



## GUIDANCE

# Children Decide: Power, Participation and Purpose in the Primary Classroom

A guide for teachers based on a research project funded by CfBT Education Trust



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## Acknowledgements

Thanks to:

- Colleagues within the Centre for Applied Research in Education and the School of Education and Lifelong Learning who have supported this project, particularly Libby Allen (project administrator) and Miriam McGregor (report design).
- The head-teachers and teachers at Catton Grove Middle School, Hillside Avenue Primary School, Mundesley First School, Ormesby Middle School, Poringland Primary School and Tuckswold Community First School .
- Finally, this project would not have been possible without the financial support from CfBT's Education Committee who fund a wide range of public domain research such as that represented in this report.

## About CfBT

CfBT is an education trust providing education for public benefit. Established 40 years ago CfBT is today a worldwide leader in the provision of independent education and training services. We work in 13 countries around the world, including the UK, providing education services and managing large government contracts.

We are proud that the surpluses we generate are reinvested in research and development programmes. We commit around £1million of surpluses every year for practice-based educational research. This research project has been funded in this way, and it is hoped that the research findings will add to public debate and development in this field.

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## Abbreviations used in this report

CARE: Centre for Applied Research in Education.

ICT: Information and Communication Technology.

KS1: Key Stage One children (aged 5 to 7 years).

KS2: Key Stage Two children (aged 7 to 11 years).

PRA: Participatory Rural Appraisal.

PSHE: Personal Social and Health Education.

UEA: University of East Anglia.

The term PRA, Participatory Rural Appraisal, is being used to describe 'a growing family of approaches and methods to enable local people to share, enhance and analyse their knowledge of life and conditions' (Chambers, 1994: 1437). These methods include many visual-based activities such as mapping, ranking, diagramming, modelling, drawing and role play. PRA has been used by governments and aid agencies to involve communities in planning development programmes.







# Children Decide: Power, Participation and Purpose in the Primary Classroom

## Introduction

Teachers are keen to encourage children's participation in decision making – for example, through schools councils and other strategies – and there is increasing recognition of children's rights within the wider educational community (see 'Every Child Matters', DfES 2004). In this context, the Children Decide project aimed for children and teachers to develop a more collaborative approach to making decisions that affect children's lives in primary schools. It was carried out in six Norfolk primary schools from October 2004 to February 2006, and funded by CfBT. The project engaged with current debates on student voice, participation and primary pedagogy and was innovatory in involving children as action researchers. Through being encouraged to take the lead in conducting action research on decision making in their own classrooms, children explored practical opportunities for children and teachers to share decision making processes, including those around effective learning and teaching.

As well as providing an account of the project activities and findings, we hope that this booklet will offer guidance to other primary school teachers who would like to initiate similar action research in their classrooms. For this reason, we have included appendices with detailed instructions for facilitating the visual methods used and a list of ideas for orientation activities on decision making. A full account of the project can be found in Cox, Currie, Frederick, Jarvis, Lawes, Millner, Nudd, Robinson-Pant, Stubb, Taylor, White (2006), available from [Libby.Allen@uea.ac.uk](mailto:Libby.Allen@uea.ac.uk) or on [www.cfbt.com/research](http://www.cfbt.com/research). All boxes in this booklet are extracts from the teachers' and/or children's accounts in the full project report.

## An overview of the project

### Background

'Children Decide' built directly on the experiences and findings of our earlier CfBT-funded project 'Empowering Children through Visual Communication' through focusing on the limits placed on children's decision making and power relations in primary schools. The culture of the school (where teachers had control over teaching and learning) meant that children's contributions to decision making were limited mainly to the school council. Children implicitly accepted that their decision making through the school council would be unlikely to encompass learning and teaching. There was a tendency for school councils to deal with playground issues and fundraising, for example.



In our previous project, we found that visual communication opened up new areas of discussion and enabled a wider range of children to participate. Our research revealed the influence of power relationships between students and teachers and between children (eg younger and older children; school council members and non members). It seemed that changes in the existing culture of teaching and learning would be required for the visual strategies to take full effect. We concluded that the visual strategies should not be viewed as an end in themselves, but as one part of a principled approach that promotes genuine participation, communication and decision making.

The 'Children Decide' project started from this principled position and focused on the development of collaboration between children and teachers in decision making. Our aims from the outset were:

- To encourage children to become more critically aware of the kinds of decisions they are involved in within their classrooms and schools and the ways in which their power is limited (power relations between adults and children and between different groups of children).
- To work towards a more democratic approach to decision making through increased levels of negotiation between children and their teachers, thus enhancing children's educational experiences.
- To involve children as partners in the research.

## The project design

A team of nine teachers (including four from the earlier CfBT-funded project) based in six Norfolk primary schools, facilitated research with the children in their own classrooms (ranging from Year 1 to Year 6), with support from two researchers (Sue Cox and Anna Robinson-Pant) and an administrator (Libby Allen) from the University of East Anglia. An action research approach was developed, with the children as researchers, so that findings could lead directly to more collaborative decision making approaches in their classrooms and in the school as a whole. With action research, we felt that there would be more opportunities for children to be in greater control of what went on in their classrooms. The project took place over 15 months, consisting of orientation workshops on research skills and decision making practices, fieldwork in the six schools, and meetings to share findings, including a children's conference in July 2005.

The classes involved in the research were: Year 1, Hillside Avenue Primary School (Sue Lawes), Year 1/2, Poringland Primary School (De Jarvis), Year 2, Hillside Avenue Primary School (Emily Millner), Year 2, Mundesley First School (Isabel Stubbs), Year 2/3, Tuckswood

Community First School (Tim Taylor), Year 4, Ormesby Middle School (Kirsty Nudd), Year 4, Catton Grove Middle School (Debbie White), Year 6, Catton Grove Middle School (Daniel Currie), Year 6, Poringland Primary School (Kath Frederick).

## The project process

In each of the six schools, one class (or two) carried out the project with their class teacher. The university-based researchers played a supportive role by spending time in the classrooms working with children and teachers on the research activities.

The project was structured as follows:

1. Orientation to the project (team workshops and classroom orientation on decision making).
2. Carrying out the research in schools.
  - i) Reconnaissance stage – finding out what decisions were already being made in the school/classroom, how and by whom (this phase included introducing children to ways of doing research).
  - ii) Children collecting and using data to decide what changes to introduce in their classrooms.
  - iii) Introducing changes in the classroom.
  - iv) Evaluating the changes as a basis for further action: children collecting more data about the changes and then repeating ii, iii, iv above (and so on).
3. Children's conference to share findings across the different schools.
4. Conference for local teachers about the project
5. Collaborative writing for the full project report.

## 1. Orientation to the project

To enable the children to become active researchers in the project, we envisaged that the following research orientation process would be needed:

- Developing a shared understanding of the concepts and processes of decision making through adult-initiated classroom activities.
- Introducing children to different research methods, particularly visual, eg institutional diagrams, drawings and timelines (see CfBT 'Empowering Children through Visual Communication' research report) and to effective group work.



## i) Classroom orientation on decision making

Following workshops at UEA, the teachers began classroom activities on decision making. These included:

- the use of stories (see Appendix 1).
- making a criteria matrix<sup>1</sup> to decide on fundraising options for the school council.
- imaginative scenarios (such as what to do if the teacher did not turn up to school).  
Some of these ‘what if’ scenarios arose in the context of other classroom activities: examples included a discussion in PSHE (Personal, Social and Health Education), when De Jarvis told her Year 2 class about a time when her son got lost in town and asked them to decide what they would do.

We began by reading ‘Would you rather?’ by John Burningham (1978) to introduce decision making as making a choice between different options. Having had much fun discussing amusing dilemmas, such as whether we would prefer to eat spider stew or slug dumplings, we moved onto thinking about ‘would you rather?’ choices related to the children’s everyday experiences. This exercise enabled the children to think about choices they make and to help them to put their reasons for making them into words. Their reasons, as the questions directed them, were mainly based on personal preference and how the decision affected them directly; however, it became apparent that some of these choices were not solely theirs to make and were influenced or were determined by others, for example, whether to have a hot dinner or packed lunch.

*We found out what a decision was. We found out a decision is a kind of choice.*

*I found out that a decision was a type of choice that we have to make by ourselves.*

*Box 1: Kirsty Nudd used stories to discuss decision making with her Year 4 class.*

Teachers used various ways to introduce children to decision making language in the real life context of the classroom.

<sup>1</sup> Constructing a criteria matrix is a PRA method which involves comparing variables and scoring them according to criteria decided by the group, see Appendix 2 for instructions.

## Understanding decision making

The priority was for the children to understand what decision-making is. An understanding of this and of the process of decision-making is the first step towards empowering children. We achieved this by using a number of practical activities. The first of these was to toss a coin to 'decide' whether we should go out to play or not and to discuss whether this was a decision.

The children were able to understand that:

☞ *If it is a decision you have to think. A coin can't think. It hasn't got a little brain* ☞ Child A

☞ *Tossing a coin is not a decision 'cos it's only flicking a coin. You are just waiting to see what it's gonna be* ☞ Child B

Coin-tossing became a visual reminder to children that decision-making involves thinking and was used as a preliminary activity to our decision-making sessions.

