

## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Abstract**

This enquiry explores how participatory budgeting (PB) can be adapted to a school setting to increase community engagement and support effective decision making in relation to Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) funding. PB was found to be potentially transformative for community engagement and empowerment, and likely to aid transparency around decision making. A literature review, and interviews conducted as part of this enquiry, suggests a lack of transparency and accountability around PEF decision making and evaluation. While it is outside the scope of this study to compare the efficacy of decisions made by PB versus the decisions made by Headteachers, the report makes clear why this is an area worthy of further study. Drawing on this case study and the work of other practitioners, this report provides a guide to good practice when planning PB projects, including the use of online platforms and social media.

## **Counting in the Community: a Case Study in Participatory Budgeting in a Scottish Secondary School**

In 2020, Pupil Equity Funding guidance was changed to encourage the use of participatory budgeting methods. This coincided with an interest in the process amongst leadership at Glenrothes High School. It was hoped participatory budgeting could increase engagement and transparency amongst parents and the community. It would also be a part of our community education offer and support the school in the strong work already ongoing in poverty-proofing, support for equity, and the integration of the children's rights agenda.

We provide our case study, for reflection, for those interested in PB in schools, and we offer suggestions for local practice, further research and policy.

### **Background: The Policy Context and Review of the Literature**

The Scottish Attainment Challenge was set up in 2015, and preceded the launch of the Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) in 2017. Both initiatives had an objective of seeking to address the educational disparity spanning from material inequality and poverty, as well as other barriers to learning. Operational guidance offered by the Scottish Government makes clear that Headteachers should determine how PEF should be spent, in collaboration with local authorities and Scottish Government Attainment Advisors. Also, parents, learners and stakeholders were to be "involved in the planning process" (Scottish Government, 2020).

In 2020, this guidance was updated to specifically encourage the use of Participatory Budgeting (PB) as a means to encourage greater community involvement. Throughout the course of 2020 and 2021, third sector and governmental organisations shared case studies and guidance on how to involve learners in PB. As of June 2021, there was still little discussion of how PB could engage parents.

#### What is PB?

Participatory Budgeting (PB), similar to, and often called Participatory Democracy, seeks to democratically distribute public funds, and actively engage and empower the public in decision making about available funds (Scottish Government, 2017). Typically, it is a "multi-stage" process where community members prioritise and decide how they wish public money to be spent (Campbell et al, 2018). The invention of participatory budgeting processes is attributed to local politicians and social movements in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in the 1990s, but its successes have led to the adoption of variants around the world. In 2018 it was estimated that 7000 to 8000 PB processes had taken place (Karner, 2019). The Scottish Government has made a commitment that at least 1% of local government budgets will be subject to PB by the end of 2021 (Scottish Government, 2017).

PB may be preferable to traditional public involvement efforts which "rarely concede the power to shape and make decisions" and are often not valued by the public (Karner et al, 2019). The element which most distinguishes PB from other methods of consultation is the binding aspect of the consultation. Power is transferred from professionals to community members. However, despite forty years of PB, it is still unconventional to democratise public funds and decision

making in this way. It is still possible that PB can be resisted by those professionals who traditionally have the power of decision making or see themselves as experts.

Similarly, where PB is designed poorly, it is also possible that power is monopolised by groups not representative of the community as a whole. Karner et al identify the need for the community to design the PB process themselves, and cite examples of poorly designed processes where those involved in consultation are disproportionately affluent (2019).

While the multi-stage process of PB should and does vary in each context, it may include:

- Problem Structuring: problems are clarified, along with potential solutions. Criteria for choosing between the projects are elaborated along with constraints and budgetary concerns. This process may be undertaken by administrators or by community members themselves. A simpler version of this stage may be known as idea generation or ideation.
- Debating: participants debate the decisions made in the problem-structuring phase. They may add or reject criteria or projects from the list of solutions for consideration.
- Preference Modelling: an individual process whereby participants determine their own preferences for projects and how the budget should be spent.
- Negotiation: participants receive, discuss and evaluate proposed offers. Various methods of decision making can be encouraged.
- Voting: participants may either vote for budget priorities or for representatives. Various voting methods can be used.
- Arbitration: an official arbiter may be appointed to make decisions based on the criteria agreed and the merits of each case. This may be used where participants have been unable to find agreement through the methods listed above.
- Participant sampling. Where it is impossible to include a whole community, representatives can be chosen as a random sample, or as a more deliberate representative sample. (Gomez et al 2013 and Firstroot, 2021)

