on individual states which highlight breaches of the UNCRC and make recommendations to secure further compliance. In its first periodic report in 1995, the Committee criticised the UK’s failure to solicit school children’s views in relation to issues such as sex education and school exclusions (1995: 3). In 2002, the Committee documented its concern that: ‘in education, schoolchildren are not systematically consulted in matters that affect them’; and recommended that the UK government should: ‘take further steps to promote, facilitate and monitor systematic, meaningful and effective participation of all groups of children in society, including in school.’ (2002: 7).

The requirement to consult children on the educational issues which affect them is not restricted to school policies. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that the UK should ‘establish procedures that would allow the views expressed by children to be taken into account in and to have an impact on developing programmes and policies affecting them’ (2002, para.12). It is recognised that this applies to policy developments emanating from central and local government. Moreover, the Committee has also stressed that it is not enough for government to consult with representatives from children’s organisations rather than children themselves. The Committee (2003, para.5) has said that: ‘Government must develop a direct relationship with them, not one simply mediated by NGOs’.
1.1.2 Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires public authorities to have regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between: (a) persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation; (b) men and women generally; (c) persons with a disability and persons without; and (d) persons with dependants and person without. The statutory equality duty has far reaching implications for the delivery of education since public authorities are defined to include the Department of Education, CCMS, CCEA and Education and Library Boards. Each of these is required to produce an Equality Scheme, outlining how they will implement section 75. An equality scheme must set out how the public authority will identify where a proposed policy impacts on equality of opportunity most significantly, how it will assess the equality impact of its policies and its arrangements for consultation with affected groups.

Consultation with those affected or likely to be affected is considered to be central to the effectiveness of the statutory duty. The inclusion of ‘age’ within the text of s.75 has meant that one of the key groupings that public bodies may need to consult with is children and young people. The Equality Commission’s guidance on the implementation of the statutory duty stresses the need for active consultation and for the use of approaches which are suitable for the consultees (2005), particularly young people with learning difficulties. Those who consider that there has been a failure to consult adequately with children and young people may initiate a complaint to the Equality Commission under Schedule 9, Paragraph 10 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. In 2005 the Children’s Law Centre made a successful complaint that the Northern Ireland Office had failed to comply with its equality scheme when it did not carry out an equality impact assessment of its policy on the introduction of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders in Northern Ireland (Equality Commission, 2006). The Equality Commission accepted that the Northern Ireland Office had not addressed the significant adverse impact on children and young people and had not therefore consulted adequately on the screening of the proposed policy.

1.2 Consultation with Pupils on Government Policy: the Educational Benefits

1.2.1 Education for Active Citizenship

Effective citizenship education not only provides children with information about the society in which they live and how that society functions, but also provides them with opportunities to ‘learn by doing through active and participatory experiences in the school or local community and beyond’ (Kerr, 1999:14). This coupling of education about citizenship to education through citizenship has the potential to educate children for citizenship, developing the skills they require to be active participants in their society. Citizenship education in schools is therefore the start of a process of lifelong learning for citizenship and has the potential to ‘spearhead the drive to create a learning culture’ within society (Cairns, 2000:39).
The imminent implementation of the Revised Curriculum presents an opportunity for educators in Northern Ireland to become a significant part of this endeavour. The Revised Curriculum aims to ‘empower young people to achieve their potential and to make informed and responsible decisions throughout their lives’ with the specific objectives to develop person the as an individual, as contributor to society and as a contributor to the economy and the environment (Education (NI) Order 2007). Central to articulating this aim in concrete curriculum terms has been the inclusion of education for citizenship as ‘Local and Global Citizenship’ in the post-primary curriculum and within the learning area ‘Personal Development and Mutual Understanding’ in the primary curriculum. This has been facilitated by the ‘inquiry-based’ approach to citizenship education taken in Northern Ireland which encourages young people to explore their views and the views of others with the intention of taking action on issues affecting them (Arlow, 2004). Furthermore the citizenship curriculum in Northern Ireland 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). Finally 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. As the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2001, para. 15) has observed:

‘... children should also learn about human rights by seeing human rights standards implemented in practice, whether at home, in school, or within the community. Human rights education should be a comprehensive, life-long process and start with the reflection of human rights values in the daily life and experiences of children’

As such the principles of effective citizenship education 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.

### 1.2.2 Developing Transferable Skills

The Revised Curriculum for Northern Ireland further requires that young people be given opportunity to develop skills, such as communication, ICT, using mathematics and thinking skills and personal capabilities, through learning experiences which are media rich, skills integrated, active and hands on and which take account of different learning styles (Education (NI) Order, 2007).

With reference to ICT in particular it is recognized that more needs to be done to develop its use as an integral and creative element in day to day learning experience of children and young people. In particular in primary schools the use of ICT for communication is under-developed and under-used and in post-primary schools there remains a need to embed further ICT across the curriculum. However, it is also accepted that the majority of children at primary level are developing increasingly sophisticated skills in the use of ICT and are enthusiastic in their work in ICT and motivated by its inclusion in their lessons (ETI, 2004; 2006).
In sum the current context is ideal for developing an approach to consultation with children which will not only fulfill obligations placed on government but also enhance learning for citizenship and the development of transferable skills. Therefore this study seeks to develop a children’s rights compliant approach to e-consultation which has the added benefit of providing significant learning opportunities for pupils.
2. Research Design

2.1 Aim and Objectives

The aim of the project was to pilot three e-consultation mechanisms with young people in order to:

- provide an evidence base for the development of an effective e-consultation strategy for Department of Education and other educational policy makers;
- develop mechanisms for schools to incorporate active citizenship into the curriculum by providing pupils with real opportunities to shape policy;
- identify opportunities for the enhancement of pupil key skills in relation to communication, ICT, managing information and self-management through e-consultation

2.2 Methodology

The project involved actively engaging a group of pupils in each of three primary schools in submitting responses to a ‘live’ consultation using the technology available within their schools, through a virtual learning and research environment (VLRE). The consultation chosen for the pilot study was in relation to pupils views on the proposed Pupil Profile. The study involved the design and piloting of three e-consultation mechanisms followed by pupil focus groups and teacher interviews.

The project 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 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

The model reflects the fact that these elements are inter-related. In particular, there is a significant degree of overlap between: (a) space and voice and (b) audience and influence. Moreover, the model represents the fact that Article 12 can only be understood fully when it is considered in the light of other relevant UNCRC provisions, in particular: Article 2 (non-discrimination); Article 3 (best interests of the child must be a primary consideration); Article 5 (right to guidance from adults); Article 13 (right to seek, receive and impart information); and Article 19 (protection from abuse).
This particular framing of the children’s rights dimension in consultation informed the approach taken to the design of the e-consultation mechanisms, the research strategy and the analysis of the findings. Central to this approach was the input from a group of children from a fourth primary school, who acted as a Research Advisory Group for the project team.

