Student Consultation about Learning and Teaching in the English Classroom

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Introduction

1.1 Rationale

The ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) ignited a range of efforts the world over to take children's ideas about things that matter to them more seriously (Lewis and Porter, 2007). In the United Kingdom, Section 176 of the Education Act of 2002 called for "consultation with pupils in connection with the taking of decisions which affect them," while Section 53 of the Children Act of 2004 established the responsibility of local authorities to solicit young people's opinions about local authority services, of which schooling is one (Morgan, 2011). To these ends, the government has provided statutory guidance on involving children in the work of schools in a document titled *Working Together: Giving Children and Young People a Say* (DfES, 2004). Moreover, the Education Act of 2005 also created the obligation for Ofsted to consider students' views as part of their routine inspections of schools. Another policy document (DCSF, 2008) cited a range of benefits that research had associated with giving students a voice:

> Giving children and young people a say in decisions that affect them can improve engagement in learning, help develop a more inclusive school environment and improve behaviour and attendance. Through effective pupil participation, schools give young people the opportunity to develop critical thinking, advocacy and influencing skills, helping every child to fulfill their potential. (p. 1)

In short, the right for children to be involved in decisions that affect their school lives has not only been legally established but also reinforced in successive policy papers (Shevlin and Rose, 2008). Yet, teachers formally consulting students about what happens in the classroom remains relatively rare as a practice in the UK at the time of writing. By experimenting with consulting my own students, with giving them a say in what happens in my English lessons, I hoped to explore—through personal experience—the challenges and rewards of consultation, as well as how students and colleagues might respond to my efforts.

1.2 Context

Mornington School (a pseudonym) is a co-educational preparatory school located in the South East of England. The school has around 390 boys and girls aged between 3-13 years on roll and provides a traditional and privileged education with compulsory Latin, a relatively small number of students in each class, and extensive grounds that include a range of sporting facilities. Children can choose to board from the age of 7 and spend a substantial part of their lives at school even if they opt out of boarding—days are relatively long and every other Saturday is a school day.

The purpose of prep schools like Mornington has always been to prepare children for Common Entrance (CE) examinations in hopes of securing students places at elite 'senior schools' such as Charterhouse, Rugby or Shrewsbury. While the aim of prep schools remains the same, many of them have begun in recent years to move away from CE. Instead, the 'pre-tests' that

students take in anticipation of CE, usually in year six, have become the main means for admission to the majority of senior schools. Increasingly, senior schools are offering places based solely on pre-test performance, doing away with the requirement of a set of CE results. In response, prep schools have begun to discontinue preparation for CE in years seven and eight. As of the 2020-2021 academic year, Mornington School has now completely abandoned CE. Consequently, the school's curriculum has become less constrained by the requirements of CE syllabuses, which has resulted in greater flexibility and opportunities for more personalized teaching, especially in years seven and eight.

At Mornington, the move away from CE coincided with the school's 200-year anniversary. As a way of marking the occasion but perhaps also to celebrate and exploit fresh opportunities for self-determination, a new 'Curriculum 200' was launched. The design of the new curriculum was directed by the Mornington leadership team and executed at the departmental level, with all of the school's teachers acting as co-constructors of the new curriculum. While the school's approach to the design of Curriculum 200 probably seems perfectly legitimate to most of the school's teachers, parents and students, I was struck by the absence of a particular group of key stakeholders in the decision-making process. *Students*, crucially, were not invited to contribute to the design of Curriculum 200.

"But I listen to children all the time anyway!" would, I suspect, be the slightly indignant reaction of some of my colleagues if I were to say that the input of students played no appreciable role in the creation of our new

curriculum (see Bragg, 2007). Admittedly, teachers probably do generally have a good sense of what works for the students they teach and why. Still, Mornington currently occupies a rare and privileged position—certainly within the context of the current educational climate in the UK—of curricular freedom. By giving students a seat at the table, the school might not only increase the legitimacy of its curriculum, but also reap other benefits of consulting students about teaching and learning.

1.3 Questions

In my reading of the existing literature, I was looking for answers to a number of questions concerning student consultation. First, I wanted to know what I stood to gain by consulting my students—what, in other words, are the potential benefits according to the literature? Second, I wanted to understand why student consultation was not more widespread—what challenges does student consultation present both students and teachers with? Finally, given that I was going to embark on consulting my students myself, I wanted to learn more about how to go about it—what should teachers bear in mind when they consult students and which strategies have been shown to be effective?

Literature Review

2.1 Student Consultation: Introduction

In this section, I review the literature on student consultation. The benefits as well as challenges of consulting students are explored, as are strategic considerations concerning possible approaches to student consultation. To begin with, however, I submit definitions of several relevant concepts.

2.1.1 Student Voice

Before defining and discussing student consultation in depth, I want to briefly situate it—along with student participation—under the umbrella of *student voice*. This broad and sometimes contentious term (Arnot and Reay, 2007) is most helpful, I would argue, when it is used to describe students sharing their ideas about school life with others, especially adults involved in their education. Similarly, Mitra (2018) argued that student voice involves young people talking or collaborating with adults to address school problems, or taking charge of such efforts.

2.1.2 Student Participation

Student voice is generally encouraged in one of two ways. The first, *student participation*, is arguably less demanding and invites students to take part in the broader work of the school. Students may be involved, for example, in new staff appointments or in decisions about the design of outdoor playing areas..

School councils, where students who were elected by their peers serve to represent the views and interests of the wider student community, are often the main vehicle through which student participation is facilitated. Participation initiatives *can* invite students to comment and reflect on existing school practices, but this is not necessarily the case (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Students may help decide on the destinations of school trips, they may lodge requests for certain clubs or extracurriculars to be added to the existing offering, or they might campaign to have a climbing wall installed on the school grounds, but student participation does not typically involve student commentary on what teachers do in lessons or about the development of the school curriculum (Ceballos et al., 2019).

2.1.3 Student Consultation

Student voice can also be solicited through *student consultation*. According to Rudduck and McIntyre (2007), who wrote the proverbial book on the subject (although they prefer the term '*pupil* consultation'), student consultation means "talking with students about things that matter to them in the classroom and school and affect their learning" (p. 7).

2.1.4 Informal Consultation

When I told Lilian, one of the deputy heads at Mornington, about the consultation intervention that was part of my research project, she asked, 'Isn't that something teachers already do anyway?'

She had a point: teachers regularly consult their students by giving them choices, by spot-checking their understanding of concepts, or by asking them whether they found an activity, lesson, or topic useful or enjoyable (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). One of the teachers in Morgan's (2011) project, Emma, seems to echo Lilian's sentiments about consultation when she said the following:

> I tend to do this anyway as pupils go out the class: 'Oh how was that? Did you enjoy that?', 'Oh yes Miss that was great' or 'Did you find that useful?', 'Yeh but that bit was a bit hard.' (p. 454)

This type of *informal consultation* does not always concern teaching and learning but, because it tends to happen verbally and spontaneously, has some distinct advantages.

Informal consultation can be done whenever it is convenient, without planning, scheduling, or imposing significantly on teachers' and students' time; it can easily be fit into moments of cognitive quiet in the rhythm of the school day, like during 'passing periods' or around break times; and it allows teachers to respond to issues as and when they arise or to focus on particular students (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Additionally, informal consultation could benefit from a range of other positive outcomes associated with student consultation in general—I offer a more comprehensive discussion of this aspect of the literature in section 2.2.

The limitations of informal consultation are also outlined by Rudduck and McIntyre (2007). Because it lacks planning and a systematic approach, informal consultation is likely to be more narrow in scope and unable to

explore issues in depth. Since informal consultation often occurs in a fleeting moment, students may not have enough time to reflect and express their views properly. Moreover, the opinions of less vocal, less articulate, and disengaged students may never be heard, while the potentially unrepresentative ideas of students who enjoy talking to teachers are likely to be privileged. Lastly, the benefits associated with students feeling that their views are recognized as valuable when they are consulted may be absent.

2.1.5 Formal Consultation

Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) argue that *formal consultation* is more deliberate, broad and explicit than informal consultation. Formal consultation is more deliberate since it is sustained over a period of time and requires, partly because of the sustained effort, careful planning by teachers (or researchers). And while informal consultation tends to focus on particular issues as they arise in the classroom, formal consultation has a less marked agenda and invites students to comment on teaching and learning more broadly. Students should be able to comment not just on teaching and learning, but also on the social conditions of learning, such as classroom organization or the management of time and space (Ceballos et al., 2019). A third, crucial difference between formal and informal consultation is that when students are formally consulted, it is made clear to them from the outset that their ideas are sought, valued, and that what they say will be listened to and can lead to tangible change (Lewis and Porter, 2007).

2.1.6 Typical Feedback

The feedback students give following consultation about teaching and learning is remarkably consistent in a number of areas (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Relationships between students and teachers seem to be of central importance to the quality of students' lives in the classroom, outweighing other factors by a considerable margin (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004). In addition, students express a desire for lessons not to be boring:

> And she rambles on a bit and that makes us lose concentration . . . she talks and talks and talks and talks and she doesn't stop. And that goes on for ages. We just get so bored that we lose concentration and start talking to our friends. (Pedder and McIntyre, 2004, p. 11)

Instead, they prefer lessons that contain variety and some scope for activity: "I like lessons where we have to do something, not just read, write and listen" (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004, p. 81). Being able to actively participate in a lesson also helps to make learning meaningful for students by turning abstract notions into lived experiences. One of the students in Morgan's (2000) project observed that active participation through role play is also simply more enjoyable, and that this contributes to learning too:

> [Role plays] help you build up your confidence for doing things in front of the class and help you understand characters in books more, it makes it more fun and, I don't know, you might be more willing to learn if you do more like that kind of thing. (p. 39)

Active participation, in turn, promotes togetherness, which students experience as important and beneficial: "I like working in groups. It gives me

confidence" (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004, p. 80). A feeling of togetherness can be promoted through pair or group work, but also through whole-class discussions: "Sharing ideas amongst the class helps you to feel more involved in the subject" (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004, p. 80). Students also like receiving a certain degree of autonomy in their work, perhaps so that they can feel a sense of pride and accomplishment when they manage things by themselves: "I enjoyed this lesson as we worked in partners and didn't have to have any help from the teacher" (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004, pp. 83–84). Similarly, Morgan's (2011) consultation project revealed that students wanted to have more choices in their learning.

In terms of further, actionable advice for teachers, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) advise reducing the amount of teacher talk and the amount of copying in lessons, and to focus instead on more engaging activities that involve action and interaction. Students involved in Morgan's (2011) project, for instance, requested more practical work through experiments in science lessons and they offered short video clips as a more enjoyable substitute, seemingly, for extended teacher talk.