Karner et al (2019) define four characteristics of high-quality or "strong PB": high quality, participant led process design with initial guarantee of binding nature of the exercise; quality outreach and support; dedicated operating fund and a substantial budget. Further, they show that where there is already an active citizenry, PB is likely to be more successful, although care should be taken not to substitute participation of real citizens with third sector leaders and professionals.

A subjective experience could also be used to evaluate the success of PB, for example, "If it feels like we've decided, it's PB. If it feels like someone else has decided, it isn't." (participant in PB) (PB Partners, 2020).

The benefits of PB include:

- Decisions taken may seem more legitimate
- The decision-making process is more transparent
- Decision-making utilises local knowledge

- Traditional office bearers/politicians gain more knowledge of local circumstances and priorities.
- Participants understand the limits of action, that is, how to balance benefits and costs.
- More engagement with, support for, and trust in, institutions engaged in PB.
- Improved diversity and more perspectives on problems and solutions.
- Improved equity in spending
- Deeper political engagement (Karner et al, 2019 and Shah, 2007)

Karner et al use the model of Arnstein's ladder as a familiar model of community engagement. Arnstein classifies community consultation and engagement initiatives in three categories: nonparticipation, tokenism and citizen power. PB is conceived as a means of moving into the realms of citizen power, which is further subdivided into that which can be described as partnership, delegated power and citizen control. They explain: "PB holds the potential to achieve transformational outcomes, raising participants' expectations about what they can achieve... winning material improvements in the quality of life, and effecting lasting changes to public policy... by placing more power in the hands of ordinary residents." (Karner et al, 2019: 237).

Shah notes that much of the literature suggests that participatory processes should be designed to take cognisance of existing power structures, and group dynamics, so that they work in tandem with existing democratic decision-making processes. (Shah, 2007)

Key findings from the 2019 report into PB in Scotland (O'Hagan et al, 2019) proved relevant to this research:

- There were problems with tight timescales and the necessarily longer process of PB decision making.
- PB has been carried out within the context of scarce resources at all levels: council; community; individual organisations; and households

#### How does PB work in schools?

Case studies of schools who have adopted PB typically focus on learners as participants. In line with Curriculum for Excellence and the pupil participation agenda, there is evidence that such interventions can offer learning about democracy, compromise, community needs and citizenship. Skills in collaboration, financial literacy and presentation can also be developed (PB Scotland, 2021).

There are no case studies of how parents have been involved in PB. This would be a useful area of further research.

#### How effective is PEF decision making?

There has been little analysis of how effective PEF decision making has been. The Scottish Government's review in 2019 noted that there has been an improvement in the amount of (local) data used for decision making but there

was a risk of “overwhelm” with the data available. Collaboration within the education system has also been noted as improving but is limited by the workload of staff working in schools.

There is wide variation within Scottish council areas in progress towards closing the attainment gap (Audit Scotland: 2021) and in approaches to closing the gap (Education Scotland: 2021). Audit Scotland suggest that progress and consistency in “closing the gap” should be a priority for further action. Both Education Scotland and Audit Scotland have found improved use of data and improved evaluation as a result of Attainment Scotland Funding. Through PEF funding, headteachers have improved their knowledge about the barriers to education caused by poverty.

While PEF reports from individual schools and education authorities are routinely published these are not routinely subject to rigorous evaluation.