Including this group there were four components to the research strategy:

### 2.2.1 Children’s Research Advisory Group

As noted above the Research Advisory Group (RAG) acted as the primary vehicle for ensuring an approach consistent with Lundy’s framework. The RAG, composed of eight pupils from a Year 7 primary class, participated in the research during three stages of the project:

*Prior to the design* of the e-consultation mechanisms the RAG were involved in the design of the research strategy. First they were consulted on their views regarding the pupil profile. These views were then used to generate the prompts and questions for the e-consultation mechanisms in order to assist the children participating in the pilot in forming their views. Images produced by the children were also incorporated into the mechanisms. Secondly the children were consulted on the most effective way of ascertaining other children’s views. Their suggestions were subsequently incorporated into the design of the research instruments.

*Prior to the pilot* e-consultations the RAG tested the proposed mechanisms and research instruments. Their responses and suggestions were then used to refine both the mechanisms and the research instruments.

*Following the pilot* e-consultations the RAG were involved in the discussion of the research findings. The children participated in a half day research workshop which involved:

- A ‘re-familiarization’ session using the three amended e-consultation mechanisms: children were then able to provide comparative insight into the use of the three mechanisms
- A session during which the children examined the data output from each of the mechanisms: children were then able to compare and contrast the mechanisms in terms of ‘ease of analysis’
- A session during which children thematised the qualitative data arising from the focus groups and teacher interviews. One group of children was provided with a wide range of cards each of which contained a different comment from the transcripts of the pupil focus groups. The children then grouped, or ‘clustered’,...
these cards based on their interpretation of connections or commonalities between each of the statements. Each ‘cluster’ was then given a theme, or ‘name’, by the children. A second group carried out the same process using extracts from the teacher interviews. The children then compared and contrasted the views of the pupils and teachers who participated in the e-consultation pilot. (see Appendix 1 for an overview of the themes generated from this activity)

2.2.2 Pilot e-consultations

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:

- An online survey - this included a range of multiple-choice and free-text responses questions based on the views of the children in the RAG.

- 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.

- '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.

The activities were delivered via the Sakai Virtual Collaboration Environment, discussed in more detail below, and technical support was provided by the Centre for Applied Research in Educational Technologies (CARET) at the University of Cambridge (see Appendix 2).

The basic questions and prompts used for the survey were used across each of the other two mechanisms to ensure consistency. Each school was able therefore to provide views on the process of e-consultation in general and on one e-consultation mechanism in particular. As mentioned above the RAG provided comparative insights across all three mechanisms.

2.2.3 Focus groups.

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 (see Appendix 3).
2.2.4 Semi-structured interviews

These 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 through the learning area of Personal Development and Mutual Understanding in the Revised Curriculum for Northern Ireland (see Appendix 3).
3. Findings

3.1 The Level of Participation and Engagement Afforded to Children

One of the objectives of this study was to establish the extent to which the e-consultation mechanisms that were piloted provided children with a meaningful and effective means of transmitting their views on the proposed policy development to government. An ongoing criticism of policy consultations with children is that they are perceived to be tokenistic and do not always offer children genuine opportunities for engagement in policy formulation (Kilkelly et al, 2005). To this end the model outlined above was employed as a framework for evaluating the extent to which the mechanisms afforded children genuine opportunity to participate. At the outset, it should be noted that Article 12 is a right and not a duty. While children are entitled to express their views, they are not obliged to do so. In the research project, the team stressed to the children that their participation was not compulsory and that they could withdraw at any time. All of the children participated voluntarily and no child chose to withdraw from the activities. However, while the feedback from the children on their experience of this project was universally positive, some of the children expressed reservations about government seeking their views all the time:

P. You wouldn’t want it that every-time you went on the computer, they were looking in. It’s good that we know that the government is looking in.

P. You wouldn’t want to do it all the time. It might annoy you, going on every day!

Some children, particularly those in hard to reach groups are sometimes asked to be involved in too many consultation exercises and may be suffering from ‘consultation fatigue’ (Kilkelly et al, 2005). This is a point which is worth bearing in mind when consultation exercises are being designed. It is important that it is not the same children who are always asked to participate and that all children are participating on a voluntary basis.

3.1.2 Space and Voice: The Right to Express a View

Creating a safe space where children feel comfortable expressing their views freely

Article 12 requires that children should be able to express their views ‘freely’. Moreover, when read in conjunction with Article 19 (protection from abuse), it places an obligation on the policy makers to ensure that all children are afforded opportunities where they can express their views safely and without fear of rebuke or reprisal. All of the children were of the view that the use of computers was particularly useful in enabling them to express their views freely. Typical comments included the following:

It gave us a bit of space to talk about it ourselves.
When pupils were asked if they were comfortable using the computers and if they felt it gave them a good opportunity to say what they wanted, they identified a range of advantages. For example, one child expressed a preference for using the computer rather than talking to a strange adult in person, on the basis that:

*The computer is good because some people have scary voices and you can’t hear their voice on the computer.*

However, the most widely identified advantage of using the e-consultation mechanisms was the fact that their views were being expressed anonymously. For many children, the fact that they were expressing their views anonymously was less ‘embarrassing’ than expressing their opinions orally in an open forum. This meant that they were more likely to say what they really thought, since as one child observed:

*Sometimes you don’t want to say what you mean as you don’t want to stand out and say something different.*

Another child explained the benefits of submitting your views anonymously by way of computer this way:

*P. It gave you privacy.*

*R. What was good about that?*

*P. You are more comfortable saying what you want. If you are saying it to somebody, you sort of hold back saying what you want to say.*

*R. Why might you hold back?*

*P. Because you are scared what they might say after.*

The teachers who were interviewed echoed the children’s opinion on the benefits of anonymity:

*The fact that it’s anonymous is good as well so it means that they can be honest without worrying about anyone judging what they’re saying or having opinions on what they are saying.*

As with the pupils, the teachers felt that children were more likely to give an honest view. However, in the teachers’ case, a major advantage was perceived to be the fact it addressed the common problem of children feeling the need to give the right answer:

*I think the aspect of confidentiality for the children’s views- there’s always that point that they would know that they wouldn’t be giving the answer you know that you want. Whereas if they’re there submitting it themselves you’ll get the opinion that they really have.*
Sometimes whenever you’re asking children their views and things they’re very good at weighing up situations and sometimes they’ll tell you what they think you want to hear. I know from in the class. They wouldn’t want to offend you, they want to tell you what they think is the right answer or you know what you think is appropriate and that would take away from the authenticity of their responses.

Children expressed very few reservations about the use of computers to express their views. However, one child identified a potential problem in terms of privacy when using the computer and in particular the fact that anonymity is only possible if no-one is watching what the child is typing.