2.2 Student Consultation: Benefits

The literature on student voice holds ample evidence of the potential benefits of consulting students about teaching and learning. These insights were mostly gained following comparatively small-scale studies for the simple reason that consulting students is relatively uncommon in the UK and many other places—sometimes in spite of official rhetoric (e.g. Morgan, 2011). Because

student consultation is not currently widely practised, the large-scale evidence required to make generalised claims about the impact of consulting students is still missing. As a consequence, the benefits discussed below must be qualified as *potential* benefits (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). If consulting students becomes more widespread, and with additional and especially larger-scale research confirming existing findings, claims about the benefits of student consultation can be made with greater confidence.

2.2.1 Benefits for Students

An important benefit of consultation for students is that the process can be empowering and foster an improved sense of civic efficacy and personal agency. It is important to note, first, that students are generally keen to express their views on their education, and that they tend to be mature and responsible in their contributions (Ireland et al., 2006). When asked about being consulted about teaching and learning in her school, one of the students in Mulliss's (2002) study said "it's something [students] think needs improving, and it interests us. It's something we already know a lot about. Some people aren't learning and we can help" (p. 3). When students subsequently notice their feedback brings about visible change, the belief in their own civic efficacy, the conviction that they can actually make a difference, is fostered (Kirschner et al., 2005). Hoskins et al. (2012) argue that contextualized civic engagement—*doing* citizenship rather than learning *about* citizenship—is a far more effective way of encouraging students to be more disposed to engage in active citizenship.

The feeling that they can make a positive impact in the world is amplified when students take a more active role in the consultation process. Students can feel especially empowered when they act as researchers, setting the agenda for consultation and developing strategies to consult their peers in the process:

> We learned communication skills that helped us in the way we carried out the interviews, we also learned about creating a key question and developing our strategy around it. This skill has recently helped us with our History and English coursework. (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007, p. 143)

Likewise, Mitra and Serriere (2012) elaborate on the new competences developed by a group of five primary-school students over the course of their consultation project: these students learned to challenge authority tactfully, to gather, interpret, and share data, and developed time-management and leadership skills, including a remarkable feeling of responsibility to look after the interests of others. Indeed, consulting students also represents a useful avenue for students to learn active citizenship, particularly when students act as researchers.

Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) argue that students can also feel an increased sense of belonging when they are consulted, that their class and school is really *theirs*, which can be a novel feeling for some students. Mitra and Serriere (2012) found that the students in their project felt more connected to their school, teachers and peers following consultation. One of the student-researchers in Fielding and Bragg (2003) said the following about how consultation altered the dynamics between students and teachers: “It changed

how some staff at the school considered their students, encouraging them to think of students more as equals and a source of help in making the most of their teaching" (p. 20).

Along with a greater sense of belonging, research has also suggested that students develop a stronger sense of self by being consulted. Through their end-of-project survey, which involved a relatively large number of teachers commenting on their experiences with student consultation, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) found that 84% of teachers thought that consultation made students feel better about themselves. When asked whether she thought teachers should consult their students, one of the participants in Morgan's (2000) project emphasized the sense of recognition she felt through being consulted:

> I think it's just what teachers should do. I think that all teachers should do it because it's just so helpful cos you know your teachers actually care what you think and they're not just there to teach you and get money for it. (p. 47)

It is clear from her comment that students can at times feel more like objects or statistics in the eyes of teachers and schools. Being recognised as a human being by being consulted can give students a stronger sense of themselves as beings with thoughts and feelings that matter. A student-researcher involved in one of Rudduck and McIntyre's (2007) projects explained how, when schools listen to students, this can help students see themselves in a more positive light:

> I had found the extra niche that I needed in order to keep me interested in my studies and motivate me to come to school. From some work that I

> had done I influenced the school's feeling about profiling so much that they had changed it. That gave me a great sense of achievement. (p. 144)

The comment above also indicates how recognizing the value of students' perspectives and treating them accordingly can help motivate students to apply themselves more to their education. A teacher involved in the work of MacBeath et al. (2003) explained how consultation promoted a range of benefits, not only in students' sense of self, but also in their learning and motivation:

> We've learned a lot about how students rapidly improve in their learning and their self-esteem and their motivation through dialogue with staff, through feeling important, feeling cared for, feeling their views matter. I think it's had a really significant effect. (p. 6)

Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) found that teachers widely noticed that students felt more positively about school following consultation, with improvements in attendance, motivation and even attainment.

Yes, *attainment*. The benefits I have mentioned so far might be regarded as mildly interesting but are perhaps unlikely to inspire teachers to immediately consider consulting their own students. Schools are far too busy squeezing as much learning—mostly through teaching—out of every minute of each school day. But spending more time on teaching and foregoing consultation may be a false economy in the bid to maximize performance, because consulting students can stimulate learning. There are three reasons, according to Rudduck and McIntyre (2007), why consultation may galvanize student learning. By consulting students, first, teachers can identify helpful and less helpful elements

of their own teaching practice and adapt accordingly. By learning what students enjoy, secondly, lessons can be made more fun, which, students assure, genuinely helps them learn better. Finally, teachers who acknowledge and take an interest in their students by consulting them (and by subsequently acting on students' feedback) are liked and respected by students for doing so, which actually aids learning. One student put it in the simplest of terms when she said "you tend to work better if you like the teacher" (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007, p. 115).

While a number of factors including those outlined above probably contributed to the improvements in attainment, I suspect enhanced metacognition may have played a dominant role. Following two years of consulting her students, Mulliss (2002) noted the impact the process had had on her students:

> When you work with the students in this way you can see they're learning about all sorts of things - about themselves, about the subject and how they learn, and about other students. What we're enabling them to do, I think, is to be more critical of their own education, and I mean that in the positive sense in which they're beginning to understand, and to be able to articulate more about what's going well, what's going badly, [and] why it's going badly. (p. 3)

By inviting students to think and comment on their experience of education they are encouraged to reflect, perhaps more than they otherwise would, on learning, thereby also gaining a deeper understanding of how they themselves learn (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). A teacher involved in Fielding and Bragg's

(2003) work on students as researchers noted students' own awareness of the transformational impact of consultation on metacognition:

> Our students tell us that things have changed for them in their ability to see themselves as learners, that their ability to understand the process of learning has been affected by becoming able to conduct research themselves, and that they've been able to use those skills specifically in their own research for subjects. But I think it's more than that. They can see themselves as people who can control their own learning and can direct it because they can understand it. (p. 18)

In the words of another teacher, consulting students about teaching and learning is "educational in its own sense, it develops [students'] ability to take responsibility for their learning" (MacBeath et al., 2003, p. 6). If consulting students is educational in its own sense, introducing consultation may be more beneficial to students' learning than additional instruction, especially considering the metacognitive benefits, which apply across subjects.

2.2.2 Benefits for Teachers

As an English teacher, I am used to giving students ideas about what they can do to improve in my subject by setting clear, actionable targets. I attempt to put a positive spin on these by telling students not just what they can do to improve, but also what they are already doing well, or by highlighting some element of their work that I was particularly impressed by. What student consultation does, in essence, is turn this process on its head. At the most basic level, the purpose of consulting students is for teachers to understand how they

can improve what they do in the classroom so that their students learn more effectively. Perhaps the most obvious benefit of consultation, then, is that it provides teachers with a practical agenda—clear, actionable targets, if you will—to improve their teaching (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Simply put, just as teacher feedback can help students improve in a subject, teachers can become better at their jobs by listening to student feedback. Consulting students helps teachers to reflect on their practice, leads to new thinking, and could be seen as a form of continuing professional development (CPD) according to Messiou and Ainscow (2015). Indeed, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) found that teachers generally welcomed the insights students provided them through consultation, and that they readily incorporated the feedback they received into their teaching.

In addition to providing learning opportunities for teachers, consulting students can also give teachers an increased sense of professional wellbeing. While government initiatives that seek to standardize teaching approaches—like the literacy hour—can provide benefits for students, they also limit teacher creativity and may be felt to signal distrust in the professional judgement of teachers (Rudduck and Flutter, 2004; Machin and McNally, 2008). In contrast, the positive feedback students often give when consulted can reassure teachers of their competence as professionals, and relating to students in new ways can foster a renewed sense of excitement, as one teacher explained:

> You know, that's what made me enthusiastic because I suddenly see all that untapped creativity really . . . You can use pupils' ideas in a very

> valid, interesting way and it can make the pupil excited, the teacher excited and you know obviously the lesson will take off from there . . . It's like going on a teachers' conference and sort of thinking, 'Oh, that's a good idea,' and planning a series of lessons together. You know . . . although you do a bit of collaborating with other teachers, there's not that much time any more so, you know, if you can actually collaborate with pupils it's equally—I didn't realise it—it's equally exciting, isn't it? (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007, p. 147-148).

Indeed, the research is littered with energized endorsements of student consultation from teachers, which, if nothing else, speaks to consultation's potential to positively affect the job satisfaction of teachers.

Part of the excitement and joy appears to stem from teachers' changed perceptions of students' attitudes and competences as a result of consulting them. It is not always obvious how students feel about lessons, teachers and school in general and students often feel more positively than expected (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Furthermore, the maturity and sensitivity with which students comment on teaching and learning, along with the insightfulness and freshness of students' ideas, can cause teachers to see students in a more positive light (Fielding and Bragg, 2003). Importantly, teachers perceiving their students as more positive, mature and perceptive than they might have done previously can contribute to positive changes in the relationships between students and teachers.

2.2.3 Benefits for Schools

One of the key benefits—perhaps the most crucial benefit—of student consultation is the impact it frequently has on student-teacher relationships. Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) argue that consultation cultivates mutual respect and trust between students and teachers. When students respond, as they tend to do, with maturity and sensitivity to consultation, this makes teachers feel more positively about students. Conversely, students are pleased with teachers who, through consultation, value and seek out their ideas and respond to their feedback meaningfully. One of the students in Morgan's (2000) study explained how consultation had made her feel closer to her teacher and how this supported more open communication and improved relationships in the class:

> She does ask for our opinions a lot more like I said . . . and so it's almost as if we're one big group and we're all friends because we all learn from each other and that does help a lot. (p. 46)

Of course, the situation as I have just sketched it is a description of an ideal scenario, in which mutual respect and trust are not only fostered but also assumed to predate the consultation initiative. Indeed, as Pedder and McIntyre (2004) explained through the notion of 'norms of reciprocity', consultation can promote but also reduce mutual respect and trust: both students and teachers must uphold their different ends of the bargain, as it were, by investing a measure of trust in the other party from the outset. So long as they do, and if this trust is then reciprocated over the course of the consultation process, consultation can transform relationships between students and teachers from more oppositional and passive to more collaborative and active (Rudduck and

McIntyre, 2007). As an illustration, Morgan (2011) found that successful consultation may lead to better student behaviour and fewer confrontations because of improved student-teacher relationships.