## **Research Design**

The research will primarily consist of a literature review, and a case study into PB and PEF decision-making in a Scottish state secondary school. As action research, the researcher was the main participant in instigating and organising the PB process, and will share the findings and evaluation of the case study for the benefit of future practitioners and researchers. The case study will consist of the opening of a web-based portal for community discussion on how £10,000 of the Pupil Equity Fund (or subsequent funding) would be spent in Glenrothes High School in 2022-2023. Social media methods will also be evaluated for engaging parents. Once initial discussions happened, online, a partial participatory budgeting cycle was carried out and evaluated. The initial web based discussion has been chosen as the best method to initiate discussion during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Wider research suggests that a long time period is necessary for successful PB. Given the time-constraints of this research and the delays cited around Covid and the changes in school staffing (see Appendix One for a brief timeline of this PB cycle), it is not expected that a complete cycle of PB will be evaluated. It is hoped that a further research report will be carried out to evaluate further stages of the PB process.

Unstructured interviews have taken place with school leaders, consultants, and an Education Scotland Attainment Advisor. Surveys were sent to 600 school pupils with a return rate of 20%. A focus group took place with two pupils and two parents for the second phase of PB. Written evidence of previous consultations has been analysed. A review of relevant literature has been undertaken.

## **Findings and Analysis**

Pupil Equity Funding and attempts at Participatory Budgeting should be considered in the budgeting context of the wider school budget. For example, even with an increasing roll, and significant cuts in the staffing budget, Glenrothes High School has been in financial deficit.

GHS has around half of its school population living in the poorest third of Scottish society (as measured by SIMD data and free school meal entitlement), therefore many of the resources of the whole school have gone to tackling inequality. The school has an important ethos around providing equity (Education Scotland: 2020), but funding has limited the interventions that have been possible, and usage of the Pupil Equity Fund. Furthermore, in session 2019-2020 the Covid pandemic stretched school resources further, and the Scottish Government allowed a change so that PEF could be spent more flexibly. In this context, the allocation of PEF resources to Participatory Budgeting has been problematic (see Appendix One). The successful London Challenge (on which SAC and PEF were modelled) was operating in a time of increased public spending, whereas the welcome promise of PEF, and higher school spending in areas of high deprivation, may have been sabotaged by stretched school budgets and a public health crisis which severely limited the capacity of schools.

In order to engage the community in the process of PB we used direct messaging, email, other community organisations, and social media. We made a short animation to explain the issue of the attainment gap, and the process of PB. The animation was popular, and our intended audience found it easy to understand.

One of my findings of the first stage of PB, that is, idea-gathering, was that parents were hesitant to contribute, especially publicly. In this, and in previous consultations, there was some evidence of a deferential attitude to educational "expertise". Similarly, there was little knowledge of PEF funding, the opportunities this could afford, and how parents and pupils could be involved. Such views are both a challenge to the implementation of PB, but also (with its promise of greater engagement and empowerment) the reason PB is necessary.

Amongst pupil responses, in the ideation phase, there were many calls to "listen to pupils" or "speak to them more". Although this is a school with an excellent record in pupil rights and consultation, it had not up until now been a place where young people were asked to make budget decisions, or even give feedback on how budgets were spent.

During this ideation phase I was still regularly negotiating funding with the senior leadership team. It led me to reflect on whether a process like this can be successfully led by a teacher or principal teacher. School leadership were initially supportive of this project being led by a principal teacher, however, there were difficulties in ascertaining what funding was available at any one time, and the figures quoted were subject to frequent change and revision. Funding decisions and use of PEF were regularly discussed by closed senior leadership meetings throughout the project and the project may have had more impact if it were being led by a member of senior leadership. Such difficulty in actors releasing control of budgets is cited by Karner (2019). He suggests that community members need to organise to take such control from professionals, although this may have been less of an issue in times of more settled school leadership and without a pandemic.

Phase two of our PB cycle was to meet with parents and pupils and determine the decision making process and begin to make the funding decisions. Experts were invited from within and outside the school. PB without such public

engagement with evidence and debate risks being little more than an exercise in ticking the “consultation” box, and won’t deliver the empowerment aims of PB.

Despite a concerted effort to encourage families to participate in our decision-making meeting, in the end, it was attended by one parent of a pupil in a target group, one grandparent, and two pupils. It is hoped this core group will encourage more attendance in future meetings.