The next stage was to make a 'proper' decision (ie using our brains) about whether to go out to play by listing the advantages (smiley face) and disadvantages (sad face) and comparing this process with tossing a coin.

Box 2: *Decision making is more than tossing a coin* – Sue Lawes, Year 1 teacher.

To begin to explore and understand decision-making, the class was *initially* taken outside and told that they were to play a Frisbee game, which had a goal at either end of a pitch. No other rules were mentioned and the Frisbee was placed in the centre of the pitch. Due to the lack of guidance, the children quickly became frustrated, which created a pressure to create some rules to decide how the game was to be played and what type of teams would be fair. After the game, the class discussed who had taken the decisions about how the game should be played and how the rules enabled the children to enjoy the game more.

Box 3: *Sorting out the rules for themselves* – Daniel Currie, Year 6 teacher.



We use a system for learning called Mantle of the Expert (Heathcote 1995). This system operates by creating, through the work of the children and in collaboration with adults, an imaginary context for the children's work. During the year of this research project the children worked in an imaginary frame 'as if' they were archaeologists. They were not role-playing or 'in drama' the whole time, but working on an imaginary commission to help create a visitor's centre beside the ruins of an ancient Roman market town.

In the imaginary community created by the class, the children can help shape and affect the environment they work in. They can make decisions and use power in ways that are not usually open to them. In effect, they have the opportunity to play at using power, in the sense that their decisions do not carry a 'price' in the real world and that they are in control of events.

I believe this kind of decision-making is important because it provides opportunities for children to experiment with power and to explore the types of decision making normally only available to adults because of the structure of the curriculum and because of the regulations in schools that control children in time and place.

In the imaginary world, the usual roles of teacher/pupil adult/child do not apply. There is a blurring of identities when participants behave 'as if' they are different people in a different setting. In the imaginary world of the expert, the teacher has to treat the children differently, behaving as if they have more or equal authority. As 'experts' they know a lot and have to be treated as having that status at all times. It is an unusual relationship for child and adult to have and forces them both to reappraise their roles.

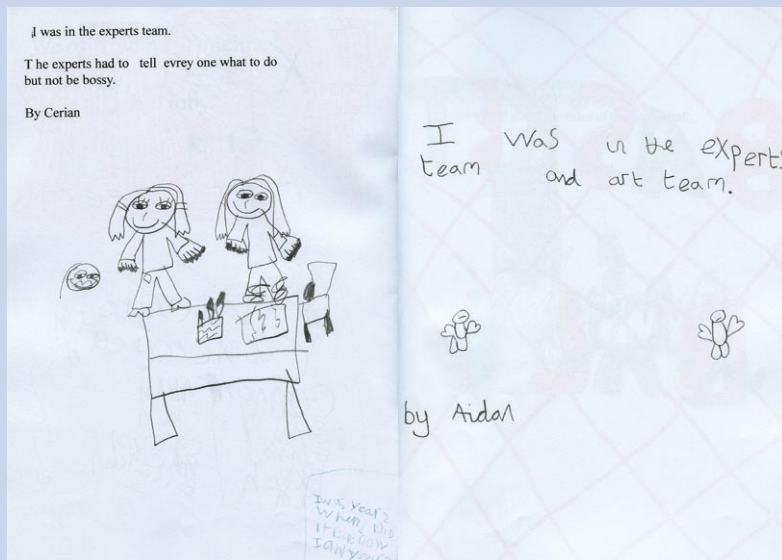
*Box 4: Tim Taylor used the Mantle of the Expert approach with his Year 2/3 class.*

## 2. Carrying out the research

### i) Reconnaissance stage

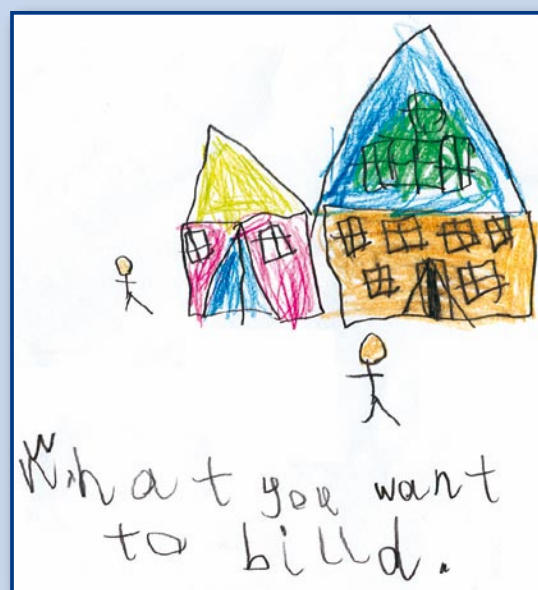
Through getting started on the research in their classrooms, the children were introduced to ways of collecting and analysing data, as well as ways of working collaboratively in groups. Teachers ensured that children had created their own rules for group work, such as turn-taking, listening carefully and taking different roles within the group. Isabel Stubbs used the jigsaw technique<sup>2</sup>, teaching small groups of 'experts' – researchers, writers, camera people, and artists – who then came together in mixed 'home' groups to conduct their research (see below). Throughout the project, Power Point, video, audio and digital photos were frequently used by children to record the research process, and to collect data.

<sup>2</sup> Details can be found on: <http://coe.sdsu.edu/eet/articles/cooperativelrng/index.htm>.



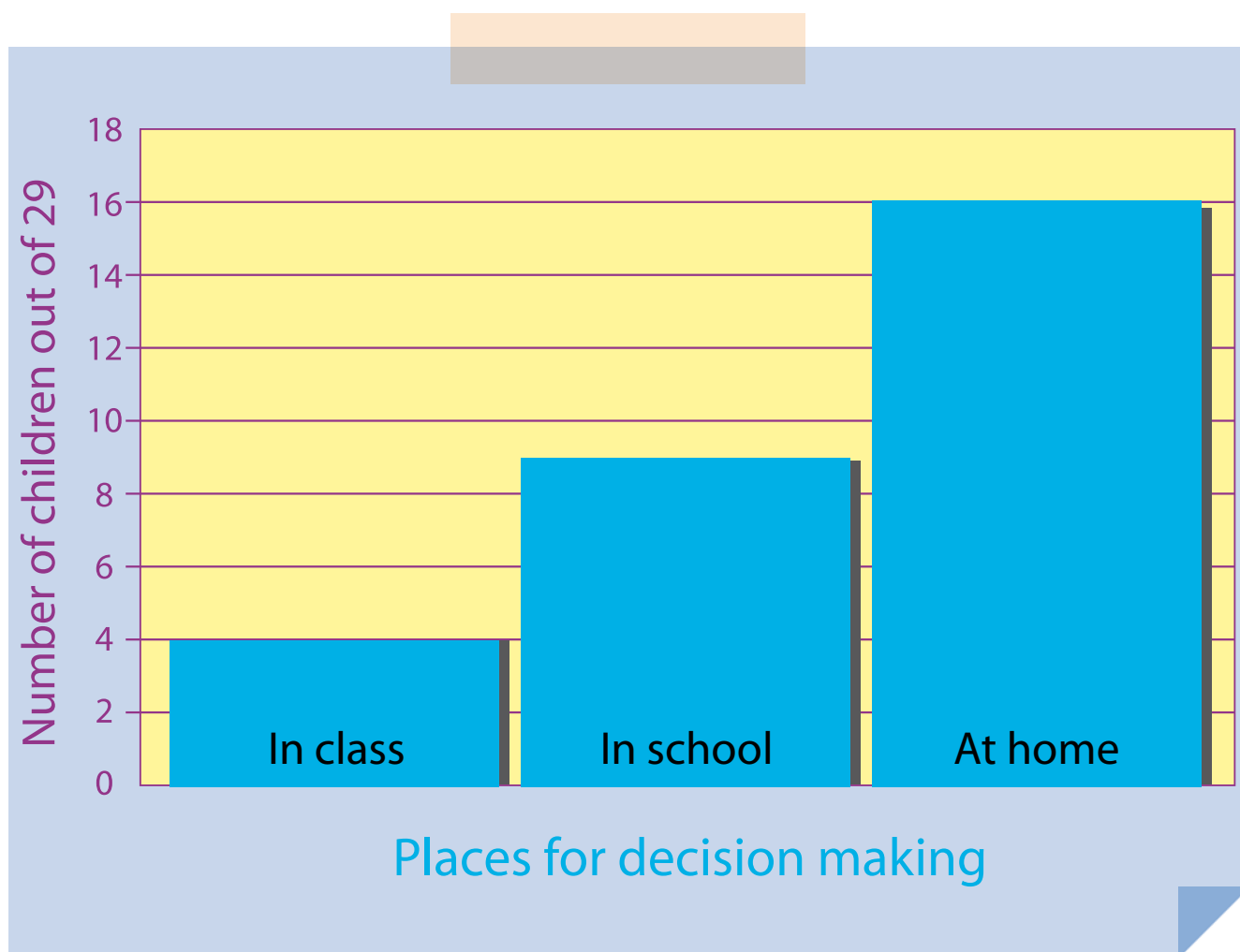
Box 5: Extract from project report written by children in Isabel Stubbs' Year 2 class.