Another benefit for schools is that consultation can promote more personalised learning experiences for students. While ostensibly not a benefit for schools per se, recent years have seen a persistent push towards more personalised learning (e.g. DfES, 2007) and therefore pressure on schools to deliver that ambition. Consulting students about teaching and learning represents one way of ensuring that students' learning experiences are tailor-made (Fielding, 2001). One of the teachers in Morgan's (2011) work was keen to emphasize that when teachers consult their own students, this can help generate ideas about how to respond to the particular learning needs of the students they teach:

> [P]eople don't realise the extra detail gives you quite an extra insight into your class. I think perhaps that's something that needs to be . . . got across to people. I think they think of it as a general finding where people say 'oh 10% of the pupils prefer' . . . rather than thinking of it as like when you've got specific information about your class and how you can use it to work with them. (p. 453)

Finally, I want to stress the potential for student consultation to create momentum that can snowball to generate overall school improvement, as discussed by McQuillan (2005). When teachers who are unfamiliar with consultation witness firsthand the impact student consultation can have, through the work of a colleague, for instance, this can have an inspirational

effect with potentially far-reaching consequences for the school culture. Especially when senior teachers or management champion consultation, the effects can be profound. In MacBeath et al. (2003), a teacher who was part of a school leadership team that hoped to introduce consultation as a whole-school practice commented as follows on the experience:

> We've had some very clear pointers from students about how they like to learn and I think it's given quite an encouragement to different ways of teaching. We've modified things or developed things further - and had the courage of our convictions.
>
> Staff that you thought wouldn't ever listen, who'd seen this going on and who'd said, 'Fine, yes, but that's not for me' - once they've seen the students reacting and hear what they're saying ... they're suddenly thinking, 'Well, maybe they *do* know what they're talking about.' And that brings more staff in. (p. 6)

These comments make it clear that while teachers may understandably feel apprehensive about consulting their own students at first, seeing the benefits of consultation for themselves can inspire teachers to try consulting their own students. Moreover, seeing colleagues successfully implement consultation might give teachers the confidence required to consult their students themselves. It seems that once the potential of consulting students is appreciated by a critical mass of teachers within a school, the idea of listening to student voice can engender tremendous positive change and truly transform a school, as Bragg's (2007) report on the efforts of Alison Peacock highlight. Similarly, a teacher in Tait and Martin's (2007) study said student voice was

"indeed the major change agent in our school" (p. 39). While the literature on student consultation describes many uplifting stories of students' voices making a transformational impact in schools, the process is not without its challenges.

2.3 Student Consultation: Challenges

In the face not only of political rhetoric, but also an array of potentially transformative benefits, we must ask ourselves why student consultation is not practised much more widely than is currently the case (Davies et al., 2006). This section will go some way to answering that question by describing the challenges involved in consulting students about teaching and learning.

2.3.1 Challenges for Students

Students may be hesitant about being consulted for a number of reasons. For one, they may worry that teachers, especially when relationships are strained, will not listen to what students have to say, as one dejected student explained: "they got all their like boffy degrees, they got to like think they're God Almighty and they don't even bother listening to pupils" (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007, p. 105). Such sentiments are perhaps also based on previous experiences, where students feel they have not been taken seriously by teachers.

Students can also be anxious about the consequences of what they disclose when consulted. One of the teachers in Morgan's (2011) study was disappointed with the response she got from students to a questionnaire she had distributed among them: "I expected them to be a lot more honest and a lot more critical . . . I actually wanted them to say, 'I did not understand this

because you went too fast'" (p. 454). Here, students may have felt reluctant to speak more openly and critically in an effort to not hurt the teacher's feelings, which, if it were to happen, could come back to haunt students. Opting for light encouragement instead of criticism can be a safer option, as one student explained in Rudduck and McIntyre (2007): "It's easier to say, 'Oh, it's a pretty good lesson' [...] If I had to make an evaluation I would, like, put in 3 or above to make [the teacher] feel good' (p. 163).

Moreover, it is not just the reactions of teachers that students may be concerned about when consulted; the potential response of their peers to what they want to say can have equally inhibiting effects. Students can be concerned that actively participating when consulted may be regarded by other students as implicit support for the teacher and their agenda (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Especially when student-teacher relationships are oppositional, contributing to the work of the teacher may be socially undesirable. As a result, some students may feel disinclined to express themselves openly and honestly when consulted.

While some students may feel pressure to not speak freely when consulted, others can simply lack the competence to do so. Human beings express themselves in many different ways and through a variety of media. The dominant media for student consultation are spoken or written language, and the degree to which students are able to express themselves through these means varies (Ceballos et al., 2019). Consequently, some students may feel uneasy about consultation because they are forced to rely on a means of

communication through which they feel unable to give proper articulation to their feelings and ideas (Brice Heath, 2004).

There are additional reasons for some students to struggle to have their voices heard. The voices of students with behavioural difficulties or those excluded from regular schooling because of previous transgressions, for instance, are often unheard or precluded from consultation altogether (Clarke et al., 2011). The views of students who are less able academically can be marginalised compared to those of more academically successful students, whose opinions and interests are more likely to align with those of teachers (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). The issue is complicated further when the relationship between academic success and sex, race, and social class is taken into account (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000; Mitra, 2001). There is a risk that consultation perpetuates existing inequalities by privileging the views of students who belong to dominant groups. Faced with this, Lundy (2007) argued that giving students a voice through a process like consultation is not by itself enough; all students also need *space* to fully and safely articulate their ideas, an *audience* to give serious consideration to these ideas, and *influence* in terms of the response to students' input.

2.3.2 Challenges for Teachers

Teachers, too, face numerous challenges when consulting their students about teaching and learning. Teachers may be nervous, first, that students might use consultation as a means to make unpleasant or personal remarks about teachers they are not fond of. However, decades worth of research has suggested these

sorts of concerns are misplaced (Pedder and McIntyre, 2004). Instead, teachers who consult their students tend to admire the way students respond. While they may criticize their teachers, students also readily praise teachers for the things they already do that help them, and when they do offer criticism they tend to restrict their comments to how they themselves are affected by what teachers do in the classroom rather than make things personal (Morgan, 2011). Moreover, if there is something students are unhappy about, they are able to provide both clear explanations for their discontent and useful suggestions for improvements (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007).

Additionally, some teachers may question whether students—children—possess the necessary maturity, insight and expertise to make meaningful contributions to teaching and learning. Czerniawski and Garlick (2011) argue that this 'ideology of immaturity' reflects an antiquated understanding of childhood which underestimates the ability of young people for thought, reflection and understanding and, moreover, overlook the position of students as 'expert witnesses' in the collective effort for the improvement of education. Indeed, research has demonstrated that children are perfectly capable not only of taking on new responsibilities but also of making decisions that affect their own lives (Kincheloe, 2007; Ceballos et al., 2019).

It is not just teachers but also parents who may feel that their children have no business commenting on the work of teachers and schools. This, in turn, can make teachers anxious about what parents might think about their children being involved in consultation about teaching and learning rather than

spending their time in school learning and preparing for important exams which influence their futures (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007).

At the heart of the matter, perhaps, is that student consultation upsets traditional power dynamics in education. I have already touched on how students can find this unsettling, thinking it 'rude' to criticise teachers, but it can be equally challenging for teachers, who are accustomed to exercising power over students (Cook-Sather, 2002). Some teachers can be reluctant, especially initially, to have students tell them how to do their jobs, as one of the teachers in Morgan (2000) illustrated:

> I mean I'm quite flexible but . . . I'm not going to have the curriculum dictated by a class . . . 'Well, we want to do this and we don't want to do what you tell us to do' . . . cos I'm there to guide their learning and what's in the curriculum cos they don't actually know. (p. 58)

While the possibility of consulting students about the curriculum is a complex issue in its own right, teachers may subscribe to an 'ideology of professionalism' and feel they, by virtue of their training and experience, know best when it comes to educational matters (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). To make matters worse, even when teachers are ready and willing, they may not always be able to listen to students.

External forces can make it feel necessary to discount the views of some students—when these do not coincide with the demands of the curriculum, for instance (Cremin et al., 2011). A teacher in Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) explained how the demands of the curriculum could get in the way of responding to student feedback:

> [T]he *huge* thing that they kept saying was how they loved drama . . . I think there is room for drama, but it can't be every single lesson because it's an English lesson. And if you do drama things every lesson you're neglecting the English skills that they need. (p. 124)

Likewise, teachers who had successfully incorporated consultation through involvement in the work of Pedder and McIntyre (2004) indicated that they would not continue to consult their students upon completion of the project because they considered doing so as incompatible with the demands imposed by assessments and the curriculum. In a study that examined primary students' views on the literacy hour, Hancock and Mansfield (2002) argued that a primary curriculum that is increasingly defined by government leaves little room for teacher independence and creativity, let alone for students' ideas. Riley and Rustique-Forrester (2002) recorded a headteacher's frustrations with the current focus on externally defined measures of success and how these impact not only the work of teachers but also students' learning: "I've got to call the Rottweilers off. I've really got to pull back and stop pushing my teachers just to achieve targets. We've got to start talking about children and about learning" (p. 69). Bourke and Loveridge (2016) claimed that working within the confines of a particular curriculum may lead teachers to conceptualize learning as only that which happens in service of curriculum goals. As a result, teachers may be deaf to students' ideas when these are not in the spirit of (sometimes implicit) curriculum values such as performance on standardized assessments. Equally, teachers are often constrained by space, time and the availability of

equipment in their ability to act on students' ideas (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007).

Internal factors like biases can likewise influence what teachers hear when they listen to student feedback. Fielding (2004) argued that teachers can misinterpret or co-opt—not necessarily willfully—students' commentary to legitimize their own agendas. Ceballos et al. (2016), for instance, found that when the questions that teachers had put to students failed to produce the proposals they were looking for, these responses were discarded. When consultation is used merely to legitimize adult power, it becomes tokenistic (Draxton, 2012). Tokenism disempowers students and weakens their sense of self (Mitra, 2018). However, the other extreme, what is sometimes called 'authentic listening', is a fantasy; when students are consulted, their voices and their messages are distorted by the inter-subjective nature of the process—by the people that are involved, by the roles they assume and by the preconceptions they are accompanied by (Greene, 2009).

The tendency to homogenize student perspectives is another challenge teachers face when consulting their students. While student views exhibit homogeneity in areas of pedagogy, such as what makes a good teacher or a good lesson, students' ideas in areas related to the social conditions of learning—based on where students stand in hierarchies of ability, popularity and social class—can vary dramatically (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Making assumptions about the uniformity of student perspectives can be another way of marginalizing some students, since the perceived uniformity of views can exist primarily in teachers' minds (Thomson and Gunter, 2006; Weller, 2007).