*When our teacher was here, I was worrying if she was looking over our shoulders to see who was writing what. I was restricting myself. And then when she went away, I wasn’t.*

Different concerns relating to the layout of the computer facilities were identified by two of the teachers. One thought that the classroom layout might mean that it would be difficult to ensure privacy. He or she suggested that it might be a challenge to:

*keep it that they are all individually doing it, keeping their anonymity so they are not reading each other’s work and that they’re really focusing...That’s where it would be difficult, if they are working at it on the computer in the classroom and other children were walking past and reading it.*

Another teacher expressed concern that, if the consultation were to be conducted as a group activity, children might succumb to peer pressure:

*Because don’t forget every group of children has got the peer leader. I could tell you who the boys and girls are in that class who influence everything. You could see them saying “What do you think? What did you say?” So are you really getting a true reflection or are you getting what one or two people think and everyone else saying “Yeah that’ll do”?*

The teacher in the school which piloted the ‘chat’ raised a safety issue in relation to the chat mechanism. The school generally didn’t allow the children to use chat rooms because of a lack of control over content. He or she felt that there would be a need for some type of moderation:

*I think there would certainly need to be someone on all the time and if there were any inappropriate comments that they didn’t come up and they were taken off straight away Certainly the whole misuse of BEBO in the media at the minute...that would be my only fear.. but I think that the benefits would be great if used appropriately.*
Another teacher also expressed concern about the possible content of some of the children’s submissions. However, his or her worry was that children might use the cloak anonymity to complain about teachers:

_If they can persuade me that what they think is better than what I think I’ll listen to it and change policy. But to give children a blank sheet of paper and let them beef off about such and such a teacher I didn’t like. Never gave me an opportunity, blah, blah, blah. It would turn into a gurners’ charter._

All of these issues were discussed by the Research Advisory Group. They grouped the various comments children made about the benefits of anonymity under the collective heading of ‘honesty’. They too concluded that the key benefit of children being able to submit their views in privacy was that children were more likely to say what they really thought. They did, however, think that there was a need to ensure privacy and that teachers should not be watching what individual children were typing. They did not consider that children would feel the need to succumb to peer pressure when they were replying individually by way of computer. They felt that peer pressure was much more likely to be a factor if the children were giving their views orally in a group setting.

**Ensuring that children understand what they are being asked**

The second most widely identified advantage of the three mechanisms was that the written text used was worded in a way which the children could understand. The fact that this was successful can be attributed to two things. First, the Research Advisory Group piloted each of the mechanisms and highlighted language that might cause difficulty (e.g. suggesting that we refer to ‘computers’ rather than ‘ICT’ in one of the questions). Secondly, the fact that in both the survey and chat mechanisms, we used quotations from other children to frame many of the questions, also ensured that much of the text was expressed in child friendly language.

The children were universally positive about the use of quotations from other children. However in one group it was suggested that the wording could be based on text language:

_P Instead of writing it all out, they could do it in even more children’s language._

_R. Even more children’s language?_

_P. Like MSN language._

_R. What’s MSN language?_

_P. Like texts._

The teachers were also positive that the language used had been pitched ‘at the right level’. One teacher commented that this was not usually the case:
A lot of policies are full of jargon… it’s not child friendly. The children haven’t a clue what they mean. I think they should make the terms more child-friendly so you don’t have to be an expert in that field to really understand what it means.

Another teacher agreed but made the point that, if it is written in too ‘accessible’ a format, the children might not take it seriously:

It’s got to look accessible to them but it’s also got to look like it’s a serious canvas of their opinions. If you make it look too childish it doesn’t seem like a serious event for them. You have to find that balance between that. I was quite happy with that survey. If there’s too much singing and dancing it doesn’t look serious.

Helping children to form their views

The right to express a view in Article 12 of the UNCRC is afforded to all children: ‘capable of forming a view’. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has stressed that children may need assistance in forming their views, including access to relevant information which sets out the advantages and disadvantages of a range of potential options. In many cases, it would be unrealistic to expect children to have already formed views on policy developments which are taking them beyond their own experience. This was the case with the proposed Pupil Profile. Although the children all had experience of receiving an end of term annual report, none had experience of the type of ongoing formative profiling which is at the core of the Pupil Profile. Nor were they likely to envisage major changes to the format (colour/child friendly language) or to the process (e.g. the inclusion of a pupil’s section) without the possibility being opened to them.

The research team adopted a number of strategies which were intended to help children form a view without leading them towards any particular response. For example, the nature of the Pupil Profile was explained in child-friendly language on the opening screen of the web-site. This was supplemented by a video in which a person from CCEA explained what the Pupil Profile was and what they were interested in finding out. Thirdly, in both the chat and the survey mechanism, the views of real children who had taken part in the initial focus groups were used as prompts for reflection. The selected quotations, expressed verbatim in the children’s own language, were chosen to include a range of views, both positive and negative about potential options. Finally, in the survey and storyboard, many of the questions presented children with a range of options which were designed to reflect a range of perspectives and therefore give children a series of options to consider.

The children who participated in the pilot were asked if the mechanism they had tried had helped them to come to a view on the Pupil Profile and, if so, in what ways. The children who had completed the survey and participated in the chat room all referred to the fact that they liked reading what the other children had said. Typical comments included:

Because if you just had the question there, you wouldn’t really know what to say. If you see what other people say, it gives you an idea.
You could think if you agreed with it.

It gave you ideas.

The benefits for the children of being able to read other children’s views were also identified by the teacher of the pupils who participated in the ‘chat’ mechanism:

But also the fact they can read other people’s comments, that was good because then they maybe consider the views of other people and then say “Oh I hadn’t thought of that” and “Yeah I can see that...but maybe this would be good too”.

One of the added benefits of the chat mechanism was that children had access to their classmates’ opinions. The children felt that this assisted them in working out their own views:

You were with your friends and not by yourself and you got a chance to know what other people were thinking.

In terms of suggestions for improvements which would help children to form their views, it was suggested that: ‘they could put a bit more comments by other children in’. Other children felt that there were not enough ‘chat rooms’. Moreover, one of the teachers felt that the storyboard was a bit limited in this respect:

I thought the survey was better than say for example the storyboard because the storyboard, for example with the time line of the year, really only had one option for them.

Facilitating children in the expression of views

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has stressed that children may need help to express their views and that there is a range of methods which might be employed. They key focus of this research project was to evaluate the use of computers as a means of eliciting children’s views. The response of both pupils and teachers to the various e-mechanisms was overwhelmingly positive. One teacher summarised the benefits this way:

It’s a great vehicle for doing it because ICT pervades everything. Children use it for everything for work, study, play, photos, email communication-everything and that is the way forward. It does give them the opportunity to speak directly to people who are listening. If they’re speaking face to face along the chain things can get changed or lost, voices aren’t heard...If children are able to do that and that goes directly and they know it goes directly it’s going to be more effective.

Children were also positive about using computers. For them, a key advantage was that it was enjoyable:
It was fun because you got to do it on a computer and it made it more easier.

For the pupils, a major advantage was that it did not involve a lot of writing. The following comments make that point in various ways:

I wouldn’t have done as long answers if it had been written down.

If it’s typing, it’s like easier than handwriting.

Because you get a sore hand when you are writing.

You can type faster and it is easier to click and drag.

There wasn’t a great deal of writing. All you had to do was tick boxes.

While all of the children liked the easiness of the box-ticking in the survey and the ‘click and drag’ icons in the storyboard, several children commented favourably on the fact that they had also been provided with free space to insert their own views. For example, one child who completed the survey said:

I liked it that you had boxes and could write in whatever you wanted.

This was also the view of the teacher in the school which piloted the survey:

The boxes where they could type in their own stuff they really came up with stuff they wouldn’t have thought of themselves. Some children were putting in things I wouldn’t have thought of either.

