Pupil Power

Co-production is in vogue. But can it help disengaged young people to become committed students? **Ally Paget** from Demos looks at a scheme that is exploring the power of co-production to involve young people in their schools.

In 2013, Demos received a grant from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to carry out a two-year pilot and evaluation of co-production in schools. Autumn 2014 sees us at the midpoint of the project, with one school year down and the second just beginning. In this article, we present some of our interim findings, with a focus on the qualitative: what aspects of the process are staff and students finding easier or harder, more or less helpful, and what does this tell us about the 'fit' between co-production and UK schools?

First, though, we provide some background to the project, explaining briefly what co-production is, what it has been credited with achieving elsewhere, and how and why we came to explore it in an educational setting.

A brief history of co-production

Co-production is widely regarded as having originated with the US activist Edgar Cahn (also the inventor of time banking). Cahn, a professor of law, was himself no stranger to innovation in education. With his wife, he co-founded the Antioch School of Law,

where – as in a teaching hospital – budding advocates 'learned by doing', providing legal representation to disadvantaged people across Washington D.C. At the same time, Cahn's vision was to foster in his students something he felt was missing from traditional legal training – namely, a sense of social justice.

Some years later, as he explains in the introduction to *No More Throw-Away People: The Co-Production Imperative*, Cahn was inspired by his own experience as a user (or more specifically a passive recipient) of a public service[1]. Aged 44, he suffered a massive heart attack. Confined to a bed on a hospital ward, reflecting on how powerless he felt, he realised it was this sense of powerlessness that, above all else, was slowing his recovery. Of course, he was dependent on other people for a great many basic needs – he was extremely physically weak – but what struck him was the expectation that he couldn't, shouldn't or wouldn't do or decide anything for himself. His time in hospital was the spur to develop a fully-fledged theory of co-production that recognised the inherent *wastefulness* (hence, 'throw-away') of the concept of the 'passive' service user.

Co-production is, in a nutshell, a service delivery philosophy that shifts the balance of power and control from the provider of a service to the user. In practice, this shift might be accomplished in a number of ways – it might mean citizen-led boards setting the minimum standards for local services, or a person with a long-term condition drawing up their own care plan.

Whatever form it takes, co-production challenges traditional notions of expertise. Certainly, doctors, nurses and social workers have expert knowledge – of what symptoms mean, for example, and how to treat them, or of what support is available and who is eligible for it. But service users have their own expert knowledge – they and *only* they know what motivates and supports them, the sort of environment in which they thrive and the sort in which they don't. Needless to say, none of this will sound terribly unfamiliar. No practitioner worth her salt will have been ignoring her patients' circumstances up until now. What co-production does, though, is to acknowledge that the individual's strengths, preferences and circumstances are more than useful detail – rather, they are at least half the equation.

Co-production in vogue?

There is increasing appetite, on all sides of the political spectrum, for new ways of delivering services. The current government came to power in 2010 partly on a 'Big Society' ticket – a promise of a greater say – and greater sway – for communities and civil society, relative to a 'smaller', less bureaucratic government. While talk of 'big' and 'small' has more or less fallen by the wayside, the ethos of transferring power downwards has continued apace in the agendas of 'Localism' (more powers for communities to shape and control local services) and 'Personalisation' (more power for individuals to choose and shape the services they receive).

There may be disagreement about how well these twin agendas have been implemented, but there is remarkable consensus on what the direction of change needs to be. Last February, Labour leader Ed Miliband set out his party's vision for a more responsive, more accountable state. This included a policy giving concerned parents the power to trigger specialist intervention at schools without need for sign-off by the Secretary of State, and the introduction of a formal right for public service users to come together to share their experiences and expertise[2].

Personalisation and empowerment, co-design and service user involvement, are uncontroversial as political promises. On one level, they are common sense. On another, a growing evidence-base links them to greater levels of satisfaction with services, and to cost savings achieved through earlier intervention.

Where co-production has been used in health and social care, there are strong indications that it increases service users' engagement with the end goals of their care. For instance, an evaluation of the diabetes Year of Care pilot programme found that people with diabetes involved in the programme were attending clinics more regularly, were more willing to set their own goals, and were even changing their lifestyle[3].