Indeed, instead of a uniform 'student voice', there is often a 'cacophony of voices', Arnot and Reay (2003) argued. Teachers may unintentionally overlook troublesome perspectives while permitting more palatable ones and then mistakenly assume that the latter are widely held (Fielding, 2007). This may be understood as a version of consensus bias. Ultimately, teachers can only try to listen to their students as best they can while being aware of the limitations inherent in the process when they consult their students.

Finally, consulting students can simply add on an additional layer of complexity to the multifaceted work of teachers, especially when there are already many ways of informally consulting students (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). Consultation could be seen as yet another item on a long list of teachers' responsibilities, requiring not just attention but also time to get to grips with. Multiple teachers in Morgan's (2011) project, for instance, were pleased with the results that external researchers who consulted their students had yielded, were keen to consult students themselves in the future, but were not sure "how to go about it" (p. 453). Similarly, Rudduck et al. (2006) noted that even when teachers involved in consultation projects relied heavily on external researchers for support, they still considered the practice demanding. In an effort to redirect the demands of consulting students away from classroom teachers, researchers in the UK have advocated for more institutional support from government and school leadership and for an increased emphasis on collaboration (instead of competition) in education (Fielding and Bragg, 2003; Rudduck and Fielding, 2006; Morgan, 2011).

2.4 Student Consultation: Strategies

Returning to the question of 'how to go about it', this section outlines the strategies for consulting students that have been described in the literature. In addition to providing an overview of options teachers have here, I refer back to particular strategies in the methodology section of the present report.

2.4.1 Conceptual Frameworks

Researchers have proposed a number of useful frameworks to help conceptualize approaches to consulting students. MacBeath et al. (2003) argued consultation could be either (a) direct, by employing questionnaires, interviews, discussions, or suggestion boxes to ask students directly about their ideas and perspectives; (b) prompted, which occurs when students are given a stimulus such as a video extract of a lesson and are then asked to comment; or (c) mediated, by letting students express themselves through an alternative medium such as drawing or photography, and then asking them to expand on the meaning of their work. In choosing a particular approach, the authors advised to carefully consider the economy (ease of implementation) and power (the ability to generate new understanding and insights).

Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) conceptualised approaches to student consultation in terms of a spectrum of student control. Questionnaires that were made by teachers and contain only closed questions represent one extreme of the spectrum, where students exercise minimal control over the consultation process; while students acting as researchers would be found on the opposite end of the spectrum, with students having control over the issues

under investigation as well as the actual process of consultation. Semi-structured interviews may be somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, with teachers and students both able to exercise comparable control over the process. Ceballos et al. (2019) refer to the same idea in their work, but prefer the phrase 'student protagonism'. Factors such as time and the familiarity of students with consultation are relevant when determining how much control it is desirable for students to have in the consultation process. When time is limited and parties are new to student consultation, a smaller degree of student protagonism may be preferable (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). As students and teachers become more accustomed to consultation, a greater degree of student control over the process may lead to less distortion of students' views (Ceballos et al., 2019).

Finally, Thompson (2009) distinguished between proactive, managerial, and constrained modes of consultation. Proactive consultation involves teachers inviting a broad range of student feedback, which is then used as a basis for teachers to reflect on their own work and, when prudent, to tweak their teaching practice. Managerial consultation occurs when teachers are less interested in actively responding to students' feedback, but instead use consultation to tick boxes as a way of demonstrating to themselves and others that they are doing what they should be doing in the classroom. Managerial consultation is not entirely honest in that students are not really given a voice, but just the ability to nod or shake their heads; scope for change and for alternative approaches is limited. Consultation is constrained, lastly, when teachers (especially when they are relatively inexperienced) invite student

feedback, are eager to respond, but come up against pressures (time, curriculum constraints) that are felt to limit their ability to act on the feedback they received.

Clearly, proactive consultation is the only 'right' way of consulting students in the last framework described above. The value of Thompson's model lies in the twofold warning expressed by the other two modes of consultation. On the one hand, teachers (and management) must have the right intentions when consulting students; on the other hand, teachers who lack institutional support may struggle to ensure that consultation is meaningful. In terms of strategies, then, forewarned teachers can anticipate these challenges and take steps to address both warnings before and while they embark on consulting their students.

2.4.2 General Considerations

Research has identified a number of conditions that can aid the successful development of consultation. On the school level, Fielding and Bragg (2003) identified five such conditions. First, it helps if the leadership team communicates clearly why student perspectives are sought and how doing so will fit into existing school values. Second, support structures and practices can make an enormous difference to teachers taking on consultation. Departmental heads can advise and support individual teachers, teaching assistants might be used to alleviate time pressure, ICT staff may assist with the analysis of students' (electronic) feedback, and CPD sessions could be used to either report or work on teachers consulting their students. Finally, a pre-existing

school culture that has a history of welcoming contributions from its entire community—through student participation, for instance—can provide an effective launchpad for consultation (also see Bragg, 2007).

Likewise, Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) delineate conditions on the level of the classroom that can bolster the development of student consultation. As I have mentioned previously, it helps tremendously if there is mutual trust between teachers and students. Students and teachers genuinely recognizing the other party for their efforts once consultation is ongoing will have a stimulating effect, too. Lastly, students should be given adequate time to reflect and respond to questions effectively. Rushing consultation in the last minute of a lesson is likely to frustrate students and unlikely to produce meaningful feedback, as one student expressed in Rudduck and McIntyre (2007): "we had to do it in a minute . . . couldn't concentrate on it" (p. 173). Moreover, consultation cycles should be carefully planned in general to ensure there is time not only for students to record responses but also for teachers to analyse students' feedback, to provide explicit acknowledgement to confirm to students that they were heard, and to explain clearly what actions have been taken on the basis of the received feedback (Morgan, 2011).

2.4.3 Specific Strategies

When choosing specific consultation strategies, the guiding principle should be the meaningful inclusion of all students (Clarke et al., 2011). Each student needs to be comfortable with and have the ability to express themselves in the chosen means of communication. Additionally, teachers may find it useful to choose an

approach that harmonizes with common modes of dialogue within their particular school setting or classroom practice (Ceballos et al, 2019). After all, it may not be particularly fruitful to rely on oral or written language when consulting the youngest of students, although age does not need to represent an obstacle to consultation—the design of the consultation may just require a little creativity (Fielding, 2011; Ceballos et al, 2016). And there are plenty of examples in the literature of creative strategies to involve otherwise hard-to-reach students in consultation projects. Cremin et al. (2011) gave students cameras and had them fill scrapbooks with photos they had taken to use as prompts in interviews. Tellingly, they found that disaffected students took more photos and used fewer words in their scrapbooks, thus showing a clear preference for visual modes of expression. Ultimately, teachers may wish to rely on multiple methods to cast a wide net, as it were, and ensure that all students are able to express their perspectives. I comment more on the benefits and drawbacks of specific strategies for consulting students—with reference to my own considerations—when I describe the methods I used in my research.

2.5 Summary and Research Questions

Consulting students about teaching and learning has the potential to provide a number of compelling and potentially transformative benefits. For students, consultation can promote improvements in wellbeing, motivation and attainment. Benefits for teachers include improvements in professional wellbeing and a renewed sense of excitement about teaching. Crucially, student consultation also provides teachers with a practical agenda for improvement

and leads to better relationships with students. This can positively impact an entire school, especially when institutions fully embrace consultation.

The challenges involved in consulting students may account for why the practice is not currently more widespread. Student consultation can cause students and teachers alike anxiety, especially initially. Consultation disrupts traditional power dynamics in schools. It can be difficult for students to be heard and also for teachers to listen, and consultation adds complexity to the already challenging school lives of teachers and students. Time, or the lack thereof, is often a challenge that is difficult to overcome, as are the demands of the curriculum and the performance agenda.

Those who are interested in consulting students must be aware of the challenges as they go about the actual process. In general, consultation should be planned carefully, its purpose should be communicated clearly to students, feedback should be analyzed scrupulously, and how feedback is acted on should again be meticulously conveyed to students. Finally, specific strategies should correspond to modes of communication that students are familiar and comfortable with, while ensuring the ability of *all* students to participate in the process effectively.

Most of the literature I have reviewed describes studies on student consultation that were conducted by external researchers, sometimes in collaboration with students' own teachers (McIntyre et al., 2005). Reports of teachers consulting their own students without external assistance are a rarity (Morgan, 2011). When I set out on my own research, I hoped to help fill that gap in the existing literature by consulting my own students and reporting my

findings. The following research questions were used to guide my research:

- How do students respond to being consulted about teaching and learning in the English classroom?
- How do teachers respond to a colleague's student consultation initiative?

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

In this section, I describe the methods I used to consult my own students and the design of the research strategies I used to investigate the outcomes of the consultation project. You will notice that the effects of the coronavirus pandemic necessitated a range of deviations from my original plans. I describe both my original plans and how I altered them to adapt to the changed situation.

3.2 Participants

Although this is not what I ultimately did, I had originally intended to consult the students in my year eight class. In a pilot study conducted during the previous academic year, I found that students in year eight—compared to those in years five, six and seven—were especially keen to be consulted about the curriculum. The students who were in year eight at that time were the last cohort at Mornington School to sit Common Entrance (CE) examinations. For them, the curriculum focused rather heavily on preparations for these assessments, which may have been frustrating. Consequently, there was a strong mandate to develop consultation with year eight in particular, not only because they craved more input, but also since there would be much more curricular freedom with the move away from CE. Indeed, the school reassessed its curriculum across the board for years five to eight and unveiled a brand new

programme of learning at the start of the 2020-21 academic year. It was my ambition to include year eight students in the refinement of this new curriculum over the course of the year. In the end, however, I chose to focus on year seven instead of year eight.

After some initial confusion, it was announced that schools would remain closed after the Christmas holidays and switch instead to remote learning in January of 2021 due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It became clear to me in the first week of remote learning that the year eight students in particular seemed to struggle with the new situation. While they did their work just fine, they were reluctant to engage in online lessons. Colleagues noticed the same tendency. What concerned me, especially in the light of consulting them, was the overall reluctance of the year eight students to contribute and speak during the online lessons. Perhaps they were disappointed to spend much of their final year at Mornington at home, or they might have felt self-conscious to appear and speak on camera. Whatever the case may have been, the other year groups did not display the same behaviour. Following a week of initial observations, I made the decision to consult my year seven class instead, because I thought doing so would yield richer data and have more impact.