The first stage of the research was to find out what decisions were already being made in the school/classroom, how and by whom. Within all the schools, the focus became an exploration of the kinds of decisions that children make within their classrooms, rather than in the school as a whole or within the school council. The research was carried out in both small groups and whole class time. As the project progressed, teachers and children found that the questions of when, what, how, and where decisions were made and who made them, helped them to focus their thinking.



Box 6: Pictures by De Jarvis' Year 1/2 class about when they make decisions.

Drawing on PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) methods<sup>3</sup>, several schools created visual timelines of their day to identify times when decisions were made and by whom (see page 16 and 17). This helped children to work out decisions for which they might be able to take more responsibility and to begin to implement changes. Other strategies were also used: Kirsty Nudd pinned a sheet up in the classroom (Year 4) for children to write on during the day whenever they made a decision. Several teachers encouraged children to consider the decisions that they made at home as well as at school. For instance, Kath Frederick's Year 6 class then made a graph to compare the decisions they made at home and at school:



Box 7: Graph made by Year 6, Poringland Primary School

Some schools used the PRA activity 'institutional diagramming', where children made paper circles to represent people and institutions in the school ('the bigger the circle, the bigger the say') to generate discussion about their own sphere of influence within the school.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 2 for instructions.



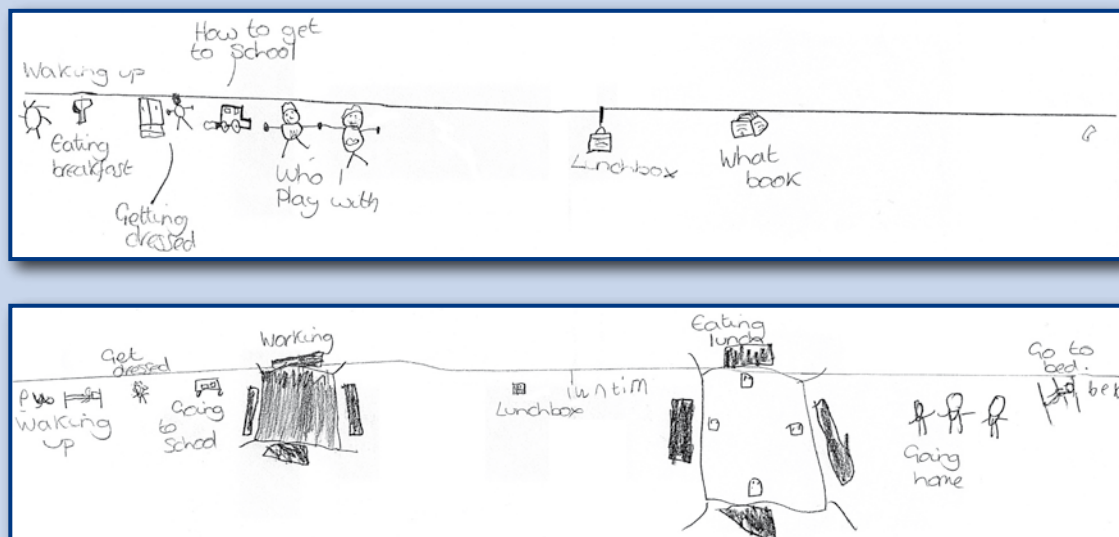
The children were given a selection of different sized circles and each group had to write the names of individuals or groups of people within the school (e.g. Mr Lawes, Teaching assistants, class councillors etc) on the respective size of circle which they felt represented their decision making power. These circles were then to be arranged in relative proximity to each other to show the relationships between these individuals or groups of people. Many variations arose between the groups, however all the finished diagrams showed that the children saw themselves as having relatively very little decision making power. They had put themselves in a small circle far away from the larger circles containing the names of the school Head and Deputy.



Box 8: PRA Institutional Diagram made by Debbie White's Year 4 class.

## ii) Collecting and using data to decide what changes to introduce in their classrooms

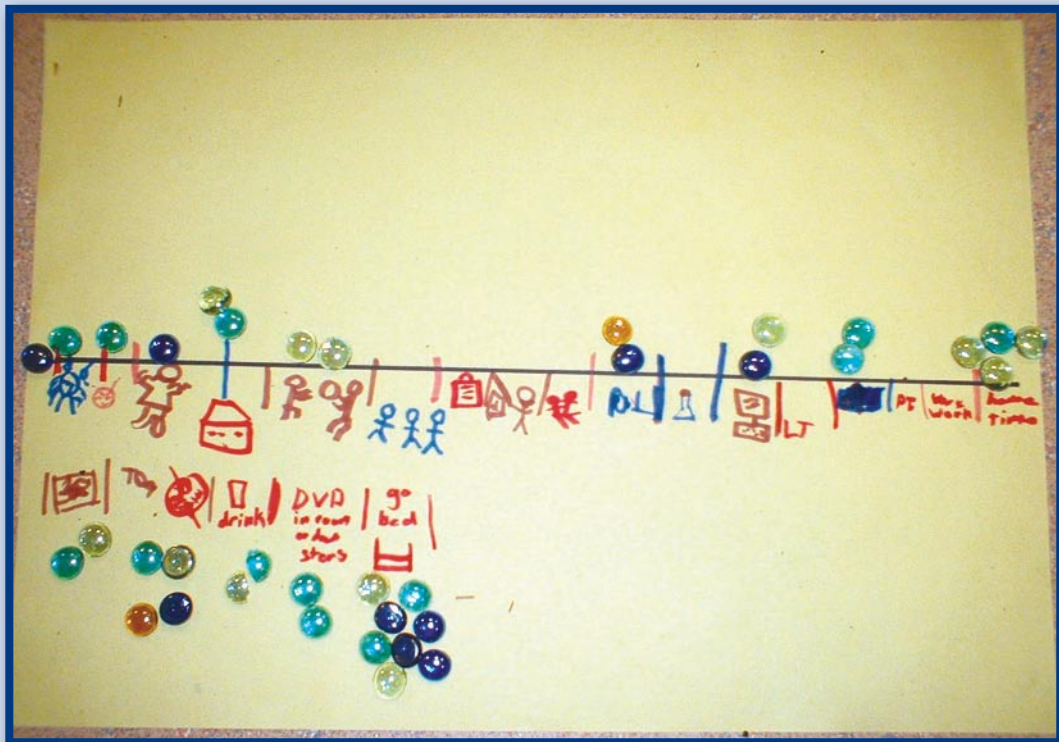
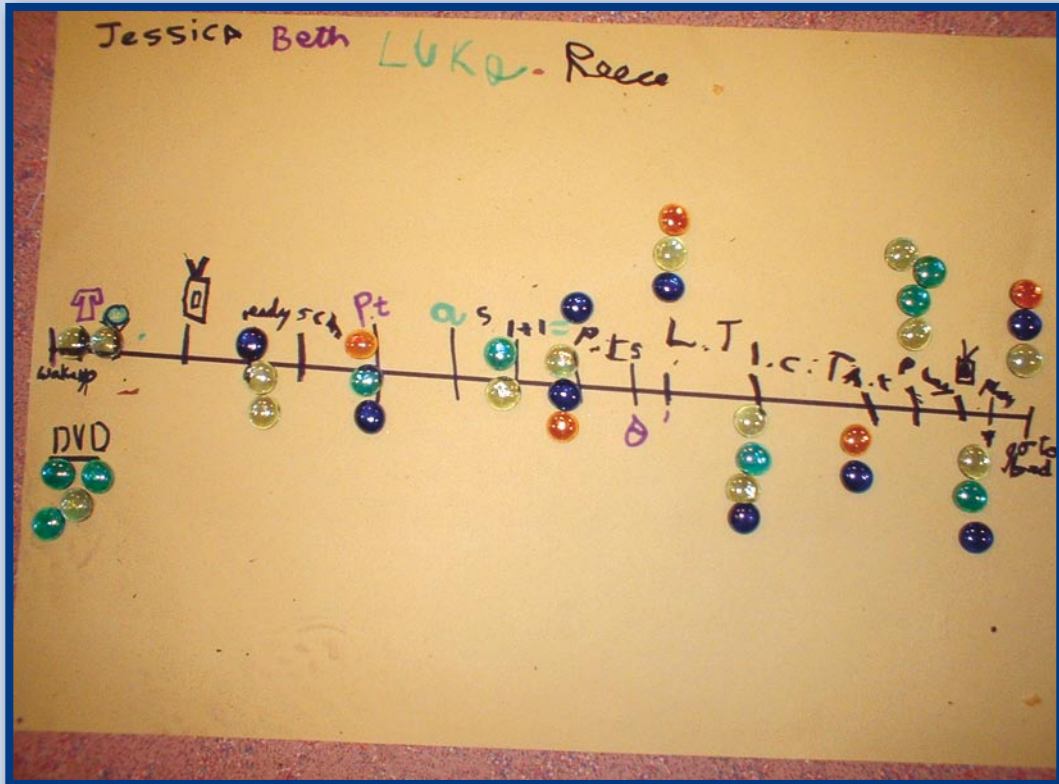
The next stage of the project was for children to begin to plan the changes they wanted to make. The timelines that the children made in the reconnaissance stage were used to help them work out decisions for which they might be able to take more responsibility. In several classes, they were able to see that they made decisions in their own time (playtime, home) and raised questions about other times of the day, particularly in lessons, where the teacher apparently made more of the decisions.