Finally, several children highlighted the fact that one of the benefits of the mechanisms was that: ‘you could take your time on them’. It is important that children are allowed to go at their own pace. The speed at which individual children completed the survey or storyboard or submitted comments in the chat room varied considerably.

**Ensuring that all children have an opportunity to express their views**

One of the challenges for any consultation process is ensuring that it is inclusive and that all those who want to participate get a chance to say what they think. There can be difficulties when children are asked their views in group contexts as some children will inevitably be more forthcoming than others (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004, p.76). One of the advantages of using computers is that it requires individual responses with the result that no individual(s) can dominate the discussion. The children considered that the mechanisms were very inclusive:

There was a chance for everybody to have a say.
The storyboard (which has less text and reading) was piloted in a group which included children with significant learning difficulties. Some of the children needed help from the researchers to explain the various tasks. Moreover, it was also the teacher’s view was that the storyboard could still be difficult for some of the children in the school:

There’s going to have to be teacher input into this. That’s OK throwing that out to the P7s say in [name of another school]- they’d go through it no problem with no teacher input at all. With our pupils there would have to be a significant amount of teacher input. Not telling them what to put down or guiding them but explaining the context, explaining the relevance, explaining around the issues more so than probably a lot of other schools.

Another teacher agreed:

The storyboard still has a large amount of literacy input at the start. That’s always going to be difficult. You have to impart that information in some way to them.

He or she suggested that one way of reducing the amount of text and reading would be to use voice or video files.

The children also felt that the storyboard might be the easiest mechanism to use and that it might work well for younger children, although one child suggested that there was a need for: ‘more pictures and colour so the younger ones could do it as well’.

3.1.3 Audience and Influence: The Right to Have Views Given Due Weight.

Article 12 affords children the right to have their views given ‘due weight’. At its most basic, this entails two things: that there is someone designated to listen to the views and that the views are taken seriously. While it is relatively straightforward to identify a ‘designated listener’, no absolute guarantee can be given about what will happen to the children’s views i.e. that they will actually influence policy. However, there are several steps that can be put in place in order to help convince children that their views will be given ‘due weight’. Several strategies were piloted in the research project. First, the opening page of the e-consultation mechanisms explained what would happen to the children’s views. Secondly, children were asked to click on video clip which featured the person from CCEA and the person from the Department of Education explaining what they were interested in finding out and why the children’s views were so important. Finally, all the children who participated received an interim summary of the research findings. The schools will be sent an up-date on how the research findings are being taken forward by CCEA and the DE. One of the difficulties in this study was that the children were all in Primary 7 and about to transfer to secondary schools. Given that it would be difficult to contact them in the subsequent year, we gave the children a web address and told them that they would be able to track the research report’s progress through the website.
The children were all in agreement that the video clip was a good idea. The teachers were also universally positive. One felt that it was good to ‘personalise’ it. Another commented:

*The video was nice. It was nice for them to see the actual people. It’s hard for them to imagine though that when they click “submit” that somewhere down the line there really is someone there. That it’s kind of gone out into the air.*

The third teacher considered that the video encouraged the children to take the exercise more seriously as it made the children realize that their views were really going to government:

*...you saw their faces whenever they were told that their comments would be given directly to Nuala in CCEA. They were really pleased about that. Quite often children say things and it doesn’t get passed on it’s not taken seriously. So the fact that what they’re saying is given values is really really important and that they know that they have every bit as much right as adults and other people to give their opinions and certainly whenever it’s to do with them they should have a voice. Obviously it’s a right, it’s a legal right, but the fact that they knew it was being passed on directly I think that made them “step up” to it as well whereas if it wasn’t get passed on maybe they wouldn’t have put in as much effort or taken it as seriously.*

The children who have participated in the research received a summary of the research findings. They will not have received feedback from the policy-makers for some time. However, when they were asked what could be done to further convince children that their views were taken seriously, teachers and pupils both identified a need for some sort of response from government. When the children were asked what form the response should take, one suggestion was:

*A wee letter from them saying we helped. Saying how they are going to use the views. Saying what changes they are going to make.*

The teachers agreed that there was a need for a formal response. One pointed out that:

*The only way to do that would be back through the schools really. Something like “Here are the questions we asked, here’s what the children thought, here’s what we’re going to do”*

The other main suggestion, from the children who participated in the chat mechanism, as that someone from the government could go on the computer at the same time:

*You should have a chat with them ... actually talk to them on the computer.*

The teachers made the following suggestions:
You can’t take an email address from them but some sort of screen coming up saying “thank you” at the end of the survey.

It may be useful if they could see how their opinion compared with other people. In the response part you could say for example “you said this and 80% of children agreed with you”. It would be good if they could see how other children thought.

3.2 The Learning Opportunities Presented to Children

The study also sought to explore the range of learning opportunities which could be presented to children through their engagement in e-consultation, particularly in relation to the development of transferable skills and to learning for active citizenship.

3.2.1 Developing Transferable Skills

The Revised Curriculum for Northern Ireland, in both primary and post primary contexts, places considerable emphasis on ‘infusing’ skills across all areas of learning. The responses of both children and teachers indicated that e-consultation mechanisms provided learning opportunities for such skills to be developed.

The children and teachers alike identified opportunities for enhancing pre-existing or developing new cross-curricular skills, particularly in using ICT. In general the teachers viewed any opportunity to develop ‘practical’ ICT skills as beneficial for pupils, with one teacher describing the direct use of ICT in the mechanisms as ‘excellent’. In one of the primary schools pupils are given an extremely wide range of ICT opportunities including the use of standard applications such as word processing, powerpoint, databases and spreadsheets alongside less traditional applications such as sound recording and editing. The teacher in this school commented that participation in e-consultation had the potential to develop the pupils’ skills in the use ICT as a communication tool. As he or she explained:

> It’s a different type of skill because we don’t generally allow chat rooms or communication really. We don’t use children’s emails or chat rooms. No communication to outside of school.

The children who participated in the chat room mechanism in particular had little or no prior experience of this form of communication. In addition some children identified other new skills they had learnt through participation in the e-consultation, for example ‘click and drag’ and using usernames and passwords.

Participation in e-consultation also presented pupils with opportunities to develop ‘thinking skills and personal capabilities’. As discussed above pupils saw the benefit in finding out ‘what other children were thinking about’ both in regard to reading the views of other children incorporated into all of the mechanisms and in regard to exchanging views in the chat room. One teacher, whose pupils had piloted the survey, saw potential for providing pupils with feedback on how their views compared with other pupils:
It may be useful if they could see how their opinion compared with other people. In the response part you could say for example “you said this and 80% of children agreed with you”. It would be good if they could see how other children thought.

whilst adding the caveat that:

...but you want them not to be giving the same answer as everyone else. They might want to go for the answer that everyone gave instead of their own.

Another teacher whose pupils participated in the chat room mechanism agreed and furthermore suggested that pupils should be able to return to the mechanism periodically to reflect on other children’s views. This would provide an opportunity for children to develop skills in the management of information through processing, analyzing and synthesizing a range of opinions in the formation of their own:

I think it would be something you wouldn’t just do once that they could go on and read ...it would be an ongoing thing. They could continue to read other people’s opinions. Obviously their thoughts would evolve over time as well and that’s what you want them to do. Because that’s one of the skills for life really that you’re teaching them in the classroom.