My mixed-ability year seven class consisted of 16 students aged 11-12 years, 4 girls and 12 boys—an unusual imbalance at Mornington. Four of them were on the school's special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) register; four students spoke English as an additional language (EAL), with one student relatively new to English. While a small majority of the students came from

White British backgrounds, the class was relatively diverse, with students' parents hailing from Canada, China, Hong Kong, Iran, Italy, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, Thailand, Russia and the USA.

3.3 Collaborators

Two of my direct colleagues in the English department acted as collaborators in the project. First, there was Murray (a pseudonym), the head of the department and also a member of the school's leadership team. He was one of the most experienced teachers at Mornington, having worked at the school longer than anyone else at the school—for over 30 years. Murray taught years seven and eight; the remainder of his timetable was devoted to a host of other jobs around the school. I had always been in regular contact with Murray and we had been co-tutors the previous two years. The other teacher I involved in my project was Hope (also a pseudonym), my most direct colleague. We both taught the entire prep school age range, years five to eight, our classrooms were adjoining, and before remote learning we coordinated on a daily basis. Hope was also a highly experienced teacher who had worked at Mornington for more than 10 years. Importantly, Murray and Hope were the only other English teachers who taught year seven.

3.4 Instruments

I used unstructured interviews for the consultations. Interviews enabled the in-depth exploration of issues at hand more than quantitative methods such as surveys might have (Cohen et al., 2007). Unstructured interviews enabled me to

remove my own agenda as much as possible, allowing students control over the issues under discussion instead. The interviews were conducted by me personally and involved, in principle, two students each time. By interviewing more than one student at a time, I hoped to encourage an open discussion and also make the interviewees feel more comfortable (Eder and Fingerson, 2003). Prior to the announcement of the school closures in January, I had intended to conduct the interviews once a week, at the end of a lesson that preceded the lunch break. At these times, students would have a break of about 15 minutes between the end of the lesson and the start of lunch. In the end, the interviews took place online, in the final 15 minutes of a weekly lesson devoted to our collective reading—aloud—of a chosen novel. These lessons finished about 15 minutes earlier than regular lessons, so there was time at the end for interviews without inconveniencing students considerably. An advantage of the online interviews was that students were completely familiar with the format, given that the online interview situation was similar to that of the online lesson. Participation in the interviews was on a voluntary basis—that is, I asked for volunteers for the interviews each time we finished our reading session.

The interviews were supplemented by a suggestions box, which enabled students to provide feedback with the benefit of anonymity. I thought this would be helpful, especially since the interviews did not afford students with the anonymity they might crave when making certain comments. In addition, the suggestion box was envisioned to remove the influence of students' peers which, again, might have affected students' feedback in the interviews (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007). While I meant the suggestion box to be

physically present in my classroom for students to use whenever it suited them, the suggestion box ultimately had to be moved online as well. This was realized by creating a poll on Google Classroom, the platform used by the school in its provision of remote learning. This way, I hoped it would still be easy to find for students, while also being available at all times.

To help consolidate the feedback students provided in the interviews and through the suggestions box, I kept a diary where I logged, in bullet-point style, students' comments. This helped me to respond more effectively to their input than I otherwise might have. It also enabled me to relay my students' feedback to Murray and Hope in weekly online meetings. These meetings would originally not have been online, and would have been organised mainly for the benefit of my investigation. But due to the switch to remote learning, the three of us held regular online meetings irrespective of my intervention and research, chiefly to navigate online teaching together. Either way, regularly communicating the feedback I received was designed to help me gauge how Murray and Hope responded to my efforts to develop student consultation. I planned to record the in-person meetings but did not record the online meetings because I felt uncomfortable doing so, as neither their purpose or focus was discussing the findings of my intervention.

Finally, I wanted to ask my class to complete an evaluation at the end of the spring term. The envisioned purpose was to see how the students had experienced being consulted. However, because I did not interview all of the students in the class in the end, it seemed inappropriate to ask the students to share their experiences of consultation. I opted instead to ask students to

complete an evaluation of teaching and learning in the spring term. I used a 'WWW and EBI' format (What Went Well and Even Better If). This gave my students an opportunity to give me feedback in the way they themselves were accustomed to receiving feedback in English. In essence, the end-of-intervention evaluation provided additional consultation data instead of an evaluation of the process—which was my original intention.

3.5 Timeline

I planned to use the eight weeks of Mornington's spring term for my project. The interviews were designed to take place towards the end of weeks 1-7, on Thursdays or Fridays, depending on the timetable (Mornington operates on a two-week timetable). No interviews were planned for the last week, because it would have been impossible to respond to the students' feedback for that session within the confines of the spring term. The impact of the pandemic meant that the first interview did not take place until the second week. In addition, I conducted no interviews in weeks 6-7, contrary to my initial intentions. With the reopening of schools in the sixth week of term and amid not only great excitement but also great challenges brought about by having to suddenly adjust to being back in school, I struggled to justify the time and energy investments required to conduct another two interviews, now at school.

Ultimately, the suggestion box was deployed at the start of the third week, immediately following the first interview. It remained live until the end of the seventh week of term, as intended. I also kept the diary, where I logged students' feedback as planned, only in weeks 2-7 instead of 1-7, since no

interviews took place at the end of the first week of term. The weekly meetings with Murray and Hope occurred following the interviews every week, as intended. Finally, in the last week of term, students were asked to complete the end-of-project evaluation as planned.

3.6 Ethics

I relied on BERA (2018) guidelines and the University of Oxford's ethical review process to ensure that my project adhered to accepted standards of ethics in research. Because my intervention involved participants whose ability to give informed consent was in question due to their age (i.e., my year seven students), I obtained written approval from the headmaster of Mornington School before beginning my intervention. I did not seek informed consent from students' parents since, according to the *modus operandi* of the University of Oxford's Department of Education, teachers acting as researchers are not usually required to seek informed consent from students' parents when research activities are low-risk and take place within the sphere of teachers' regular practice (see Felzmann, 2009). In such cases, parental authority is transferred to the headteacher (NHMRC, 2007). When I argued to the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) at the University of Oxford that talking to students about teaching and learning lies within the normal practice of most teachers, they agreed. With ethical approval thus in place, my next step was to seek the informed consent of my participants at the start of the intervention.

In easy-to-understand language and with the help of a short presentation that contained visual aids (Ruiz-Casares & Thompson, 2014), I explained the

nature and purpose of the intervention to my class of year seven students. While I included in my explanations an outline of how participating may be of some benefit to them, I also made it clear to my students that they were not expected or obliged to participate in the project. Still, I was sensitive to the pressure that students may have felt to participate despite my assurances. After all, students are accustomed not only to indulging their teachers' wishes and demands on a regular basis, but also to the undesirable consequences of neglecting to do so. However, I considered the potential benefits of student participation substantial and endeavoured to mitigate risks associated with participation as much as possible.

To start, I assured my students that anything they said during interviews would remain confidential. In accordance with Mornington School's approach to remote learning, all of the online lessons I taught were recorded for safeguarding purposes. Since they were conducted towards the end of these online lessons, the interviews were recorded in the same way. The only person with immediate access to the resulting video files was the teacher who recorded the lesson. Therefore, I had exclusive access to the interview data, which was probably the most sensitive. Moreover, the interview data were anonymized by assigning a pseudonym to each student. But other data provided by students likewise benefitted from confidentiality; the data from the suggestions box and the end-of-project evaluations were also anonymous, offering students further protection. While things might have become complicated had students divulged sensitive information during consultation, this was not an issue I anticipated or encountered.

I was also aware of the importance of maintaining confidentiality when communicating my students' input to Murray and Hope. While this proved unproblematic since I could simply relay feedback without making reference to which student made which comment, it is certainly true that, as teachers and beyond my consultation initiative, the three of us discuss particular students and the things they say or do from time to time, when this is pertinent. Hence, my weekly meetings with Murray and Hope were not a source of serious ethical concerns.

Reciprocity, in contrast, was a key ethical concern—not least because of other researchers' insistence on the importance of the concept in student consultation (Lundy, 2007; Tangen, 2008; Thompson, 2009). It would be unfair to ask students to invest their time and energy in participating in my research without giving them something back in return, especially when their participation entails potential risk (Cohen et al., 2007). Consequently, I made every effort to respond in earnest to students' feedback over the course of the intervention. In addition, I made it clear how exactly I had responded to their comments. When I felt unable to respond effectively to a particular piece of feedback, I tried to explain carefully why this was the case.

Lastly, I should probably note that choosing, ultimately, not to consult my year eight students might not have been entirely ethical. After all, it could be argued that their perspectives may have been those of disaffected students, and that such perspectives are marginalized too often. Electing to consult the year eight class in spite of perceived difficulties may have been the right thing to do. I do wonder what the year eights' feedback might have encompassed and

regret not knowing. However, the impact of the pandemic on my plans should not be underestimated. The announcement that schools would remain closed after the Christmas break was both sudden and unexpected and required a good deal of improvisation. In a time of great uncertainty, I was unnerved by the prospect of potentially not completing my project (and degree!) and considered a potentially questionable ethical decision an acceptable compromise under the circumstances.

3.7 Analysis

When the spring term ended I started analyzing the data, organizing by research instrument and beginning by transcribing the interviews. I also compiled all of the data from the digital suggestion box, from the end-of-term evaluations, and from my meetings with Murray and Hope. Next, I used content analysis to code and categorize the data to facilitate the recognition of patterns and trends (see Ezzy, 2002; Krippendorp, 2004).

3.8 Limitations

The methods I used have two important limitations. First, the inter-subjective nature of the qualitative research instruments I used for the project limits the objectivity of its findings, which reduces their scope for generalization (Walford, 2001). Secondly, the size of the sample (16 students) further limits the generalizability of my findings. Further large-scale research will be needed to confirm, deny or qualify the findings of my own small-scale study.

Findings and Discussion

4.1 Interviews

Due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, I conducted four interviews instead of the seven I had originally planned. These interviews involved a total of seven students: two per interview in principle, but one student declined to participate at the last second when I reminded him that participation was optional. Ultimately, then, I was able to interview less than half of the students in my year seven class. While I regret not speaking with the rest of the group, the interviews I did conduct represent a rich source of data.

Following content analysis of the interview transcripts, a number of categories of student response emerged. These categories were in line with Rudduck and McIntyre's (2007) comments on the typical ways in which students respond to consultation. My interviewees tended to (1) accentuate the positive, (2) identify unhelpful practices, (3) offer modifications, (4) use contrasts, and (5) propose constructive alternatives.