Each child made a time line of their day starting when they woke up and finishing when they went to bed. On this they marked, using pictures or words, the main parts of the day and when they felt they were making decisions. This activity enabled all children to be involved including those with poor literacy skills. Mealtimes and playtimes stood out as being the times when the children felt that most of their decision making took place.

This activity highlighted the fact that the children don't feel that they make any decisions during lesson time. It was not known at this point whether this was because they didn't want to make decisions during lessons or because they didn't feel that they were able to.

Box 9a: Emily Millner's Year 2 class made timelines of their day.



Box 9b: Timelines made by Year 4 children in Debbie White's class.

In Year One, to make the issues less abstract, Sue Lawes asked the children to consider the decisions she made as teacher, and whether they could take responsibility for some of these. She also showed a video of them tidying up and asked them, 'if you were a teacher, would you do it differently?' The children had all noticed the level of noise and this provided the opportunity to stand back and consider what they would do. Kath Frederick set up activities to encourage her Year 6 class to look at issues around their learning.

Together we posed the research question "When and how can we make decisions about our own learning within the confines of the classroom itself?"

In order for them to make decisions about their learning they needed to consider the following statement: What, when, where and how we learn. With that statement in mind they needed to focus on the classroom environment and each aspect of the statement in turn.

They worked in groups, each having a set of labelled coloured cards and questions to consider. The teacher allowed them the freedom to express themselves as they chose resulting in varied answers and approaches to the task.

*Box 10: Exploring their own learning (Kath Frederick, Year 6 teacher).*

In discussion, the children in Tim Taylor's Year 2/3 class had expressed concern about being organised into ability sets for maths. They decided to conduct videoed interviews with children in their own class and the other class involved, as well as with their teachers and head-teacher to find out more about their views.



*Box 11: The children carrying out interviews (Tim Taylor's Year 2/3 class).*

Kirsty Nudd encouraged all the children in her Year 4 class to take photos with digital cameras and present them with individual voice-overs to show what they would like to change in their class/school. (See page 19.)

## Some suggested changes

• I would like a basket ball for each year group so there won't be too many balls going in at once. 9



• I would like to play golf because it is fun. 9

• I would like to have a longer playtime because we only have 15 minutes and we don't get time to chat to our friends and play more and have fun. 9

• I would like to spend more time in the computer room. 9



• I would like to decide where to sit because it gets boring sitting next to the same people every day. 9



• I would like to sit next to whoever you like because you get to work with somebody different and as long as you're sensible you should be able to sit next to whoever you like and it will be better because you learn more about different people. 9

• I would like to be able to decide where the tables go. 9

• I think there should be more tennis in games so people can be more energetic. 9



Following on from this, Sue and Anna supported small groups to evaluate which of these options would be best for the class to work on. The children used matrix ranking to discuss and assess the chosen options from those suggested in relation to different factors, such as time, cost and impact on learning. When assessing the options, the children assumed certain parameters – such as the amount of time they should spend on lessons. When they discussed about playtime being longer, they thought that they would have to come to school at 8am if this was the case or that the buses would have to come later. They used plastic blocks for scoring all the options against each criterion at a time. They were keen to show their individual preferences as well as a group score, through using a certain colour and number of bricks for each individual in the group. They also built the blocks upwards so that they could see which the highest score was literally. Within each group they had to decide whether a high score was a good thing: did this mean the option was more or less viable?

The children who had worked with Sue and Anna then acted facilitators to enable all children to carry out this activity. The options which were most viable, from each group, were fed back to the class and this formed our list of possibilities.

Box 12a: Using visual strategies (Kirsty Nudd, Year 4 teacher).



Children showed options and criteria as pictures. For this group the more cubes there were the better the option was. They wrote the numbers on once they had taken the cubes off. This group also decided they did not have to use all their cubes when voting for each criterion.

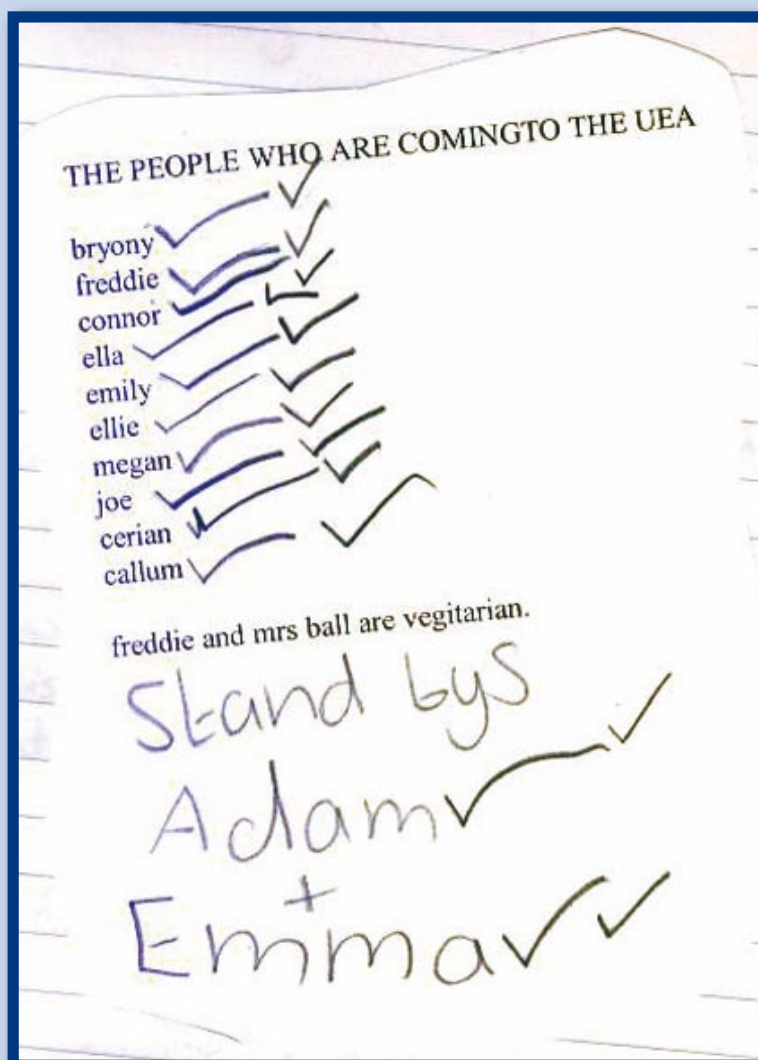
A hand-drawn matrix ranking table on a grid. The criteria are written vertically in the first column: 'Cheap', 'Not a lot of organisation', 'People like it', 'Good for learning', 'Good for other people', and 'Good for teachers'. The options are written horizontally at the top: 'Change layout of the classroom', 'To play golf in games', 'To decide who to sit next to', 'More time in computer room', 'To decide to read Fuzzbuzz books', 'To play tennis in games', 'To play more football', and 'To have more break time'. The numbers in the cells represent the number of cubes used for each option-criterion pair. The total number of cubes for each criterion is written at the bottom of the grid.

	Change layout of the classroom	To play golf in games	To decide who to sit next to	More time in computer room	To decide to read Fuzzbuzz books	To play tennis in games	To play more football	To have more break time
Cheap	16	4	16	5	9	7	12	12
Not a lot of organisation	11	4	16	12	16	11	16	7
People like it	13	11	15	15	15	6	16	16
Good for learning	11	13	16	16	13	16	13	10
Good for other people	16	8	6	12	15	11	14	9
Good for teachers	6	10	16	14	5	11	12	5
Total	73	50	85	74	73	62	83	59
Position	4 <sup>th</sup>	7 <sup>th</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>

Box 12b: Matrix ranking (Kirsty Nudd, Year 4 teacher).

The matrix approach was used in a number of ways. Several of the classes adopted it as a way of reaching a consensus about what changes to implement first. Other ways of making decisions about what to do included voting in a visual way with coloured counters. Daniel Currie's class used the interactive whiteboard to vote and present the results visually.

As well as being a visual approach to facilitating research and decision making, the timelines and matrices provided a useful visual record of the children's activities. The children and teachers explored various ways of recording the progress of the research. For instance, Isabel Stubbs introduced the idea of a research journal using words and pictures contributed by the children and herself.



I felt we needed to keep a diary of our experience with the Project as our sessions were not on a regular basis and I felt the children and I needed to keep a record of each discussion and events which may occur. So I introduced the "Journal" to our class. In this lilac notebook we would keep a note of everything we did and would record everyone's comments. The children wanted me to be the "Secretary" and write in it, and they thought photos would make it more interesting to look at. This journal became an important part of our research as we kept notes of our teams and the children learnt that it was useful to be able to read what we had discussed last time before we continued each session.

Box 13: The research journal used by Isabel Stubbs' Year 2 class.



Through analysing the data (particularly looking in detail at the visuals they had made), the children began to distinguish between their own personal views and independent data analysis. As Kirsty Nudd observes in her report: “sometimes the children made conclusions that they believed to be true, rather than the data told them”. Daniel Currie encouraged the children to turn their data into questions. They also began to see that there were no right or wrong answers in research, and that questionnaires were not to be confused with ‘tests’.