The following simple exchange also indicates that pupil participation in the e-consultation pilot provided pupils with the opportunity to learn that their views were of value, arguably contributing to the development of their self-confidence:

R. Did you learn anything today?

P. That we should have a say

In comparing the views of teachers and children the RAG noted that the teachers focused on the ‘learning’ opportunities associated with the e-consultation mechanisms whereas the pupils focused on the ‘fun’ aspects. They explained that learning was important to teachers because:

...they want something educational. If you take children out of class they might think you’re just playing on the computers.

One of the teachers however recognized the benefits of the ‘fun’ aspect to learning:

They didn’t view that as work today, they were more than happy to do it. It was something they really wanted to be involved in.

The RAG concluded that the three e-consultation mechanisms were ‘a bit of learning and a bit of fun’.
3.2.2 E-consultation and the Citizenship Curriculum

The Revised Curriculum for Northern Ireland makes provision for aspects of citizenship education within the area of learning ‘Personal Development and Mutual Understanding’ in the primary curriculum (and more explicitly within ‘Learning for Life and Work’ in the post-primary curriculum). The teachers interviewed unanimously agreed that e-consultation with pupils on government policy would benefit from being incorporated into the curriculum, in general, and into the citizenship curriculum in particular.

One teacher saw integration of e-consultation into the curriculum in general as necessary to ensuring ‘cost-effectiveness’, stating that:

*OK people have been consulted and they’ve had their say but is it really a sensible use of money. If it were integrated into the curriculum I wouldn’t have a problem with it all. Yes as part of the curriculum done in a manageable way.*

Two other teachers saw the potential for linking e-consultation into their schools’ citizenship curriculum as necessary to ensuring it received adequate ‘time’ in the classroom. Also for one teacher it was a necessary mechanism for managing the use of ICT in the classroom, in a context where the school had opted not to have a computer suite but rather to provide each classroom with a small group of computers. As he or she explained this forced a more integrated approach to ICT:

*ICT is always linked to the curriculum activities…[for example]… during music there’s groups doing ICT music activities, during a Maths activity there’s a Maths group going through it. There’s always a long queue waiting to do the ICT activity. So that kind of thing there would need to be done as part of PSE or something.*

While these responses suggest practical/classroom management reasons for curriculum integration, one teacher expressed the need to connect the consultation process to the curriculum in order to ensure effective pupil participation:

*It [e-consultation] couldn’t stand alone. You’d have to teach a lot in front of that so the children knew what to expect. Like if you were say doing something on children’s rights, the United Nations or Amnesty International, for example. It would be useful to use it in that way. If it was stand alone you wouldn’t get a proper response from them. They’d need to understand that their opinions were of value first… we would then say that they were being given to express their opinion about something.*

3.2.3 E-consultation and Citizenship Practice in Schools

As discussed above citizenship education should not only provide opportunities for children to learn about their right to participate in society but also be situated in a context where children are given opportunities to learn through participation in the decision making processes which affect them. Pupils unanimously agreed that government and
their own schools should consult them on matters of policy and on their own school experience. In particular the children thought that their schools could use the mechanisms to ask them their views on both pastoral and curriculum issues such as:

**Bullying**

**About different ways of teaching.**

Once again they identified the ‘safety’ associated with expressing your views on computer rather than face to face:

*You might think that if you talk to the teacher the bully might know that you said it. On a computer they wouldn’t know that you said it.*

*If the teacher was very nice you might want to talk straight to her. But if she is not very nice then you might just want to talk on the computer so she doesn’t know it was you.*

When the teachers were asked whether it was valuable to consult children an interesting spectrum of opinion emerged.

One teacher was exceptionally enthusiastic, providing a rationale for consultation based on both the benefits it would bring to the school’s understanding of pupils views and on the benefits it could accrue for the pupils themselves:

*In the past it would have been very much “I’m the teacher...you sit there you listen”. It’s completely different now we are more facilitators in education. As facilitators in education we need to listen to the children and we need to find ways in to help them so they’re leading their own education but we’re there helping them. And I think that for the future and certainly for the pupil profile, this is the perfect time to really involve them in it. Children know what’s important and they want to do well at school and they know what they need to know for life. Obviously we have a better overview from experience but it’s so important to include them in it. I think for their self esteem to make them into autonomous and independent individuals it’s really, really important. Certainly children when they’re given the opportunity to give their opinions they do display a maturity. They know a lot more about what’s going on than people give them credit for. They are children but they are very aware. We want our children to do well and we want to get the best out of them and that means bringing them along with us and giving them a voice. If they’re feeding into the whole process they’re more likely to feel the need to get involved and to get more out of it.*

It is also interesting to note that this teacher operated in a school environment where consultation with pupils had become part of school policy over the past few years. In particular the children had been consulted on the pastoral care policy and the ‘whole issue of bullying’. This teacher was also the most enthusiastic about the potential use of the e-consultation mechanisms in his or her school context. In particular the teacher suggested
how the chat room facility could replace aspects of the current approach in the school to pupil self-evaluation of learning by setting up individual chat rooms for reflection on for example, what the children would want to learn in a unit of work, what they had learnt and what they would like to learn next. Children could then anonymously record their views, as he or she explained:

*It would mean then that they could do it in a non-threatening way. They could go away and think about it and then come back and put their views on. The way we do it at the minute is fine but some children are going to be more vociferous and some children might not have the confidence…they mightn’t feel “I want to learn this…I’m going to put this”. They might feel “I just have to sit here and do what I’m told” If we had some way of using a chat room like this to consult with our children on policies in our school it would be really really useful.*

Another teacher’s attitude was broadly positive about the value of consultation but expressed some reservations:

*It can’t do any harm. It’s hard to know what will come of it at the end, y’know what will happen. I think it’s good for children to feel that they can have an influence on the outside wider world.*

This teacher similarly worked in a school context where there was some degree of consultation with pupils.

*We have a post box. Children can post their opinions through and then the pastoral care teacher empties that and deals with it or directs it to the appropriate person.*

The reservations expressed in general about the value of consultation could also be seen in his or her response when asked if the ‘post box’ could be replaced by an e-consultation tool:

*The advantage of the pen and paper approach is that you can get it at anytime. You’d need access to a computer otherwise and you’d have to get them logged on and permission to use it. And all their screens face out into the room so it would be hard to do confidential work on the computers. You can’t really cover like a bullying issue that way. Paper and pencil is better.*

The teacher could however see some benefits to using the survey tool in the school for ‘pretty much anything’ provided that:

*…it’s all set up. Schools couldn’t obviously have the time to set up a system like that themselves. If it was already set up and accessible only by the school and not freely available to anyone else it would be OK….as long as the results of the survey were completely confidential for the school.*

The third teacher was much more skeptical about the value of consulting with pupils:
Sometimes I wonder if we’re giving pre-adolescents too much voice. And too much say in what they want. What they want today is not necessarily what they want tomorrow or what they wanted last week. Or can they possibly have the global view of education in its widest sense that we as educators should have. Have the lunatics taken over the asylum?