4.1.1 Accentuating the Positive

When I invited my students to comment on their classroom experiences of English, they would often begin by highlighting aspects of my practice they considered helpful or enjoyable. On the topic of creative writing, for instance, several students indicated that they preferred activities that were structured or constrained, but still contained an element of freedom. One of the students,

Robert, put it as follows: "When you have a topic about, uhm, 'On the Pirate Ship' or something . . . yeah, that's the title and we have to base the story on that—I like them." Going one step further, Patricia expressed the same preference but was also able to articulate why structure can be helpful when writing: "I think a lot of people do like being given a scenario to write about . . . cause they have . . . they know now what to write about"' Similarly, Claude commented on the feel-good factor of being given a task when writing: "I just like having a task to do—of just having the good feeling of 'okay, I've ticked that off.'"

On the face of it, such commentary simply confirms common pedagogical principles and practice. However, I would argue there is still great value in having these sorts of conversations with students. If nothing else, it provides teachers with a practical agenda for improvement, as Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) argued. In this case, I should probably give my students a little more structure when we work on their writing. But the framing of this feedback seems particularly key: by accentuating positive aspects of my practice, these students reassured me not only of my own professional competence (and this is important, especially for a junior teacher like myself), but also of their cooperation, of their positive participation in the consultation process. After all, teachers may initially feel unsure about whether students will respond constructively and maturely to being consulted about teaching and learning. My students' comments above and those still to follow support previous findings that suggest such initial doubts about consulting students are often unwarranted (Pedder and McIntyre, 2004; Morgan, 2011).

During an interview that followed those quoted from above, and after I had incorporated the feedback about structure into a subsequent writing activity, Simon made the following request: “Less comprehensions, more writing about, like . . . the . . . you know the TripAdvisor thing. I want to do more things like the little things before that.” Ignoring his comment about comprehensions for the time being, Simon was referring here to an extended writing activity that was broken down into smaller tasks, following Claude’s comments. As a result of Patricia and Robert’s feedback, the activities were also designed to still contain a degree of freedom, with students being able to choose for themselves a destination to write a trip report about. In short, the input I received during consultation—perhaps especially because my students had accentuated a positive aspect of my work—led to better planning, which in turn led to improvements in student learning and enjoyment. Moreover, it was extremely satisfying for me to receive praise for a sequence of activities that I had planned as a result of talking to my students, and I can only echo the comments made by other teachers regarding greater professional wellbeing as a result of consulting students (Fielding and Bragg, 2003). Conversely, I suspect that my students were pleased to see that their feedback had been acted on, a crucial element of consulting students according to Pedder and McIntyre (2006). In sum, I found that students responded positively to consultation, both initially but also subsequently, when they recognized how and when their feedback had been acted on.

4.1.2 Identifying Unhelpful Practices

While my students readily accentuated positive aspects of my teaching during our interviews, they also had the confidence to express criticism, although they never did this in a hostile manner. Returning to reading comprehension for a moment, Andy made the following criticism when indicating his preferences: "Having a more interesting text to read from, not like The Pony Express; that was really boring." Although he was rather unambiguous in expressing his feelings about that particular text, he and Robert (his co-interviewee) were then able to explain very well what had been wrong with it, and could point to other texts we had read that they found more enjoyable, and why. Rather than attacking me or my choices on a personal level, the students I interviewed made criticisms based on how elements of my teaching affected their own learning.

Andy also suggested it was unhelpful when students had the last 20 minutes or so of an online lesson to work independently, without then coming back at the end for a final plenary:

> Cause like some people I've been... Some people... I know some people, cause they're really, like, naughty, like Kieran [a student in a different set]—he had to get his phone taken away... It's better cause then people will actually focus on their work more. So they know when you come back you have to have something done and that will motivate them more.

While I had, on the contrary, previously had other students request the foregoing of the final plenary, presumably for greater flexibility and convenience in terms of time management, Andy actually argued in favour of

the end-of-lesson plenary and for the sake of improved learning. Furthermore, he seemed concerned not just with his own learning, but with the learning of his peers as well. In other words, Andy understood what I was hoping to achieve, approved of the initiative and its goals, and wanted to contribute, even if it meant possibly inconveniencing himself (and some of his peers). Andy's comment exhibits benevolence, maturity and a willingness to take responsibility for his learning, perhaps even a quiet desire to act as an expert witness in the case for educational improvement.

Simon also highlighted something that, while mildly entertaining, was probably detrimental to learning overall. The video-conferencing software we used for online lessons at Mornington contained a chat function that was helpful at times but often challenging to monitor and control while teaching. During the interview, Simon suggested I "maybe stop Robert from writing random stuff on the chat" and then proceeded to explore, with me, what could be done. During the interview, we found a solution that I could (and did) then also use with my other classes. In fact, I shared what we had come up with with my colleagues, who could then apply the same fix to a problem they were also experiencing. Overall, then, the students I interviewed identified several practices they experienced as unhelpful to learning and had the confidence and tact to relay their concerns effectively.

4.1.3 Modifications

The students I interviewed also offered *modifications*, or suggestions to change existing approaches with a view to improve learning. The most frequent

request my students made in the interviews (and via the other channels that were part of my intervention, as we will see) was for more opportunities for creativity, whether through writing, as Patricia's comment illustrated: "I mean, this is just my personal opinion, but I would like to do more . . . more creative writing because, uhm, I really like creative writing;" or by other means, as Andy suggested:

> Yeah and we can also do, like, some more creativeness . . . like, you know, with Slender Man—you can just read us a text or just a description of a person and we could, like, try to draw them out how he is in our mind.

These comments could be interpreted rather dismissively as students simply asking to do more of the things they enjoy, with little regard for the demands of the curriculum, or, if the curriculum presents no barrier, for well-rounded development in a particular subject. However, teachers (or researchers) listening to students' feedback should be aware of their own preconceptions about what learning is and how it happens (Bourke and Loveridge, 2016; Ceballos et al., 2019). Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) found, moreover, that enjoyable lessons stimulate learning according to students themselves and, contrary to the presumptions of teachers who are more pessimistic about the value of consulting students, that students do tend to be concerned with learning, not just about having more fun.

Of course, teachers do also have a range of external factors to contend with when it comes to acting on student feedback (Hancock and Mansfield, 2002; Riley and Rustique-Forrester, 2002; Cremin et al., 2011) and, I must

admit, I was a little apprehensive myself of the prospect of potentially having to justify (to Murray or a parent, for instance) more drawing in English, as Andy suggested. But Andy's comment seemed more to say 'drawing helps me to form a clearer picture of a character in my mind' rather than 'I'd rather just be drawing all the time cause it's easier'. Perhaps anticipating my potential uneasiness around drawing, a further modification of Andy's idea was offered by Robert: "Also, you could be put in partners and so one partner writes the description and the other one has to try and draw it. We did that in French, but... via French." Note the sophistication of his suggestion, which not only includes a recommendation of pair work, but was perhaps also designed to reassure me that other teachers are employing similar strategies, perhaps in an effort to remove any hesitation I might experience. In the end, I aimed to create more room for creativity in lessons as a result of the comments above. Pleasingly, the students expressed their appreciation of these efforts in the end-of-project evaluations they completed—I discuss these in greater detail in section 4.5.

A different suggestion for a modification was proffered on the topic of comprehension questions by Patricia, who said the following:

> Uhm, I think four and above [marks] is just too much to write about in one question . . . I mean, you can have, like, separate parts of the question, like 1a and 1b and 1c and stuff like that, but not all in one question.

For context, the CE comprehension papers consist of questions totalling 25 marks. While these marks are sometimes distributed over a larger number of

questions, there are often three six-mark questions that will take students a long time to answer and must be answered in a rather particular way, which the students need to be trained in. Patricia's suggestion was, I think, a very sensible one, since splitting 'larger' questions into smaller parts would take away some of the unpredictability in terms of how CE comprehension questions are marked, and therefore also reduce the need to 'teach to the test'. The fact that Mornington had dropped CE preparation in years seven and eight added to my readily acceptance of Patricia's suggestion, which was also bolstered by Bodley, who explained *why* comprehension questions worth five or more marks can cause frustration: "Yeah, I don't mind a lot of questions; I mind long questions. Cause you feel like you're making no progress." Ultimately, Patricia and Bodley's ideas to modify comprehensions (which, incidentally, are disliked with remarkable universality and intensity by students at Mornington) helped make them much more palatable and much less complicated.

4.1.4 Contrasts

Providing contrasts was another useful way for students to express their ideas during the interviews. When I asked Patricia if she had any closing thoughts at the end of our interview, she recapitulated her point about creative writing and then followed up with a final suggestion by providing a contrast:

> I just enjoy creative writing quite a lot. And also, like, poems are good. I like poems, uhm, but, kind of fun ones because when I went on my [senior school], like . . . you know, the day at [senior school] we had, like, an English class and we went over this poem and I thought it wasn't very

fun but usually when *we* do do poems it is quite fun.

The lovely tact and kindness of these remarks will, I hope, act as a contribution to the body of evidence that suggests that students generally respond to consultation constructively and with compassion. With the contrast she sketched here, between her experience of poetry in my class on the one hand and at the school she would start attending in about a year and a half on the other, Patricia gave me both validation and inspiration to not only cover more poetry in my lessons, but also to be careful in my selection of that poetry. I do also think she was right about asking to do more with poetry—the material we had been covering of late had mainly focused on non-fiction writing, and poetry had been left by the wayside a little. As such, her feedback also caused me to reflect on the structure and contents of the term's scheme of work and on how the material might be more varied. My experience is in line with findings by Messiou and Ainscow (2015), who suggest that teachers are often inspired to reflect on their own practice following consultation.

Two other students I interviewed, Bodley and Claude, provided another contrast to talk about the cherished 'library slot'. While the students were learning remotely as a result of measures to contain the coronavirus in England, we spent about 30-45 minutes during one of the four English lessons every week reading a novel as a class. Normally, while not in lockdown, we would spend one hour per fortnight in the school library, where students read independently. In the interview with Bodley and Claude, I asked how they would prefer to organize class reading and library time upon our eventual return to school. I knew that the students had really enjoyed the online reading

sessions, and Bodley explained he would prefer reading more frequently but for a shorter time, rather than vice-versa: “I’d rather do it every week we do a half hour reading session than an hour every two weeks.” While a seemingly inconsequential suggestion, it is perhaps through making small changes like these (altering the duration and frequency of time devoted to reading) that teachers can improve the quality of students’ lives at school. Although it was only partly because of Bodley’s suggestion (and also due to limited access to communal spaces like the library due to coronavirus restrictions), I was pleased to be able to act on his request, which was well received by students not just in my own class, but also in the other sets and year groups.