### iii. Introducing changes in the classroom

Once they had prioritised the possible changes they had identified through their research activities, the children drew up action plans on how to implement them. In some cases, they needed to do more thinking about the practical implications of introducing the changes. The teachers encouraged them to work collaboratively, as they wanted to increase the level of control that the children had in implementing their decisions. Across the schools, the changes that the children brought about ranged from classroom organisation (both to the physical environment and to classroom routines), to issues in the playground (such as making games fairer) and changes to children’s learning experience (for instance, planning their own lessons for a certain time in the week and reorganising maths groups).

The children in Debbie White’s Year 4 class and Emily Millner’s Year 2 class had both decided to take over the teacher’s role in giving out rewards for good work and behaviour.

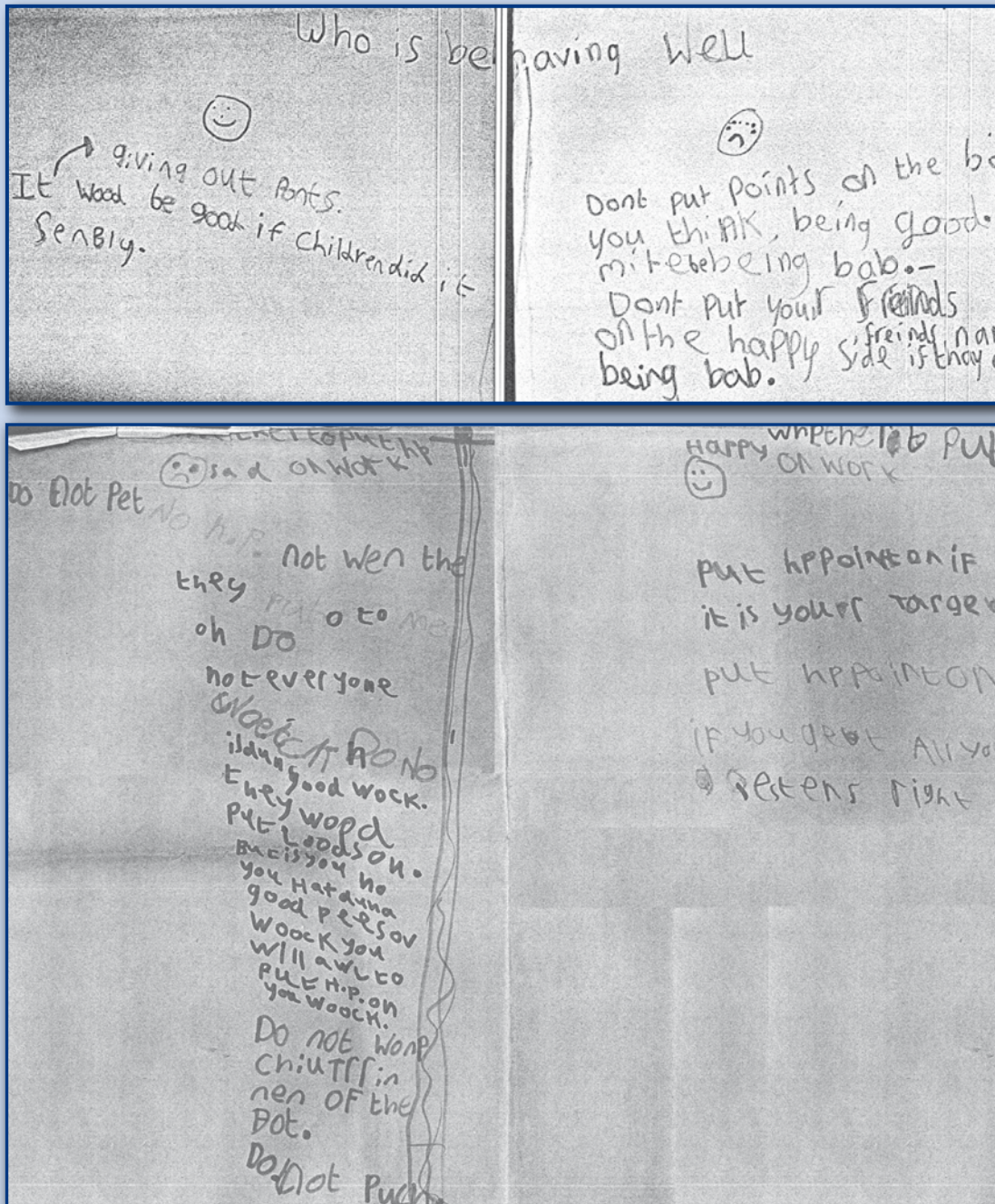
The children chose to decide ‘who is behaving well’ and ‘whether to put house points on their finished work’. The children wanted to follow the guidelines that were already in place within the class when making these decisions i.e. if someone is behaving well (following class rules) they would have their name written on the board and get a sticker. The difference would be that the children would decide when that should happen rather than the teacher.

Before the children began to make these decisions for themselves they looked at the pros and cons of doing so. This activity was carried out by a small group of children. The outcomes were as follows. With regards to deciding who is behaving well the children were concerned that class members would only nominate their friends to have their names written on the board. They felt that if children did it sensibly then it would work well.

*Continued over...*



- It would be good if children did it sensibly. •
- Don't put points on the board... you might be being bad. •
- Don't put your friends names on the happy side if they are being bad. •



Box 14: 'Taking over the teacher's role' (Emily Millner's Year 2 class).

Through interactive work in groups, the children in Debbie White's class considered the 'what, when, how and who' questions that would help them to develop a fair and organised system:

- Who – who would be responsible for giving out the Cat Stamps?
- When – would there be a certain time to give out Cat Stamps within the class?
- Why – for what reasons could rewards be allocated?
- How – how would the system run in the class?

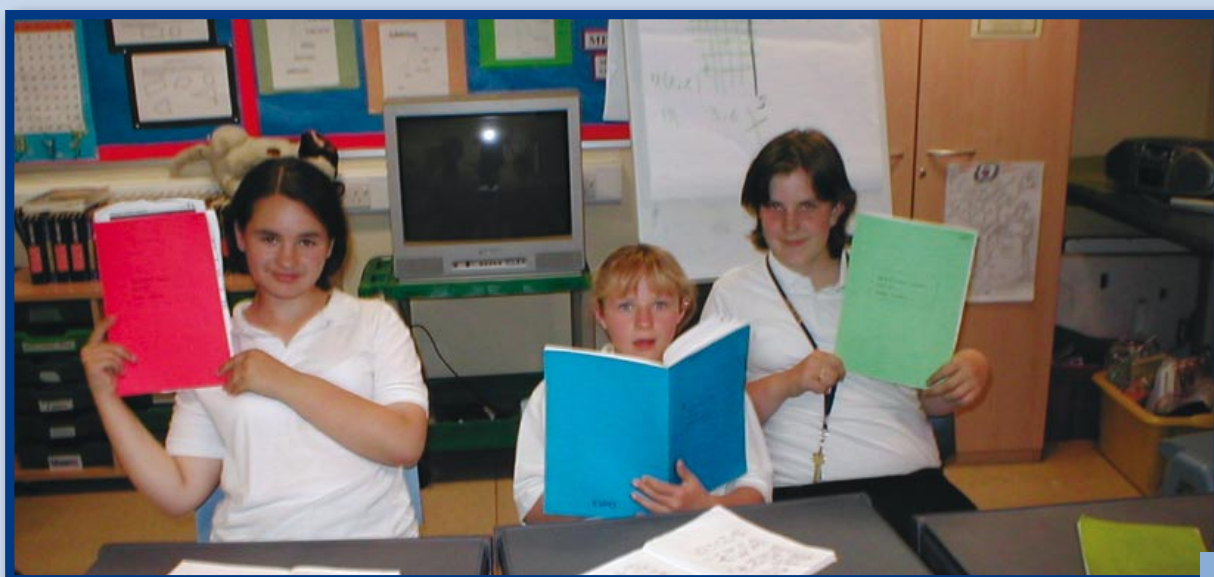
Once these aspects had been considered the groups shared their ideas and decided to run their system for one week as a trial.

*Box 15: "Teachers are supposed to give out cat stamps but in 4W we changed the rules," (Debbie White's Year 4 class).*

## Introducing RChoice

Before RChoice was introduced, the children were asked to produce an action plan for their RChoice session. Initially this involved deciding on what activities the children wanted in their RChoice session and later thinking about who would run the different learning activities.

*Box 16: R Choice: "students decided to have their own 45 minutes session to choose and participate in their own lesson," (Daniel Currie Year 6 teacher).*



*Box 17: 'I would like to choose the lessons that I want to do to get a job when I'm older,' (Daniel Currie's Year 6 class).*

## iv) Evaluating the changes as a basis for further action

In many of the classes, the children carried through several of their ideas over the school year. They used a variety of methods for evaluating the changes that they had introduced. In Isabel Stubb's class, children took video footage of the basketball game at playtime before and after they had introduced new rules. Kirsty Nudd's class made a questionnaire to collect children's and their teacher's views on the new classroom seating arrangements. They then analysed this data and discussed the issues that had arisen in order to make decisions about further improvements. Daniel Currie's class adopted a quantitative approach to evaluation, through counting the number of stars and warnings given during their R Choice lessons, as well as collecting children's views.