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The Demos pilot: Aims

We at Demos were interested in exploring the potential for co-production to improve engagement in another context – namely the school setting. Evidence shows that, by the age of 16, one in five pupils will have lost interest in their education. This disengagement manifests itself in a number of poor outcomes at school, including attainment, attendance and behaviour, and puts students at risk of a whole range of negative long-term consequences, from reduced earning potential to unwanted early pregnancy and poor mental health. If co-production can be used effectively to address educational disengagement, the potential benefits extend far beyond school – to the public purse, the economy, and society at large.

UK and international examples of co-production in education already exist. Below are three fairly diverse examples:

■ **The Kunskapsskolan Education (KED) programme** operates a significant share of Swedish secondary schools, and sponsors the Learning Schools Trust, which operates four academies in the UK. KED offers personalised learning, where each student's timetable is designed around individual goals set by the student with input from their parent(s)/carer(s) and teacher, and reviewed in weekly one-to-one sessions with a teacher.

■ Project-based learning has been popularised in the US by the **High Tech High charter schools**. This approach dispenses with the traditional curriculum in favour of a longer-term, student-directed project that incorporates a range of tasks and topics. Projects tend to be rooted in the real world and may be of tangible benefit to the local community. Past examples from High Tech High include an environmental assessment of the area around San Diego Bay, where the findings were used in subsequent research by city and state authorities, and an animation on blood diseases and the importance of giving blood, which was commissioned by San Diego Blood Bank and displayed in one of the city's public art galleries[4].

■ **Learning to Lead** is a UK initiative, first developed in 2001 at the Blue School in Wells, Somerset but later rolled out to 21 further schools. It aims to give all students – not just the 'usual customers' who tend to make up student councils – a say in issues that matter to them, their school, or the local community. Following a whole school survey and a half-day planning workshop, students form project teams which run throughout the year. Learning to Lead involves the whole school, but is compatible with a normal curriculum[5].

What these existing models have in common, however, is that all represent a significant departure from the way in which education is traditionally delivered – fundamental changes to school timetables and curricula, or structures and roles. The pilot Demos is running has a specific goal that marks it out from all of these. We wished to explore co-production on a smaller scale, within the constraints of the UK school system and national curriculum.

Methodology

For the duration of last school year (2013/14) and the current one (2014/15), Demos is working with four secondary schools across England. All our partner schools are located in deprived areas of the country, based on data from the **Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI)**.

In both years of the pilot, each school identifies a total of eight students – four in Year 7 and four in Year 9 – who are at risk of disengagement from education. Schools also select two (teaching or non-teaching) staff to work closely with students. Staff receive initial

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training from Demos in co-productive techniques, as well as ongoing support. Students and staff meet weekly, either individually or in groups. Staff facilitate students to identify, plan and enact changes that they wish to make to their learning or within school more widely.

Demos is collecting baseline and follow-up data on indicators of educational disengagement – namely, attendance, attainment, progress and behaviour – as well as qualitative data on students' perceptions of school and teachers' perceptions of students. These are compared with a 'control' group of non-participating students from the same years, whom schools identify at the beginning of the year as showing similar risk of disengagement. Importantly, our evaluation is formative – a priority for us throughout the two years is the collection of feedback from participating schools, staff and students on how the process might be improved.

Early findings

The charts below show some of the characteristics of the 2013/14 participants.

Male	24
Female	8
FSM	15
no FSM	16
Unknown	1
Pupil Premi	26
No Pupil Pr	5
Unknown	1
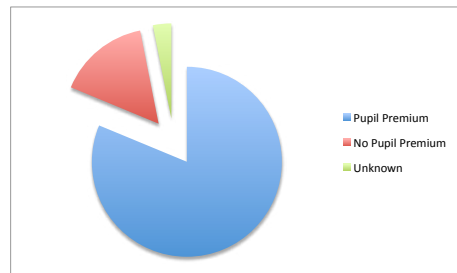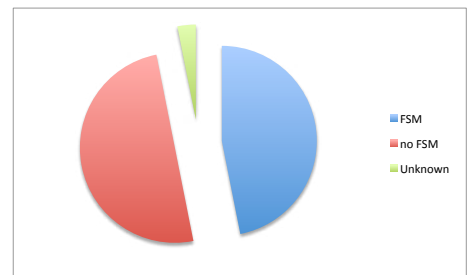
Beyond the requirement that participants should be 'at risk of disengagement', we deliberately gave schools minimal guidance about selection of students. (We did suggest, however, that it would be inadvisable to choose students for whom family circumstances or special educational needs were the main barrier to engagement. We reasoned that these students would be best served by existing interventions.)