This teacher however did indicate that the mechanisms could be used to ascertain children’s views on what they learnt with one caveat:

_Criticize the curriculum but leave the individual teacher out of it_

The value placed on consultation with pupils is clearly affected by individual teachers’ own views and the practice of the schools in which they are situated. The views expressed by the three teachers are arguably reflective of the views of teachers in general: from those who are committed to pupil participation in school life through to those who are reserved on the basis of practicability and those who are skeptical on the basis of their concerns surrounding teacher criticism. Despite the range of views on the value of consultation, all the teachers agreed that e-consultation mechanisms should made available to schools on Learning Northern Ireland.

In comparing the views of pupils and teachers on this matter the RAG highlighted the issue of ‘trust’ in relation to consultation with pupils in school:

_They don’t trust us…they don’t want us to write down what we think about the school and the teachers._

### 3.3 Feasibility of e-consultation with children in schools

#### 3.3.1 Designing the mechanisms

The project was planned and developed within ‘Sakai’\(^1\), a virtual learning and research environment (VLRE) (that is, a collection of online tools for learning and research). As such the VLRE not only hosted the e-consultation mechanisms but also allowed all information relating to the project (for example, transcripts, data generated from the mechanisms, draft reports etc) to be held in a shared location which could be easily accessed by the project team. The use of this environment also ensured secure access and privacy for users, including the pupils who used the VLRE when piloting the e-consultation mechanisms. The VLRE also allowed browser-based access to the mechanisms without the need for additional software in schools. Finally it generated a certain level of routine data about user activities, such as logging which pages had been accessed by which user. The feasibility of designing and amending each mechanism is described below:

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\(^1\) Technical details about Sakai can be found at http://www.sakaiproject.org/.

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The chat rooms

Password-protected chat rooms were available through the use of Sakai. However, chat rooms are a common tool and could be hosted outside Sakai. The chat was focused using textual prompts shown alongside the chat room (see Figure 1). It had been anticipated that these prompts would also include a video clip or an animated slide show, which would undoubtedly have made the prompts more appealing. However this would have required more time (approximately 2 days) than was available. Also such visual stimuli can have disadvantages. For example, one of the primary schools did not have a broadband connection which would have made the video download very slow.

Using a ready-made and secure chat room tool made this the simplest tool to set up. Though administrative knowledge of Sakai was clearly necessary, no specialised programming knowledge was required. From a technical point of view, this tool could easily be replicated by any project with access to a similar chat room system.

The storyboard

The game-like questionnaire had originally been intended to be a fully-fledged storyboard, in which students would construct free narratives of their experiences at school, and their hopes for the pupil profile. However, discussion of the initial concepts led us to create a more structured activity. Pupils were asked to drag and drop icons on the screen in order to respond to questions (see Figure 2). They could then provide additional information by typing in text boxes, if desired. This was intended to be more enjoyable for the children, and to support children with weaker literacy skills. The tool itself was created using Flash, a multimedia authoring program, and students’ data was sent back to a server based in Cambridge, where it was collated. As this tool was developed specifically for the project, it took longer to create than either of the others, and could only be altered by a Flash developer with a basic programming knowledge.

The survey

The online survey was carried out using Ostrakon\(^2\), a commercial online survey system. Ostrakon is hosted by the company, so no web server is needed. The survey was relatively simple to create, although the length and complexity of the initial survey meant that it took a couple of days to set up. Standard questions could be edited by any project member, making the process of moving from a pilot to a ‘real’ version more efficient. However, although images and audio could be included, this was more difficult and needed to be done by someone who had previously used XHTML to add images and audio to web pages (see Figure 3).

The table below compares each mechanism and summarises the key issues in relation to feasibility:

\(^2\) More details about Ostrakon can be found at www.ostrakon.org
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>Time to set up</th>
<th>Software required</th>
<th>Hardware (spec) required</th>
<th>Technical proficiency required to design</th>
<th>Technical proficiency required to amend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chat</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
<td>Sakai or other VLRE</td>
<td>Web server running Sakai. See <a href="http://www.sakaiproject.org">www.sakaiproject.org</a> for details</td>
<td>VLRE administration experience</td>
<td>VLRE administration experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyboard</td>
<td>10 days</td>
<td>Macromedia Flash</td>
<td>No particular requirements</td>
<td>Experience programming Macromedia Flash</td>
<td>Experience programming Macromedia Flash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>2 days</td>
<td>Ostrakon or other survey tool</td>
<td>No particular requirements – e.g. Ostrakon is provided as an online service</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Table comparing e-consultation mechanisms in relation to practical feasibility
Figure 2: Screenshot of chat room facility

Figure 3: Screenshot of storyboard facility

Figure 4: Screenshot of survey facility
3.3.2 Using the mechanisms in the classroom

The teacher whose pupils had participated in the chat room facility was positive about the feasibility of using it in the classroom both in terms of literacy level in the text and also in terms of the ICT skills required:

*It certainly was very accessible. It was easy to understand and use, typing in the web address and using the password. So the interface was quite straightforward for them. They're very familiar with using web-based resources. I was very happy with it.*

Access to computers was also straightforward in this school:

*We have a computer suite and several computers in all our classrooms. In all schools since NOF and C2K schools are well resourced in terms of computers so in terms of having access to the resources it's much more possible than it would have been 10 years ago.*

The teacher did however recognize that this might pose a problem for schools without ICT suites or with large classes. One option suggested by the teacher was to encourage pupils to access the mechanisms from home. However he or she did acknowledge that this would be ‘unfair on the children who don’t have access’. This point was picked up by the RAG when comparing pupil and teacher views. As one pupil commented:

*The teachers might say that’s really good- You can go and do that in the house. But what if you don’t have a computer? Then when your friends come in the next day and say what they’ve done you might feel a bit left out*

The teacher also identified an ‘age appropriate’ factor in using the chat room:

*It would be more difficult for younger children to be able to feedback. My P7s were very familiar I would say the 6s and 5s would probably be fine as well with that but lower down the school, they would need a different means of getting their views.*

The teacher whose pupils used the survey tool was also very positive about its feasibility in the classroom:

*I thought the survey was very easy for them. They seemed to go straight through it with no problems at all - just point, click, scroll*

However like the teacher above he or she did identify potential classroom management issues in schools without ICT suites:
There’s always going to be a backlog. Unless you have an ICT suite, which some schools have. We choose not to do that. We prefer to have ours in the classroom. So there always be a backlog of children waiting to get onto the system. It won’t be the only activity going on in the classes. So what you would need to do then is get the time scale right for the consultation period. If you have long enough for any piece of ICT work, if you have the system we work... you’d need three months to make sure you got them all through really.

The third teacher whose school had 40% of the pupils on the special needs register also commented on the accessibility of the survey:

There’s an awful lot of reading in that. I wouldn’t let my children, to be honest, do that... Some of our children we have to be realistic at the age of 11 have got reading ages of 8, 8 and a half, 5. And you have to say to yourself in terms of not even the individual questions but in terms of the amount of questions. If I was doing it personally I would make it very simple.

In this school the children had used the storyboard mechanism which again posed some problems for the pupils:

But even the storyboard would be impossible for some children. The storyboard still has a large amount of literacy input at the start. That’s always going to be difficult. You have to impart that information in some way to them. I think if they were talked through it and it was explained to them.