4.1.5 Constructive Alternatives

Finally, the students I interviewed also came up with their own ideas and suggestions. Zelda, for instance, made the following remark: “We should do more, like, challenges.” I was unsure initially of what exactly she meant by this, but when I asked whether she would like to do language-related warm-up activities at the start of lessons, which was something I already did with year five and six but not with year seven and eight, she said that was exactly what she had in mind. This was something that worked really well with the younger year groups and something that could easily be introduced with the older students too. With the benefit of having used them once or twice before, I simply adapted some of the activities I had used with the younger students and added the warm-up activities to the materials we had already made for online learning. They were a roaring success and contributed greatly, I suspect, to the

students' enjoyment of online English lessons. Such constructive alternatives offered by students are an absolute blessing: they are easy to implement and high in impact. Zelda's idea also represented a great opportunity for me to give the students confidence that their ideas are being listened to and acted on and that they have the power to make a difference in their lives at school.

In addition to Zelda's suggestion, there were a number of ideas that centred, once again, on creativity. Simon, for instance, offered the following suggestion: "We could choose a style of word like nouns or verbs or something and then just make something . . . like a presentation or a poster." Inspired by Simon's suggestion, Zelda then shared another idea that was very similar to the suggestion made by Andy in an earlier interview: "Or, you could give us . . . like . . . a descriptive passage and we have to . . . like . . . make it come to life, like draw it maybe . . . or something," to which Simon replied, "Or the other way round." Jokingly, Andy had also said "We could do cooking! No, no, you're alright" at the end of his interview. I told him that I had, in fact, incorporated food preparation into a lesson with another year group in the past, and that his idea was not as outlandish as he may have thought.

Over the course of the various interviews, it became clear that having more opportunities to express themselves creatively was one of the things my students craved. Accordingly, this, along with Morgan's (2011) finding that students wanted more practical work through experiments in science (which my own students' feedback reminded me of), was something I tried to emphasize in the lessons that followed on from the interviews—and my efforts

did not go unnoticed. In the end-of-project evaluations, students widely mentioned their satisfaction with more creative activities.

Finally, I want to mention a comment Bodley made, which lead to us coming up with an idea for a lesson together:

> Yeah, something I really don't like about English (this isn't to do with any lessons or anything; it's just about the language): it's so hard to write comedy. Cause you have to do speeches, and then you end up . . . you get confused with all the speech marks you've done. Cause you had to go speech marks, sentence, speech marks, speech marks, questions . . .

Based on his comment, I suggested we could work on a piece of creative writing with a focus on dialogue but without worrying about the punctuation too much in the initial stages. I told him I had recently seen an interview with Guy Ritchie who, despite being dyslexic, went on to become a successful film director primarily as a result of the strength of the scripts he wrote, which were, according to the man himself, full of errors. Bodley liked the idea, still seemed a little concerned about eventually punctuating his scripts, but granted that his 'flow' would at least not be interrupted, that he would, this way, be able to concentrate on writing the actual comedy. I cannot help but think that my conversation with Bodley helped him, at worst, to think about his own learning. At best, his understanding of how his own mind works might have improved, which may help his future learning. Either way, it seems that the interview made Bodley think about his learning, about where he struggles and about how he can overcome challenges he faces. In short, being consulted about teaching and learning seems to have benefited Bodley in a metacognitive sense. Indeed,

previous research (Mulliss, 2002; Fielding and Bragg, 2003) has pointed to the potential metacognitive benefits for students as a result of being consulted about teaching and learning—as a result, in effect, of being encouraged to reflect on their educational experiences.

4.2 Suggestions

Unfortunately, the students seem to have misunderstood the online suggestions box somewhat. On the day the box went live, seven students made a suggestion. It seems that many of these students took the suggestions box, which I uploaded to the platform Mornington used for online learning, as an assignment to be completed before the start of the next lesson. A further four suggestions were entered into the box on subsequent days—on the second, seventh, ninth and twenty-first day of the box being live, to be precise. I am unsure as to whether each suggestion was made by a different student, since suggestions were made anonymously. Even if the majority of students assumed the suggestions box was a mandatory assignment, the suggestions received served as a useful supplement to the interview data and allowed, moreover, students who did not participate in an interview to give feedback.

The majority of the suggestions I received concerned creative writing. Some were straightforward but unspecific: “More creative writing,” and “We do lots of different types of creative writing.” The remaining suggestions about creative writing were quite specific and contained an actual idea: “We write a detailed story of a video game in a gothic and sad way. For example: *Once there was a player in a world filled with people against him* , or something like that,”

and “We should write about watching a sporting event and describe what it’s like.” Another two suggestions were pleas for more active, practical or creative activities: “More practical stuff to get us away from our screens and fun things like art or sports (we could design the cover for *Grace*, for example),” and “We should do more creative stuff and more drawing with freedom.”

These suggestions surrounding creativity harmonized with much of the feedback gathered in the interviews, which made acting on these suggestions relatively straightforward. While I did not use the specific creative writing prompts suggested by the students, I explained that I adapted them to fit in with the theme of the current scheme of work, which seemed to satisfy them; most of the students were just happy to be writing. I did let students design a cover for *Grace* (by Morris Gleitzman), which was the novel we were reading as a class. I took the suggestion about designing activities that allowed students time away from their screens to heart, partly because I felt sympathy for the students and their situations, but also because I thought the suggestion lent itself well to being combined with the various requests for more space for creativity.

For instance, I asked my students to write, in pairs, a set of instructions for building a den in the woods (this was when remote learning was no longer necessary). After they had written them, they swapped the instructions with another pair, and then proceeded to build the den in the woods on the school’s grounds. They *loved* this. They had been cooped up at home, often alone, in front of a computer for weeks, and it seemed to do them good to be outside with their friends for that reason. But I would also argue that there was educational value in the activity. I hoped, for one, that the activity would be

memorable because it was fun. Secondly, by actually experiencing what it is like to build a den based on (limited?) instructions written by peers, I hoped it would help students reflect on the need for precision and thoroughness when writing instructions. While I could simply tell my students that their instructions must be comprehensive, I suspect experiencing it for themselves in a memorable way was likely a more effective teacher.

That being said, I was also nervous about taking my class outside, in full view of some of the other classrooms. Some of my colleagues might disapprove, might not appreciate the inevitable noise, and their students might be distracted or envious. Even if I have not personally internalized the notion that learning happens in—quiet!—classrooms, I worry (unhelpfully) that others have. I am also aware that it would be impractical if all teachers took their classes out of their classrooms all at once and that, therefore, I perhaps also should not have. In the end, however, I think my students were happy while they learned something—isn't that what school should be?

Similarly, another two students suggested we use Kahoot!, a game-based learning platform, in lessons with greater frequency: "More kahoots because they are fun and helpful," read one suggestion, while a second simply stated "Kahoot." Again, I would usually be inclined more towards dismissing suggestions like these because Kahoot! feels more like a game (students tend to get very excited while 'playing' a Kahoot!) and I was a little skeptical of the platform's ability to promote learning in a meaningful way. Such reservations notwithstanding, the suggestions for more Kahoot!—which I had also received verbally and informally with some regularity and from students in all of the year

groups I taught—made me reflect, first, on how I could incorporate the platform into lessons more often. Aside from simply loading a premade Kahoot! from their website, creating your own custom quiz may represent a useful (though more time-consuming) opportunity to introduce tailor-made, engaging opportunities for learning into lessons. I also wondered whether my reservations about Kahoot! might be misplaced. Indeed, based on a review of 93 studies examining the use of Kahoot! in classroom settings, Wang and Tahir (2020) concluded that Kahoot! had an overall positive impact not only on learning, but also on classroom dynamics, student attitudes and anxiety; Zhang and Yu (2021) drew similar conclusions using a comparable method. Lastly, I wondered what students appeared to enjoy so much about Kahoot! and whether I might be able to develop my own teaching based on an improved understanding of what makes the quizzes on the platform so enjoyable. In sum, consulting my students and receiving the suggestions I did about the use of Kahoot! in lessons sparked my professional curiosity and kindled reflection on my own practice and on the nature of learning more generally. While my research questions in this paper were intended to explore how my students and colleagues responded to my efforts to consult my students about teaching and learning, I could perhaps also have asked myself what impact consulting students might have on me, personally, especially since the majority of the literature on student consultation involves external researchers who perform the actual consultations—a question to be explored in future research, perhaps.

4.3 Meetings

As I mentioned in the methods section, the purpose of my weekly meetings with Murray and Hope was not, ultimately, to discuss what I had found from consulting my students, and I did not, therefore, keep records of these meetings. Nevertheless, I wish to register a few observations of how my two colleagues responded to my efforts and to the feedback I relayed to them when this felt appropriate.

When I first told Murray about my intervention, his response was characterized by neutrality: he was neither pessimistic or optimistic, enthused nor disinterested. Conversely, Hope appeared a little sceptical initially, asking questions such as 'We do that anyway, right?' and 'Do they come up with lots of silly ideas?' However, I was pleased to notice both Murray and Hope incorporate some of the feedback I received and shared with them into their own work. For instance, both of them included challenges, as suggested by Zelda, at the start of lessons with their own students. Murray, who put together the comprehension component of the mid-term assessment, integrated Patricia's feedback by splitting six-mark questions into three two-mark questions instead. Hope also incorporated Robert's feedback—"I like the comprehensions where we do the comprehension and at the end we haven't actually finished reading the story and we write what we think would happen"—in creating the comprehension component of an assessment for another year group. That way, students were able to demonstrate their understanding of the text in a more creative, engaging way. Additionally, Hope distributed her own end-of-term survey to gather feedback from students

about teaching and learning in the spring term. Moreover, she encouraged Murray to do the same and suggested end-of-term questionnaires become a permanent element of the work of the entire English department.

Overall, I was pleased that Murray and Hope responded positively to the feedback I received from my students and regarded the students' input as useful. While they incorporated some of the feedback I shared with them, they displayed no inclination to consulting students themselves, apart from either informally or through end-of-term questionnaires. Perhaps sharing my experience of consulting students about teaching and learning with the wider school community will enthuse a critical mass of teachers and make consultation a permanent fixture within the school. The appendix to this report contains a research poster I created which outlines my project (and betrays a little bias!); this was put on display in my classroom and also at a conference at the University of Oxford, in an effort to share my work with others, and hopefully inspire positive attitudes towards student consultation.

4.4 Evaluations

In total and due to circumstances relating to the coronavirus pandemic, I received end-of-project evaluations from 11 out of 16 students. In terms of what went well in the minds of the students, creative writing received many mentions (9), with students making most reference (11) to the more creative lessons and various activities I designed as a result of feedback in interviews and through the suggestions box. Hugh, for example, wrote the following: "The den building was really fun, when we made our website, seagull posters and

creative pieces were fun." Similarly, Bess explained that working on something creative with a partner was a highlight for her: "I liked making a website with my best friend, Patricia." Patricia, in turn, expressed the same sentiment and also motivated her comments:

> The creative writing was very fun because I love creative writing. I loved the den building and the instructions because we actually got to do the thing we wrote for. I liked making the website because it was fun to do something with a friend and something we can completely customise.