Reflecting on the characteristics of the students selected is very informative. One of our four schools – an inner-city school with an overwhelmingly non-white student population – chose to use the project as one of a several interventions targeted at its small cohort of low-achieving white British students. Another school plans, in the second year, to incorporate the pilot into its (already comprehensive) programme of interventions for children with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties. Staff at a third school told us that they valued the opportunity the programme gave them to work with students who, being neither the highest achieving nor the most challenging, might not otherwise have received such intensive input.

One year in, following discussions with participating students and staff, we are in a position to identify a number of things that are working well about the pilot, as well as a number of challenges. Three key findings are set out below:

1. 'Why me?' Changing roles and expectations
At the end of the first year, we asked participating students to think back to their initial impression of the project – why did they think they had been chosen to take part? Perhaps understandably, given the general profile of the students selected, most had simply assumed they'd been selected because they were the 'naughty' ones. "I wasn't happy," said D., "because I thought they chose people that were bad behaved".

Over the course of the year, though, D. changed her mind. In July, she described the purpose of the project in this way: "[The teachers] want to help you with your school years and they want you to achieve better and they're helping you with your confidence. […] [I'd tell someone it's worth doing because] you build your confidence and you'll be involved in more stuff."

Her advice for selecting students for the second year was that the school should choose "non-confident people. People in the background that don't contribute or get involved." The same was true of K., who came to understand that the project was "where you try to make the school a better place". For her, the ideal candidate was "[a] person who's willing to put their point across, that's not too quiet or too shy because there's no point in them being here if it's just going to be teachers' points [that are being listened to]."

There are two essential differences between this co-productive project and more common ways of capturing 'student voice' (school councils, for example). One is that this approach is more far-reaching – students are expected, and facilitated, to actually bring about the changes that they want to see made. Perhaps the most important difference, though, is the nature of the students that take part. School councils, like similar endeavours in the adult world (think of boards of trustees, town councils, etc.) are populated by the 'usual suspects' – individuals who are already engaged, and already happy to take on the role of decision-makers.

By contrast, this project aims to give choice, voice and responsibility to some of the *least* likely suspects. In some of our schools, simply giving these students the chance to occupy a different role in the school – as 'decision-makers' as opposed to 'troublemakers' – appeared to have a positive effect. In one school, this contrast between expectations and reality, established reputations and new roles, was explicitly used as motivation for the students. This suggests that, especially for Year 9s who are already known to most school staff – there may be value in having a 'second chance' to change teachers' opinions of them. Related to this, participating staff reported that other staff around the school were initially less willing to cooperate with the pilot because of the reputation of the students involved. As a result, they frequently found themselves advocating for the students, ensuring that others in school were aware of what they were achieving.

2. 'Letting go': Getting results vs. ceding control

From the outset, we anticipated that the required shift in power from staff to students would be something that both parties, but staff in particular, found difficult to achieve. However, it was clear from end of year interviews that both sides had begun to relate to each other in a different way. Staff reported seeing students in a different light, and students were conscious of this:

'It feels like I could talk to her; other teachers I wouldn't talk to. Sometimes, yeah, I'd say we have a good relationship. She probably changed her opinion of me in the year – probably [at the start of the year, before she got to know me] what other teachers said about me had a bad influence on her,' explained one Year 9 student.

In a sense, it seemed that the emotional or 'relational' shift in the student-teacher dynamic was not the hardest part. It became apparent that there were also a number of other barriers to letting students take the lead. Staff reported feeling under pressure – whether from Demos, from the school senior leadership, or their own high standards – to be seen to be 'producing results'. As a consequence, there were a couple of instances of students engaging (under the heading of this project) with activities and opportunities that were the most easily available, rather than those which they might have chosen themselves. For instance, students at one school which was on the Tour de France route were involved in activities relating to that, and while this provided a specific focus and a specific set of responsibilities for them, it was staff-directed rather than student-led.