3.3.3. Analyzing the data from the mechanisms

One of the key features of any consultation mechanism is the ease with which the responses can be analysed. The data generated by each of the mechanisms is produced in different ways. The data in the chat mechanism takes the form of a transcript of the actual chat:

Figure 5: Excerpt from chat room transcript
The data in the storyboard mechanism is generated as a list of individual responses which need to be combined for analysis.

Student Lauren said The student likes the following: 1st choice - comments; 2nd choice - symbols; 3rd choice - grades; The student made the following general comments: "it may upset some people getting a grade;"

Student Lauren said The student would like the following words to be used: classmates; on_time; hardworking; The student made the following general comments: "the words used should be easier to read;"

Student Lauren said The student would like their report to look like this: Colour text; large text; comic ms type

Student Andrew said The student would like to receive: What I’ve done this year and what I still need extra help with in christmas; To next year’s teacher in summer_holidays;

Student Andrew said The student would like the new profile to be written by the following people: the child’s teacher; the children themselves;

Student Andrew said The student would like to see the following in their new profile: Homework; Fun I have in school; Attendance; Subjects I do in class;

Figure 6: Extract of data set generated by story board mechanism

The survey tool contains a mechanism for generating a report, which collates the data and presents it in graphical form in addition to combining any free responses to questions:

“**It should include the things you do outside school**”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Agree a little bit</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
<th>Disagree a little bit</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Is there anything else you would like to say about when you should get your pupil profile?**

- There is nothing else i would like to say about my pupil profile
- u should get a profile at christmas, easter
- no
- Not a thing.
- the teacher should help you from the very start of the year and not just after christmas

Figure 7: Extracts from report generated by survey tool
There can be little doubt that, from the perspective of analysis, the survey is the most convenient mechanism for those wishing to undertake consultation with children. This was apparent to the Research Advisory Group who commented:

*They can look at it and see the numbers right away.*

They thought that the storyboard data would be the most difficult to analyse, followed by the chat mechanism. One of the difficulties identified in relation to the chat transcripts was that government might have problems following some of the text-type language in the chat rooms. However, they acknowledged that the chat room would be useful because:

*There are things there they wouldn’t get in the storyboard or chat.*
4. Conclusion

4.1 The Potential of E-Consultation: The Children’s Rights Dimension

The responses of the teachers and pupils who participated in the pilot study demonstrate the potential for e-consultation 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. The study shows that from a children’s rights perspective e-consultation in general provides a very effective way to engage children in policy consultations. First, it facilitates direct contact between children and government. Secondly, while as noted above the use of video and/or sound files would have enhanced the mechanisms, e-consultation employs a medium which children clearly enjoy using. Thirdly, e-consultation provides mechanisms whereby children can anonymously express their views and as such are more likely to give honest answers. 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.

Moreover the study demonstrates that 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. As such the piloted mechanisms demonstrate the additional potential for e-consultation as ‘consultation for learning’. 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.

The study also shows that e-consultation, developed using a children’s rights perspective, can convince children that their views will be taken seriously. In addition to the specific mechanisms outlined earlier, which can be hosted and/or incorporate into e-consultation mechanisms, 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 were overwhelmingly positive when asked whether they thought that their views would be taken seriously by government. When asked why they were so sure about this, the replies included:

Because they [the government] want to make things better.

It’s really important as we are the children they [the government] want to help.

If they keep on ignoring us, they could just get things wrong
They don’t know what children think unless you tell them.

and perhaps most tellingly:

Because we took the time to do it.

Finally 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.

4.2 The Potential of E-Consultation: The Educational Benefits

The pupils and teachers who participated in the study identified a number of general educational benefits which could be accrued from participating in e-consultation. First, the teachers 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. Secondly, participation in e-consultation provides an opportunity for children to learn about aspects of the work of government and to discover with which issues affecting them government are currently engaged. Furthermore it provides specific opportunities for pupils to take action on these issues by expressing their views directly to government. Thirdly, 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 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’. As such e-consultation has the potential to provide opportunities for children to learn practically about their rights or to reinforce previous classroom based learning. Thirdly, as the RAG noted, while teachers focused on ‘learning’ the pupils focused on the ‘fun’ aspect of e-consultation. The piloted approach to e-consultation therefore has the potential to underline ‘learning as fun’ in the classroom.

In sum the study demonstrates the potential for e-consultation to provide opportunities for development cross-curricular skills, such as ICT and communication, and thinking skills and personal capabilities, such as managing information. Furthermore it 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.
4.3 Developing an effective e-consultation strategy

4.3.1 Involving children in the process

The pilot study suggests that 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. There were clear benefits in involving children in the Research Advisory Group: offering valuable practical insight into the design of the mechanisms; pre-piloting the mechanisms to ensure ease of use with other children; providing comparative insight on the three mechanisms and assisting with the analysis of the findings. Their involvement in the analysis was particularly significant since it provided a children’s perspective on other children’s views which at times countered an adult interpretation of the views and as such led to a more nuanced understanding of the findings. What may be of particular interest to policy makers is that these benefits were accrued with relative little additional cost in terms of time. No more than 6 hours were required to work with the RAG: initial focus group, 1-2 hours; pre-piloting the mechanisms, 2 hours; children’s analysis of data, 2 hours. The study demonstrates the effectiveness of an approach to e-consultation which is based on a children’s rights perspective. This process is summarised as a series of progressive steps in Appendix 4.

4.3.2 Practical feasibility

The three e-consultation mechanisms piloted in the study are each feasible in terms of design. While the ‘storyboard’ mechanism requires specific expertise in relation to ‘flash’ programming, the ‘chat’ and ‘survey’ require moderate ICT competence for design and subsequent amendments. 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 evidently the data would be very time-consuming to analyse.

In terms of classroom use the teachers agreed that 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. This was supported by the views of the children who piloted the mechanisms and the RAG. It was also acknowledged that children with special education needs would find the survey extremely challenging. However it was also noted that the ‘story board’ activity would also be difficult for these children and as such would require a degree of teacher assistance in supporting the pupils using the mechanisms. In such contexts the need to ensure privacy to elicit an honest response from pupils would need to be balanced...
against the need to ensure equal access for all pupils regardless of ability. 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 he e-consultation. However as noted above it was suggested that policy makers should ensure that the consultation period was of a sufficient length of time to allow for this.

4.3.3 Selecting an effective mechanism

The children in the Research Advisory Group (RAG) had the opportunity to try all three mechanisms and therefore were able to provide comparative insight. The RAG preferred the interactive element of the chat mechanism identifying its advantages as follows:

It was fun waiting to see what others typed.

You can talk to your friends.

They also thought that the teachers might see the fact that they were communicating with each other as an advantage. However, they expressed concern that the teachers and government might not be able to follow ‘text language’.

The RAG felt that the survey would be the least popular with pupils as it was the most ‘boring’. Comments included:

There were too many questions and it was only grey and white.

The RAG did, however, recognize that it would be most popular with their teachers and with government. They thought that the teachers would like the fact that it had a ‘lot of reading’ and government would like the fact that the survey gave them ‘more information’.