- *R Choice lessons are better because we get more stars and less warnings.*
- *I think the R Choice lessons are better because we get to work with who we want to work with.*
- *I think R Choice lessons are better because instead of adults teaching children, children get to teach children.*
- *I think R Choice lessons are better because we get more work done.*
- *I think R Choice lessons are better because you get more than one choice.*
- *I think R Choice lessons are better because while people teach they can also learn.*
- *I think R Choice lessons are good because everyone is participating.*
- *I think R Choice lessons are better because you learn different things off different people. Coz if the teachers didn't know how to play table-tennis children can teach you how to play it.*

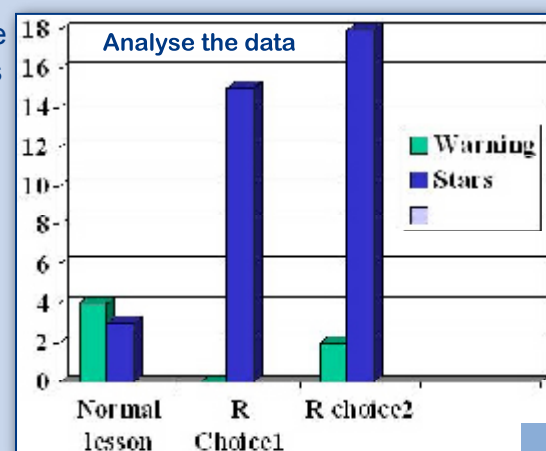
Box 18: Evaluating R Choice lessons in Daniel Currie's Year 6 class.

We decided on making our own 45-minute lessons we called it R choice. Our first R choice lesson we had a game of Frisbee with no rules so we could do whatever we wanted but after a while we put some rules together then the game became more fun. The next lesson we did in R choice was table tennis. (Joe quotes) "I think the table tennis lesson was a brilliant success every one had lots of fun, lots of rewards were awarded".

During the next R choice lesson when we were dancing people didn't co-operate as much because people didn't find it as much fun.

### How well it went

This is an R choice chart we recorded the amount of stars and warnings that had been given. We wanted to show how well the R choice lessons went.



Box 19: Extract from Ross Bellkidd and Joe Stapleton's project report (Year 6 children).



Some schools found that the process of the research in itself created change in the way that the children now thought about their own situation in school. Sometimes, the in-depth discussions were an end in themselves, in terms of raising children's awareness of themselves as decision makers and developing space for negotiation with their teachers.

## v) Team workshops

Following the orientation workshops at the beginning of the project, we continued to hold meetings for the whole adult team at UEA at regular intervals. The purpose of these meetings was to share what was happening in the different schools: we developed a pattern of each person reporting on the research activities that the children were doing in their class. This enabled everyone to learn from the experiences in other schools and helped us develop further strategies for the research. We also spent time acting as critical friends and discussing some of the issues that were emerging.

## 3. Sharing the project experiences

A children's conference was held at the University for representatives from each class to present what had happened and discuss issues arising in their research with children from other schools (around 60 children in total attended the conference). During the project, several classes also disseminated the findings of their research to other children and teachers through presentations at whole school assemblies. The children were enthusiastic about taking forward some of the ideas into their new classes next year. We were also keen to involve the children in this stage of the project and invited them to write their own reports which were included in the final project report.

A conference attended by teachers and head-teachers from the local area was held to share the ideas developed during the project. The final session included the team's reflections on what they had found out and how it had changed their perceptions and practice. The conference was videoed and this last section provided a starting point for our collaborative writing workshop.

Written feedback from conference participants demonstrated their enthusiasm for implementing this approach in their own schools. The impact of the visual approaches and practical activities was clear: "It is the way forward. I have always discussed decisions with the children but I now feel able to facilitate this in a more visual way."



*Discussing timelines at the UEA teachers' conference*

# Reflections on the project as a whole

Written collaboratively by: Sue Cox, Daniel Currie, Kath Frederick, De Jarvis, Sue Lawes, Emily Millner, Kirsty Nudd, Anna Robinson-Pant, Isabel Stubbs, Debbie White

We focused our final adult team workshop on writing our reflections on the project together as a group. The following sections were written by small groups around the themes identified collaboratively in our writing workshop. These themes are not presented here in any order of priority. In some cases, ideas overlap between themes, as we did not want to distort the groups' reflections through an editing process.

## Pupil voice

At the beginning of the project, children did not see themselves as important decision makers in their classrooms and had little awareness that they made decisions. It seemed that this was an area that they had not thought about before. As the project evolved, it became clear that through empowering the children with the skills of decision making, they became more independent and pro-active with regard to asking questions. Their willingness to challenge present systems within school developed alongside their skills. As they had a growing ownership of an area of change, they became increasingly engaged in the work which filtered through to other areas of the curriculum. The decisions that the younger children made were limited but we felt that a significant benefit of the project was that it provided them with the skills to make decisions. There was a sense that if they were given the responsibility, they were able to make their own decisions. As the project progressed the children recognized its value through increased ownership of decision making in their school. As teachers, we realised that this needs to be a 'conversation', therefore giving the pupils a voice.

## Skills and decision making

First of all we thought it was important to ascertain through discussion where the children were within the balance of power between adults and children in the school context. After coming to an understanding of what a decision meant, they needed to be taught the skills and given opportunities to practise them in a safe environment. We found it crucial to investigate decisions they may encounter in real life. After empowering the children with the skills of decision making, they came to understand that individual decisions may vary in outcome and therefore some may be more advantageous than others. Throughout the project it was necessary for us as teachers to not make value judgements about their decisions but support them through their thinking. However, on the occasions where their decisions were not successful, we encouraged them to reflect upon the process, re-evaluate and make changes.

## Impact on curriculum and learning

An emerging conception of the project was that decision making should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a 'principle of procedure' for working with children across the whole curriculum. We felt that the project could affect the whole school ethos in this way and had the potential for remodelling and transforming the curriculum. A focus on decision making foregrounded learning 'how. Similarly, the way in which the project encouraged 'enquiring minds' signalled a shift in the curriculum towards processes of learning, rather than emphasising content. There were some changes in the classroom culture as a result of the project. For example, where there was a focus on behaviour, children took more responsibility for themselves, because they were making more of the decisions. Such changes were indicative of the way that children were being empowered to make decisions about their learning.

## Space, time and work

During the project we discovered that understanding and practising decision making takes time. In order for the children to become decision makers, we needed to give them time and space to explore and develop their understanding of the process. A lot of teacher input and opportunities to experience and practise decision making were necessary for the children to build their confidence and move them from reluctant decision makers to more proactive decision makers. The process of action research itself involved children having to reflect, analyse and feedback their work, which in terms of the curriculum became very time-consuming. However, this amount of time is essential for children to be truly empowered to make meaningful changes in their own classrooms. The fact that making change took a lot of work helped us to realise that the process was as important as the change itself.



## ICT

In this age of communication, it is increasingly important for children to have a real life context in which to use ICT effectively. This project provided that context. During the research process the children used video cameras, digital cameras, audio recorders and presentation software to document and present their findings.

- Video cameras were used to record group discussions, interviews and observations to present findings.
- Digital cameras were used to photograph PRA diagrams, freeze-frame and to create a visual diary of the process.
- Audio recording equipment was used to capture key thoughts and responses.
- Various presentation software was used to analyse information and present findings.

ICT provided a means for the children to communicate, analyse, reflect upon and present their research in a meaningful way.

## Power and classroom culture

Exploring power relationships was necessarily an important aspect of the children's research on decision making. The project had the potential to challenge the hierarchical model. They became more aware of where they were as children in the power relationships in school. The research raised questions about what the balance between control and participation should be, and the need to use the word 'power' carefully. Is it, for instance, helpful to talk in terms of 'power struggle'? Are we just enabling children to become more organized and self-directed or are we empowering them to become independent in thought and thus confident to make their own decisions?



*Children from class 4W from Catton Grove Middle School present their Power Point slides at the UEA Children's Conference.*

As teachers we also began to reflect on how we 'assign' power in the classroom. Tim suggested that it can be useful to consider power in the classroom, in terms of three different metaphors: the factory, where the teacher has power over the children as overseer; the family in which the teacher's role is a nurturing one and the laboratory in which power is shared through investigation. We realized that children must be given genuine opportunities to exercise power and that teachers need to earn children's respect rather than simply expecting them to conform. We concluded that the project indicated that there was a real need for a far-reaching change in the school culture.

## Inclusion

The approaches that were used in the project were intended to encourage everyone in the class to participate in the action research. Here we were building on what we had learned from our previous project ('Empowering Children through Visual Communication') on the value of visual and practical approaches to communication and decision making. As well as using PRA methods, children were encouraged to use digital cameras and videos for recording the processes. This meant that the data was more accessible to a wider range of children, than if they had relied on written records. It was apparent that writing was more likely to distract the children from the process of thinking about and making decisions. We recognised the variety of activities (such as making visual representations such as timelines and matrices and using counters and cubes to show preferences) accommodated children's different approaches to learning. The project enhanced inclusion through children learning to see and accept others' points of view. Towards the end of the project, they were thinking beyond their own point of view or those of their friends.