3. 'Getting it done': Timing, practicalities, and whole-school support

Across all four schools, the biggest barriers to implementing co-production were practical in nature. These ranged from the expected – timetabling, finding a physical space to hold sessions, and turnover of staff and students – to some concrete problems we had not anticipated; for instance, one school building was simply so large and complex to navigate that students often found it too difficult to reach the designated space for sessions, or did not see this as worthwhile.

Participating staff required "buy in" from the school senior leadership to be able to fit sessions into their own timetable, and into students' timetables. For the latter, it was necessary to plan which lessons students could miss, should miss, or would tolerate missing, and how often. There appeared to be a traceable relationship between the amount of top-down support staff had from the senior leadership, the frequency and regularity of sessions, and how much students reported getting out of the project. The school where the project had been the most obviously successful was the one that had selected non-teaching heads of year to deliver it. By contrast, in the school where the participating teaching staff had least support, sessions ended up being held only a handful of times per term. As a result, the project lost its "identity", with students unable at the end of the year to explain what it had been about.

Lunchtime Sports Club

Early on in the year, the four Year 9s at School C identified a need for more activities within school at lunchtime. They felt that not having enough to do left students bored, leading to fights, bad behaviour and poor concentration at lunch and throughout afternoon lessons. With Mr. T's support, they put their argument to the Head of PE, who agreed to let them use the sports hall and equipment. They also promoted the new sports club around the school. Mr. T has agreed to give up his time to supervise the lunchtime club, but that is the extent of his involvement – the students continue to deal with issues as they arise. So far, they have had to institute different days for older and younger students, and have discussed what different sports they might offer to encourage more girls to take part.

Conclusion

The clearest finding from this year is that staff and students are finding co-production hard work. Nonetheless, schools can see the potential; we are delighted that all four are continuing to work with us for a second year. The challenges and successes of the first year have informed how we jointly plan for the second. For example, one of our schools is moving responsibility for delivery from teaching to non-teaching staff, while another has scheduled fixed sessions into the students' timetables for the whole term ahead. We will continue to refine our approach in 2014/15, identifying problems and trying out solutions as we go along. At the end of the project, thanks to the effort and commitment of our partner schools, we hope to have something approaching a Pupil Power "package" – an approach that is replicable, adaptable to different schools, and scalable to larger cohorts of pupils.

However, some wider questions are already starting to take shape which go beyond what can be addressed by one, or even four, pioneering schools:

- Our first year findings suggest there may be potential gains from giving challenging students more responsibility over the school and their learning. What are the risks inherent in this approach? What will have to change to make schools willing to take those risks?
- Although there may be clear, self-reported gains for students and staff, initiatives like this may not yield concrete outcomes of the kind schools are used to measuring (and are increasingly expected to measure). How can schools measure and demonstrate the effect of initiatives like these – and if they can't, can they justify their delivery?

As these questions illustrate, our main aspiration for the Pupil Power project is not to provide an answer, but to start a wider conversation – not just with schools, but with policymakers too. Co-production may be in vogue, it may even *work,* but – in much the same way as our staff need their heads' support – schools need commitment from the very top if they are to translate co-production into the day-to-day.

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References

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2. Miliband, E. (2014) The Hugo Young Lecture. [speech], 10 February 2014. Transcript available at: labourlist.org/2014/02/ed-milibands-hugo-young-lecture-full-text/.
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4. The Innovation Unit. (2012) Work that matters: The teacher's guide to project-based learning. Available at: www.innovationunit.org/sites/default/files/Teacher's%20 Guide%20to%20Project-based%20Learning.pdf.
5. Frost, D. and Stenton, S. (2010) Learning to Lead: The story so far. Available at: http://www.learntolead.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/learning-to-lead-the-story-so-far.pdf.

[All web links accessed 10/09/2014].

Knowledge trails

1. Pupils as school leaders – James Cauchi discusses the benefits of giving students more responsibility within the school, and ways to successfully do so.
   library.teachingtimes.com/articles/pupils-as-school-leaders