They also thought that the storyboard, while an engaging and enjoyable medium, did not give pupils as much freedom to express their views but might be appropriate for younger children and children with learning difficulties.

Each of the mechanisms piloted in this study therefore has particular strengths and each presents particular challenges to developing an effective e-consultation strategy.

The chat mechanism had a high engagement factor as the children thoroughly enjoyed using it. It provided a very open environment for sharing views and provided an opportunity for children to see communication in ICT in action. It was relatively simply 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. While the children enjoyed using it they 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.

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 other two mechanisms. For example, incorporating activity based questions into the survey using some of the strategies employed in the storyboard. The chat facility could also be used creatively alongside the survey: pupils could chat with other pupils on the topic of consultation to assist them in forming their views before completing the survey; pupils could chat after completing the survey to extend their learning on topics of relevance to citizenship issues and to generate ideas and opportunities for further action.
5. Recommendations

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:

- consider using e-consultation as an effective strategy for meeting their obligations to consult with children.

- consider developing e-consultation strategies which are children’s rights compliant by:
  - involving children in the design of the consultation strategy and in the analysis of results
  - including mechanisms tailored to meet the needs of children
  - ensuring that the mechanisms developed assist children in forming their views
  - providing a safe and inclusive space in which children can express their views
  - including strategies to assure children that their views are taken seriously

- 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.

- encourage schools to consider incorporating e-consultation on real policy issues into the citizenship curriculum as a opportunity for children to take action on matters affecting them.

- encourage schools to make use of e-consultation with children on internal policy issues and as part of the school’s self-evaluation process.

- explore the possibility of hosting a wide range of e-consultation tools (including a survey tool) on the ‘Learning Northern Ireland’ online learning environment.

- encourage existing ICT training programmes to include the development of teachers’ skills in relation to design and implementing e-consultation strategies.
Appendix 1: Themes emerging from children’s analysis of qualitative data

Ideas from pupils on e-consultation (arising from focus group discussions):

The pupils thematised the qualitative data from pupil focus groups under the following headings:

- ‘Enjoyable/not enjoyable’ aspects of e-consultation
- ‘Easy/hard’ aspects of using the mechanisms
- ‘Serious listening’ to the views of children
- ‘Honest’ responses to questions being asked
- ‘Children and other ideas’ – learning from other people’s views
- ‘My views’ – the chance to give your own views

Figure 8: Pupils from the Research Advisory Group ‘clustered’ comments from pupil focus groups to generate themes

Ideas from teachers (arising from interviews):

Figure 9: Pupils from the Research Advisory Group ‘clustered’ comments from teacher interviews to generate themes
• ‘Don’t trust us/ giving children a say’- relating to the variety of views held by teachers
• ‘Improvements’ to the e-consultation mechanisms
• ‘Good ideas’- what worked well, including things like honesty, confidentiality etc.
• ‘Helping learning’- how e-consultation would contribute to pupil learning
• ‘Left out’ – problems with access which might exclude certain pupils
• ‘Safety’ – concerns regarding internet safety

Comparing and contrasting pupils and teachers views:

According to the RAG pupils and teachers agreed that:

• it was good to have access to other children’s views
• some teachers can take children’s views seriously
• the mechanisms allowed for honesty/anonymity/confidential
• the mechanisms were safe/not scary for pupils
• giving room for free responses was a good idea

According to the RAG pupils and teachers disagreed on the following:

• whether or not it could be used in school to address issues like bullying (pupils thought it could, teachers thought it could not)
• some teachers think children’s views cannot be taken seriously
• teachers thought peer pressure might stop pupils from giving their own views; pupils did not raise this issue
• pupils raised that it was a good chance to say what you thought; teachers did not
• teachers talked mostly about the ‘learning’ that could come from e-consultation; pupils talked mostly about the ‘fun’ they had had!
Appendix 2: Centre for Applied Research in Educational Technologies (CARET)

CARET (http://www.caret.cam.ac.uk) at the University of Cambridge aims to enrich the experience of education for students, teachers and researchers by providing a range of generic tools free of charge or producing tailor-made solutions where funding is available. CARET also promotes the debate and evaluation of developments in educational technologies.

It provides services for the ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme including web hosting for projects, a 'DSpace' digital repository and Virtual Research Environments based on the dotLRN and Sakai platforms, and has been awarded a JISC grant to evaluate the Sakai platform as a potential virtual research environment for social science research more generally. The staff at CARET has a wide range of experience in the development, implementation and evaluation of software within education projects: these include e-learning and collaboration environments, online feedback and survey tools, e-Portfolios, and games and simulations.
Appendix 3: Research Instruments

Focus Group Questions (pupils):

**Engagement**

- Did the activities give you a good opportunity to express your views?
- Did you feel comfortable giving your opinions using the computer? Was it easier or harder than giving your opinions ‘face to face’? Why?
- Did the activities help you to think about things you hadn’t thought of before? What? How?
- Did the activities give you the chance to say everything you wanted to say?

**Audience/ Influence**

- Do you understand what will happen to your views now?
- Do you think your views will be listened to? Why? Why not?
- How else could government convince other children that their views are being taken seriously?

**Feasibility**

- Did you find the activity easy? Why? Why not?
- What difficulties did you have using the survey/chat room/storyboard?
- What advice would you give to government to make this easier for children to use?

**Citizenship**

- How important do you think it is that children tell government what they think?
- Do you think using computers in the classroom is a good way of government finding out what children think?
- Are there any other things the government could do to find out what children think? Using computers? Using things other than computers?
- What did you learn through doing the activity?
Interview Questions (Teachers):

Engagement

- Do you think the activities give the children a good opportunity to express their views?
- Do you think they feel comfortable giving their opinions using the computer? Is it easier or harder than giving opinions ‘face to face’? Why?
- Did the activities help the pupils to think about things they hadn’t thought of before? What? How?

Audience/ Influence

- Do you think they understand what will happen to their views now?
- Do you think their views will be listened to? Why? Why not?
- How else could government convince children that their views are being taken seriously?

Feasibility

- How easy/accessible was the activity for the pupils?
- What difficulties do you envisage children having when using the survey/chat room/storyboard?
- How do you think it could be made easier for children to use?
- What classroom management issues do you envisage if this strategy were to be adopted? Computer facilities? Group size? Access in other classrooms/? Younger pupils? Timetabling?

Citizenship

- How important do you think it is that children get the opportunity to express their views to government?
- Do you think using computers in the classroom is a good way of government finding out what children think?
- Are there any other mechanisms the government could use to obtain children’s views on policies? Using ICT? Other mechanisms?
- Can you see any use for this type of mechanism within your own schools context?
- What do you think the children learnt from doing the activity?
Appendix 4: An Effective Process for E-Consultation with Children

Step 1: Initial focus group with Research Advisory Group to ascertain children’s views on the consultation issue and on the most effective way to consult with children.

Step 2: Design e-consultation mechanism based on children’s responses to initial focus group.

Step 3: Pilot e-consultation mechanism with RAG to ascertain views on content and mechanism.

Step 4: E-consultation open to all participating children.

Step 5: Collate data.

Step 6: Analyse data with RAG.

Step 7: Inform all participants of outcomes of the consultation and action to be taken.
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