## Language and vocabulary of decision making

We feel that the language of decision making is becoming an integral part of the classroom culture. We found out that language was very important to decision making, for instance, the need for children to qualify what they said. Children and adults needed to be clear about the language they used: what is a decision? Is a choice different from a decision or the same thing? We reflected on whether the research project had enabled children to extend their use of language to articulate their reasoning. Certainly, they were better able to explain their reasoning now. We have noted the impact of the project on children's use of language and their development in terms of speaking and listening.

## Developing children's skills as researchers

As well as developing speaking and listening abilities, children improved their social skills through working as researchers. In particular, they established ground rules for group discussion around research activities. The research enabled the children to learn about the difference between opinion and analysis: they learned to look for what the data told them, rather than making conclusions from what they believed to be true.

## Explaining/partnership

A clear alternative to the hierarchical relationships emerged as the project progressed. We established more open relationships both in terms of what the children might expect of us and what we might expect of them. As teachers, we all found we were more willing to explain the reasons for the decisions that we routinely made. Children began to ask "why" for explanation. As Isabel commented "Children now ask why I do things". As teachers we found we were involving the children more in the decisions we made and talking about things together. As a consequence we found that children were more able to identify, understand and empathise with the reasoning behind our decisions. We found that children were more likely to follow rules and instructions if they understood why and had some ownership over 'rules'. Adults impose lots of rules on children and expect them to follow them unquestioningly.

The increased understanding of the process of decision making had an impact in other areas by helping children to understand and explain other people's reasons for action, for example in historical contexts. Moreover, the children became more able to explain their own reasons, using the word 'because'. This had an impact on their learning, their behaviour and social skills. We saw the changing relationship between teacher and children in terms of leading, guiding, coaching, rather than directive teaching. By the end of the project, the idea of education as a partnership between children and teachers was beginning to influence the power relationships within our classrooms.

## Children's decision making

When we looked more closely at the decisions the children felt they made at the beginning of the project, we noticed that from an adult perspective, the decisions seemed to be surrounding quite trivial issues. We were unsure whether the children regarded them as such and perhaps underestimated the importance of the decisions that the children were making. These 'trivial' decisions largely involved the physical aspect of the classroom, for example which pen they chose, where they sat on the carpet, and who they played with. We noticed that the children rarely reported making decisions that directly affected their learning and felt that this was the teacher's responsibility. By the end of the project, some classes reported that the decisions their children were now making were impacting upon their learning to a greater degree.

## Younger children/older children

It became evident early on in the project that there was a significant difference in the desire and ability of children of differing ages to make decisions. This led some of us to question whether the project aims were inappropriate for young children, since childhood could be seen as a time when they shouldn't have to make decisions. At the beginning of the project, younger children were largely unaware that they were decision makers in the school setting and were generally content to allow adults to make decisions for them. As the project progressed they acquired the necessary skills, an understanding of what decision making involves and who is making decisions. However, it did not open up the floodgates to demands for greater participation in decision making in the classroom, and changes made were relatively low level in nature. Older children were similarly unaware that they were decision makers, but were quick to understand that decisions involved reasoning and consequences and were keen to take on the role of decision makers. The decisions they wanted to make were of a higher level, in one case resulting in a change to one of their lessons.



## Teacher led or not?

An aim of the project involved children becoming action researchers. Younger children found this difficult. Although they were able to review data presented in a simple format (eg video), they were not able to suggest future activities in the research cycle. For younger children, the project was largely teacher-led with children as active participants. This contrasts with work carried out by children at the upper end of KS2, where teachers acted as facilitators rather than directors.

## Independent learning

The skills that the children learned through the project enabled them to think for themselves, to question, analyse and reflect on what happens within their classrooms. It also gave them a greater sense of ownership and involvement in their lives at school. It helped to focus our attention, as teachers, on what children can do independently, especially as in recent years the climate has been less than conducive to a child-centred approach. With the current emphasis in educational practice on the need for children to become independent learners, it is clearly very important that we find ways to foster this independence.

## Thoughts on the longer term effects of the project

As the project activities for the children came to a natural end when they moved into their new classes in September, this raised questions about how far the changes they made were sustainable. In one Year 4 class, the children were keen to take their system for awarding 'cat stamps' to their new teacher and were able to explain the rules and procedures that they had decided upon. The need for decision making to become embedded in the school ethos was clearly a further issue. The project signals a shift in the way we think about curriculum: moving from an emphasis on knowledge-based content to a focus on the personal attributes needed in the real world. We reflected on what happens when the children go to a new class where they might encounter a different culture. A particular question for us was what would happen for the Year 6 children who had taken part in the project when they went on to secondary school? We recognised the tensions that might be created if children had an expectation that they could continue to share in decision making in their next class or new school. In wider terms, we acknowledged that the project had the potential to help the children make decisions that could have an influence on their future lives.

## Impact on teachers' practice

The project has had an impact on our own practice in so many ways. We see the project as a journey where we continually reflected on our teaching and learning styles. We have changed children's practice, through allowing them to make more meaningful decisions and to share decision making in their classrooms. We feel that our practice has become more reflective, for example, we now take more time to explain our decisions to the children which helps them to understand why they need to "comply", for instance, when certain decisions were beyond negotiation because of health and safety regulations or statutory requirements. Through the action research, we sometimes recognised the mismatches between our aims and our practice: for instance, Tim observed that though he saw his classroom as a laboratory, he sometimes acted more as an 'overseer'. However, there was a sense that the team shared Kath Frederick's feeling that the project had "given me back my values".

## Some concluding thoughts

As a team, we feel that the work that the children have done in the 'Children Decide' project in our varying settings shows that different kinds of school can give children more involvement in decision making. We feel this project has provided us with a coherent framework of values (addressing issues of power and control) to support development of primary practice in the context of current changes in the primary curriculum. We hope that readers of this booklet will take these ideas forward in their own professional context in ways that focus on the underlying principles of participation. Although the examples in this booklet show the kinds of decisions children might make in their own classrooms, obviously they should not be taken as a blueprint. As a critical account of the experiences in nine different classrooms, this booklet provides a framework for facilitation of participatory approaches. Children in other classrooms will make their own decisions about what to change in their school lives, which may be very different from those described here. Although we carried out this work in the context of a funded research project, we suggest that all teachers should be able to integrate these approaches into their own practice.



# Appendix 1

Ideas for helping children to understand the concept of decision making in preparation for the project (This is an illustrative, not an exhaustive list, compiled from notes from team discussions at Children Decide Meeting at UEA, 21/11/04)

## 1. Using stories

Ask questions at key points in the story, such as how would you solve a problem?

Could talk about the characters in stories, eg Red Riding Hood, Three Little Pigs, why did they make those decisions? Could also talk about characters outside the story – such as the wolf's mother.

Philosophy For Children (P4C) suggests using stories focusing on dilemmas or decision making, such as Willy the Wimp. See for example: [www.dialogueworks.co.uk/dw/p4c.html](http://www.dialogueworks.co.uk/dw/p4c.html).

Stories with alternative endings. For example, John Burningham's 'Would you rather...?' books.

## 2. Children telling stories

Start telling story and ask, what happens next? What would your choices be?

Shared writing and discussion: how did you decide where to go with it? What were the options you had?

Pictures as a stimulus for discussing decisions – different points of view on what they might represent.

National Gallery – can look at a picture on their website and zoom in and out to discuss decisions around one aspect/character.

## 3. Drama

Set a scene or problem for discussion about decision making.

PSHE session on making choices – eg about smoking, where they 'freeze the frame' at a certain point to discuss should the character take the cigarette or not? What are the factors in making the decision?

## 4. Conscience alley

Children make two lines facing each other – one side is 'for' and another gives the reasons 'against' a certain decision. Do this when you get to a point of decision in a story to discuss what the character would do next? One child will walk down the middle of the two rows (as character) hearing the reasons for and against, then has to make the decision.

## 5. History

Look at other people's decisions, eg why did Florence Nightingale, Henry VIII etc take one course of action rather than another?

## 6. Teachers' decision making

Explain your decisions in context, eg I thought of this, this and this but decided to do this (explain your reasons).

## 7. Imaginary scenarios

Your house is burning down and you have time to grab one item – why do you choose that one?

Survival on a desert island – what would you take and why?

## 8. Variation on consequences/ what if games

Give children situations and extrapolate from them, eg what if we had no lessons, what would you do? If you found a wallet (had money, credit cards etc), what would you do?

## 9. Using language in context

Scaffold to introduce new terms (eg 'dilemma').



Expect reasons for decisions from children. Eg I've decided to do this because... Introducing idea of justifying their decisions: encouraging them to say 'because' means they don't just give the answer, but also the reason why. Say: It's up to you. You decide. What do you think? Asking: 'why did you decide'?

Use 'choose' and 'decide' in parallel. Discuss children's choices/decisions to clarify the meanings of these terms.

## 10. Diagram of the effects of decision making

'My decision' at the top then all the 'ripples' showing the people affected by that decision below. Can discuss how they are affected.

## 11. Simulations and real life contexts

Put children in simulated or real situations where they have to make decisions. Discuss what the options were and what they decided to do.