The above comments are emblematic of much of the feedback found in the 'What Went Well?' part the end-of-project evaluations, suggesting not only that students appreciate being listened to and being involved in contributing to their own education, but also, I would argue, that there is a great deal teachers can learn from students in terms of what they do and do not enjoy and experience as helpful and unhelpful to their learning. The feedback from the evaluations clearly indicates the central importance of 'fun' for learning. While none of the students who completed an evaluation explicitly said this, they appear to echo the comments of students heard by Rudduck and McIntyre (2007), who said having fun in lessons aids learning. In another echo of previous research (e.g., Kirschner et al., 2005; Thompson, 2009), the sheer volume of references to activities that were inspired by student feedback in the comments above highlights the validation and increased sense of agency students experience when their opinions are not only sought but also listened to and acted on. However, Patricia, who suggested comprehension questions be structured differently, did directly express her satisfaction with the change her feedback

had brought about: “I liked the end-of-term assessment because the comprehension questions did not have a mountain of marks on each question.”

Interestingly, students often used the ‘Even Better If’ portion of the evaluation to reinforce the positive feedback they had just given. Where Hugh had previously noted his enjoyment of the den building and website creating activities under ‘What Went Well’, he then proceeded to say that more activities like those would have made the term even better: “Doing more outdoor buildings like dens and our website in real life.” Furthermore, he was not alone in choosing this rather artful approach. Artful, because doing so reinforces the first comment but also clears the feedback-giver of the risk of hurting the recipient’s feelings, which is something students can be concerned about, especially in the early stages of consultation (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007; Morgan, 2011). In our case, my students may have been keen to end the consultation process on a positive note, while also reinforcing their preferences, which included creative writing (four references in the ‘Even Better If’ section of the evaluation), creative activities (two references) and, once again, kahoots (two references).

Aside from the above predilections, four of the eleven students who completed an evaluation articulated a desire for fewer comprehensions. Some, like Arabella, were unequivocal: “Even better if we did *no* comprehensions.” Others, like Gregory, revealed their preferences but left the comprehension door ajar: “Less comprehensions, but we can do them if they’re fun and interesting,” thus echoing a comment made by Andy in one of the interviews. Bearing Patricia’s feeling that individual comprehension questions should not

be worth too many marks in mind, it seems my students are willing to complete comprehensions, but that there are a few ways by which they can be made more bearable. The feedback I received on comprehensions was especially useful since, as I have already hinted, comprehensions are strongly disliked by the majority of Mornington School students. Hopefully, now that we, as a department and as a result of consulting students, are more aware of the problems related to comprehensions, they will not be loathed quite so much. Ultimately, this change can be brought about because of how the students I interviewed, but also those who made a suggestion and completed an evaluation, responded to being consulted: with tact, eloquence and in the spirit of cooperation.

Conclusions and Implications

5.1 Conclusions

My experience of consulting students about teaching and learning in my English lessons was hugely positive from a range of perspectives. First, I was impressed by the cooperative, benevolent and thoughtful way my students responded to the consultation process, especially in the interviews but also in their evaluations. The students I interviewed communicated their ideas with tact and with the improvement of learning—not just their own but that of their peers too—as a common priority. While the importance of 'fun' was frequently emphasized by the students I interviewed, their intentions did not seem, as teachers may worry, to simply make their lives easier and more enjoyable, with little regard for learning. Instead, they accentuated positive aspects of my teaching but also were not afraid to point out unhelpful practices; they offered constructive modifications, used contrasts to elucidate their ideas, and contributed novel ideas of their own. In all, the interview feedback helped to improve lessons considerably but also seemed to bring metacognitive benefits for students. Equally, the students' comments encouraged me to reflect on my teaching in fresh and stimulating ways.

The feedback from the suggestions box and evaluations allowed for some triangulation of the input gathered during interviews, with students underlining a desire for more opportunities for active and creative work especially. Furthermore, many of the evaluations contained references to activities I had

designed on the basis of comments students had made either at interview or through the suggestions box, which I was very pleased with. By implication, students were not only happy to have their voices heard and experience that their feedback was actually acted on, but they also provided useful ideas which may have led to improvements to learning. In sum, I believe being consulted about teaching and learning in English was a positive experience for my students, perhaps particularly those I was able to interview. In an ideal, pandemic-free world, I would of course have interviewed *all* of the students in the class.

Owing to the impact of the national measures imposed as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, gauging how my colleagues Murray and Hope responded to my efforts to consult students was more challenging. On one hand, they seemed to appreciate the feedback I had gathered and relayed to them, given that they had incorporated some of it into their own practices. Moreover, Hope actually championed the continued use of open-ended end-of-term questionnaires going forward—a powerful endorsement of student consultation, surely. However, on the other hand, Murray and Hope appeared not to find formally *speaking* with students about teaching and learning in a structural way a feasible idea, given that neither expressed any inclination towards doing so in future.

5.2 Implications

In conclusion, proponents of student consultation may, likely due to the manifold pressures on the time at teachers' disposal, wish to settle, perhaps

initially, for methods of consulting students which do not impact so severely on teachers' time. Collecting written feedback about teaching and learning, although not without drawbacks, may be a more practical and realistic way of consulting students, compared to the setting up of interviews with a view to speaking with students directly. Perhaps the former may serve to open the door for the latter, if results are pleasing.

Because of the methodological limitations related to the generalizability of my findings, further research is necessary to explore whether my positive experience of consulting students represents a majority view. In addition, future research may wish to also focus more on how teachers who consult their own students themselves are affected by the process, in addition to exploring how students and colleagues respond to efforts to promote consultation.

With all that said, the most important implication of my research, I would argue, is that the challenges associated with consulting students can be overcome, and that the benefits can be great—that, in short, consulting students as part of common teaching practice should become more widespread. Consulting my students has, I believe, lead to improvements in my teaching and in my students' learning. Moreover, schools have a legal and political mandate to consult their students about teaching and learning; this has been ignored for too long. With schools' help and through consultation, teachers can help improve their students' education, by bringing power to the pupil.

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Appendix


CONSULTING STUDENTS ABOUT TEACHING AND...
POWER TO THE PUPIL!
...LEARNING IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM
A STUDY BY JOACHIM VAN GELDER, ST EDMUND HALL, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD DEPT. OF EDUCATION. 2021
BACKGROUND:
"TALKING WITH STUDENTS ABOUT THINGS THAT MATTER TO THEM IN THE CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL AND AFFECT THEIR LEARNING" IS RARE, DESPITE IMPORTANT BENEFITS:
A BETTER WAY TO TEACH CITIZENSHIP
IMPROVED MOTIVATION & METACOGNITION
BETTER RELATIONSHIPS
CONTRIBUTES TO TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND WELLBEING
IMPROVEMENTS IN STUDENTS' SENSE OF · SELF · AGENCY · BELONGING
PROVIDES A PRACTICAL AGENDA FOR IMPROVEMENT
METHODS:
WEEKLY UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS WITH 2-3 OF MY YEAR 7 STUDENTS OVER THE SPRING TERM
AN (ONLINE) BOX FOR STUDENTS' SUGGESTIONS
WEEKLY MEETINGS WITH TWO COLLEAGUES
END-OF-PROJECT STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE
THEMATIC CONTENT ANALYSIS TO INTERPRET THE DATA
KEY LITERATURE
MAYBIN, J., DOMETRIOU, H., RUDDOCK, J., & MYERS, K. (2013). CONSULTING PUPILS: A TOOLKIT FOR TEACHERS. PEARSON.
MORGAN, B. (2011). CONSULTING PUPILS ABOUT CLASSROOM TEACHING AND LEARNING: POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESPONSE IN ONE SCHOOL. RESEARCH PAPERS IN EDUCATION, 26(5), 445-469.
RUDDOCK, J., & MCINTYRE, D. (2007). IMPROVING LEARNING THROUGH CONSULTING PUPILS. ROUTLEDGE.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS:
• HOW DO STUDENTS RESPOND TO BEING CONSULTED ABOUT TEACHING & LEARNING IN ENGLISH?
• HOW DO FELLOW TEACHERS RESPOND TO ATTEMPTS TO DEVELOP STUDENT CONSULTATION?
RESULTS:
I WISH WE DID MORE KAHOOTS BECAUSE THEY ARE FUN AND HELPFUL
WE SHOULD DO MORE PRACTICAL STUFF TO GET US AWAY FROM OUR SCREENS AND FUN THINGS LIKE ART OR SPORT
SIR, I'VE GOT AN IDEA ABOUT COMPREHENSIONS: I SAY WE DO ONE EVERY OTHER OTHER THEN WE SHOULD DO MORE CREATIVE STUFF AND DRAWING WITH FREEDOM... MORE KAHOOTS!
WE SHOULD DO MORE CHALLENGES. THIS FEELS LIKE A THERAPY SESSION OR SOMETHING
I LIKE THE COMPREHENSIONS WHERE WE DO THE COMP. AND AT THE END WE WRITE WHAT WE THINK WOULD HAPPEN.
I DON'T LIKE THE CHARTS THEY HURT YOUR BACK
YOU'RE A GREAT TEACHER
A REALLY FUN TEACHER
LESS COMPREHENSIONS!
I GUESS I DON'T REALLY MIND COMPREHENSIONS AS LONG AS THE QUESTIONS AREN'T TOO LONG. THEY SHOULD BE LIKE 3 OR 4 MARKS, MAX.
I LIKED THE END-OF-TERM ASSESMENTS CAUSE EAH QUESTION WAINT WORTH A MOUNTAIN OF MARKS AND THE CREATIVE WRITING WAS FUN BECAUSE I LOVE CREATIVE WRITING.
I LOVED THE DEN BUILDING AND THE INSTRUCTIONS BECAUSE WE ACTUALLY GOT TO DO THE THING WE WRITE INSTRUCTIONS FOR. I LIKED MAKING THE WEBSITE BECAUSE IT WAS FUN TO DO SOMETHING WITH A FRIEND THATS REAL. YOU KNOW?
HOW MY COLLEAGUES REACTED TO MY ATTEMPTS TO DEVELOPING CONSULTATION WAS, ULTIMATELY, DUE TO THE IMPACT OF COVID-19, NOT ENTIRELY CLEAR. THEY SEEMED HESITANT AT FIRST, BUT INCORPORATED MUCH OF THE FEEDBACK I RECEIVED FROM MY STUDENTS INTO THEIR WORK WITH THEIR OWN STUDENTS. ADDITIONALLY, BOTH OF THEM GAVE THEIR STUDENTS AN OPPORTUNITY TO COMMENT ON TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THEIR OWN CLASSES.