## 12. Have a making decisions day

Children told that they can make all the decisions today. Can they decide the parameters? (eg have to be safe, stay at school). Evaluate it at the end. Compare with the teacher making all the decisions for the children.

## 13. Spheres of influence

Draw a picture/diagram representing your influences, your concerns in different sized concentric circles (things that you can do something about, things that you are concerned about but can't do anything about). Use the size of the diagrams/circles to show comparative 'spheres of influence' of different people.

## 14. Justifying decisions

Different coloured pegs attached to four different pictures. Choose a coloured peg from a pile to represent the picture you like best and then stand by that picture. Explain to the others standing there, why you liked that picture best. Technique can be used to encourage independence in decision making.

Pictures of 'wrong' and 'right' solutions/situations? (from PSHE materials) – children asked to put them in order of which was best. Moving them up and down a line according to how 'wrong' or 'right' they might be and giving reasons.

Drawing pictures of unfair and fair decisions on different pieces of paper then sorting them according to which were fair/unfair or along a line as above.

## 15. Evaluating decisions

Get children to count the decisions that the teacher makes and that the children make. Discuss which are big or small decisions: could write/draw each decision on a large or small piece of paper according to importance. Bring out issues of value – people have different ideas related to different values.

Changing your mind – when are decisions 'bad'? How do we make spur of the moment decisions? Is following your emotions bad? (eg child hiding under table when things get too bad).

## 16. Institutional diagramming (PRA)

Who makes the decisions in your school, how and why? Use different size circles to represent different decision makers in the school (children decide who to draw) – put in order according to who has the most say and discuss why. [See Appendix 2 for further details].

## 17. School and class councils

Use class council and school council meetings as focus for discussing how decisions are made, by whom, when etc.

# Appendix 2

## Instructions for PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) activities used in the Children Decide project

### 1. Time line

Making or drawing a time line or daily schedule was used as a starting point for discussing when children made decisions and what decisions they made. Timelines can be made in different ways:

- In small groups, children can draw the different activities from the beginning of the day (getting up) until the end of the day. Sometimes, this doesn't work chronologically – some children tended to draw playtime and lunchtime first, then fill in the gaps.
- Some children may prefer to use symbols or words to represent the different parts of their day.
- Objects can be used as symbols – give the children a box of objects (this can be anything eg pen, string, food packets, clock, ball etc) and ask them to use these to represent different things they do during the day.

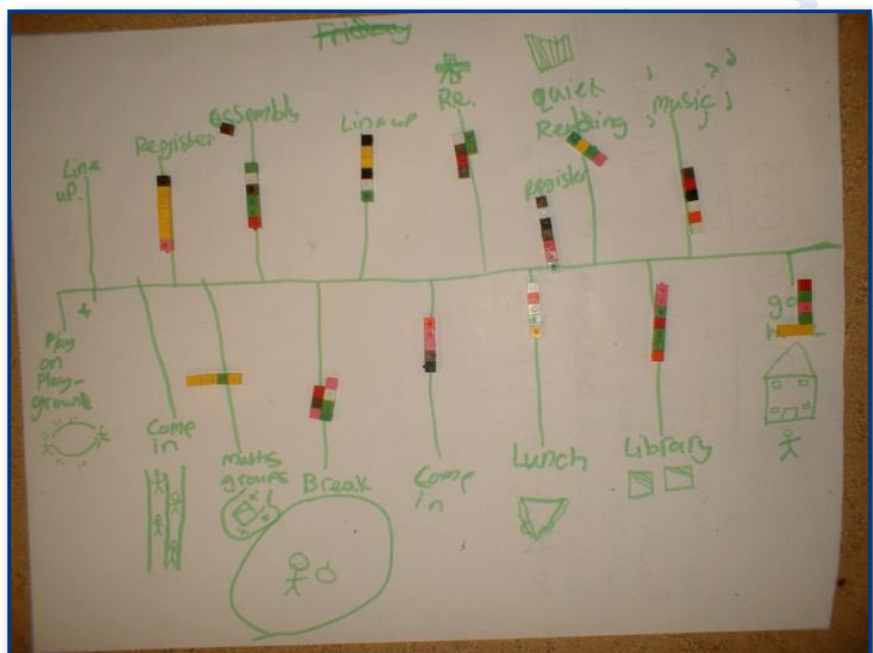
Once children have constructed their own timeline, they can use this to represent how many and what decisions they make at different times of the day:

- Each child has a pile of counters, beans etc to indicate next to the drawing/object where they make most decisions and least decisions (big pile = lots of decisions). This can be done individually or as a group.
- Some classes also had different coloured counters to show where adults make lots of decisions (eg red counters) and where children make many decisions (eg blue counters).
- A timeline can be produced on paper using Clip Art (based on the earlier activity) for children to then indicate when they make decisions at present. Kirsty Nudd's class did this individually, then compared their timeline with friends and highlighted where the teacher made decisions.

Both these activities can lead into a discussion about what those decisions are, and why children or adults make more decisions at certain times of the day. Classes also compared the number and kinds of decisions that they made at home as compared to school each day. Kath Frederick's class later produced a graph based on the comparison of decisions at home and school. Emily Millner's class used the timeline to make a list of the decisions that the teacher made that directly affected them, particularly during lesson time, as a basis for deciding which they would like to try making for themselves.

In order to move the discussion onto ideas for change, children indicated through counters ('voted') where they would like to make more decisions (or fewer) and discussed why and what changes they would like to make. Sue Lawes' class made a time line with 'post it notes' to show the different decisions they made in a day. They then sorted these post it notes into 'decisions that make me happy' and 'decisions that make me sad' (under happy and sad faces).

The timeline can be photographed and the process videoed (by the children) so that it becomes a reference point for further discussion and a record of how the children felt.



Decision timeline constructed by Year 6, Catton Grove Middle School.

## 2. Institutional diagramming

This method can provide a way into discussing relationships within the school, how children perceive the key actors in decision making and how they see their own role. The diagrams produced can also become the basis for discussing how children would like to see things change. Possible ways of conducting this activity include:

- Draw (on separate pieces of paper) the people and groups of people who make a difference to you at school. Put yourself at the centre, then place the other pieces of paper in relation to each other – overlapping where you feel they have the same role/importance or keeping them far apart if they have no connection or far from you if you have no contact with them. People identified through this activity might include the class teacher, secretary, caretaker, governors, school council, PTA etc.
- Draw the people/institutions which are important in making decisions at school – cut out large or small circles according to whether you think they are very important or not so important. Place the circles in some kind of order on the floor to show how they work together (children can decide the way in which they organise the diagram). Alternatively, the circles can then be ranked in order of importance.
- Discuss the people involved in decision making in your school and find an object to represent each. Rank these in order of importance, allowing each member of the group to move the objects around and show which they find most important/ least important.

In the Children Decide project, institutional diagramming became a way for teachers and children to share their perceptions about decision makers. It was surprising how often the children did not include themselves as ‘circles’ (decision makers) in the school.

## 3. Matrix ranking

This is a useful method for encouraging children to analyse different alternatives, and for working out the reasons for and against a certain decision. In some classes, children constructed a matrix to decide which idea they should follow through in their classroom (eg comparing ‘changing the desks around’, ‘having more computer time’, ‘choosing our own reading books’). Here are two ways of constructing a matrix:

**a. Matrix based on criteria ranking** Begin by making a list (with pictures, objects, words) of the various options. Then ask the children to compare any two of the objects/pictures – which is better/worse and why? Gradually build up the criteria based on these reasons and put each in a separate column (eg Isabel Stubbs’ class did this to decide between fundraising options, coming up with criteria such as: costs a lot, takes too much time, safety, fun). Once they have decided on the criteria, the children should vote or decide a score for each option. In a small group, they can vote with counters for each, or they can decide as a class whether to give 1, 2 or 3 score to each variable. Make sure that the criteria are all positive or all negative or the scores won’t make sense! If they have ‘expensive’ in one column (negative) and ‘everyone likes them’ (positive) in another, the scores will not be comparable.

In Kirsty Nudd’s class, children used plastic multi-link cubes to score each option by building them upwards. This enabled them to see at a glance which option had the highest pile. They also used different colours to identify individuals’ views within the group.

**b. Matrix based on preference ranking (also referred to as pairwise ranking)** This method is useful for comparing variables/decisions/ideas in order to see which is the most popular.

Start with a list of the various options as above. Then the same options should be listed horizontally as well. You construct the matrix by asking the group which they prefer – eg changing the room lay-out or having more time on the computer. If the preference is ‘changing the room lay-out’, a symbol (this could be the first letter of the word) is placed on the chart at the co-ordinate of these two options. By comparing each pair of variables twice, you can also cross-check. When the chart is completed, it is easy to see which options are most popular.

Things to consider	Safety	Durability (lasts)	Sharability	Space	Fun/pleasure
Fenced football area	xxx	xxx	xx	xx	xxx
PE shed	xxx	xxx	x	xxx	x
Concrete over mud	xx	xxx	xxx	xxx	x
Water fountain	xxx	xxx	xx	xxx	x
Tubs of flowers	xxx	x	x	xxx	x

*This matrix was constructed by children at Poringland Primary School in order to decide how they would like to improve the playground. Example of preference ranking matrix (from Cox et al 2003).*

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