During the covid crisis, like many schools, we were able to engage parents in conferencing platforms, such as MS Teams. Where we sent out open invites to information evenings, regular attendance rose from around 20 parents (to an average in school event) to around 100 (in an online event). The technology, however, has largely been used passively, and attempts to engender more engagement such as in parent partnership meetings, and PB meetings have not received as high attendance.

The biggest barrier to attendance of parents seemed to be shift patterns, and uncertainty around work hours. We surveyed parents on when would be the best time to meet but agreement could not be found and in future rounds of PB several focus groups, at different times, may be required. A targeted learner explained how her parent would always agree to attendance whenever the school phoned, but would fail to attend at the required time. Further research could test whether more engagement would come from using local conferencing facilities and childcare, as suggested in Karner (2019).

During the meeting, the decision to be made was how to spend £10000 of PEF. The four options suggested by staff, parents and pupils during the ideation phase, were:

1. Tutoring
2. Intensive literacy catch-up funding
3. Clubs and activities for after school and during the holidays
4. Materials for learners living in poverty: books, stationery, ICT.

School staff were “inspired” and encouraged by the quality of the discussion which was informed by input from school staff, Fife Council staff, and the local attainment advisor. More important, however, was when pupils spoke about their desire for tutoring, and their belief in the difference it could make. A carer spoke about the difference PEF funded literacy interventions had made to her grandchildren, and called for more such interventions. After hearing more about PEF she called for wider publicity about the nature of the fund. It was surprising, and insightful, that as someone so involved in the life of the school, she identified this need.

As discussed in the literature of PB case studies, participants engaged freely and openly, and were noted to change their preferences when engaging with evidence and the views of others. From an initial preference for literacy interventions, participants became more supportive of tutoring, and eventually settled on splitting the funding between the two initiatives. Senior management at the school found the meeting to be the deepest level of engagement that they had been involved in. They contrasted a wide, passive level of engagement, which had been widened by the use of online platforms, during the covid crisis,



to the much deeper and educational level of engagement found during this PB pilot.

## **Conclusions**

The Pupil Equity Fund is widely supported, and PB is a tool which can be used to meet similar aims. PEF is a more direct and flexible form of funding than the Scottish education sector had hitherto experienced. By allowing such direct forms of democracy, as PB, PEF can become even more flexible and more suited to local conditions.

More could be done by the Scottish Government to encourage such uses. For example, the envisaged use of Scottish Government Attainment Advisors in assisting headteachers, has been limited. This role would be better re-defined as one of participation officers, or community workers, who could move the debate away from experts defining what is best for those living in poverty, to empowered communities able to define how they wish their communities to engage in education. In other words, rather than a structure that replaces one group of education professionals with another group of education professionals, investment should be re-directed at community engagement. Leaving such engagement to schools alone does not show that it is a priority. This is consistent with, and expands upon by including relevant adults such parents, carers and grandparents as well as pupils, those who model professional development of teachers in more 'bottom-up ways' as they seek collectively to solve problems of practice in their own schools. (For example, Elmore, 2002; Harris and Jones, 2010; Loughran, 2010).

However, another finding of this report, is that there are significant resources within local education authorities that could support PB. Through researching this report, I found a PB consultant working for Fife Council who gave excellent advice on how to develop the PB processes in Glenrothes High School. Furthermore, this contact was able to set up and monitor a website designed to support PB. This website, Consul, did not suit the needs of our consultation, but, perhaps, could more successfully be used in smaller-scale PB enterprises. Information and resource sharing within local authorities would be a useful area of improvement in the development of PB in Scotland.

The impact on this secondary school, of one incomplete cycle of PB, has already been profound. PB has been added to the remit of a principal teacher, and another principal teacher has been appointed to share the remit. PB is now clearly seen as a process which will shape further funding decisions, as future funding allocations are released. Very few parents and pupils were engaged in the decision making meeting which constituted phase two of the research, but all those who were involved reported being advocates of the system, and feeling empowered by the process. My recommendation for other practitioners is even where it is difficult to engage parents at first, use those parents who do want to be involved. Furthermore, learners may be an easier group to target for initial engagement. The success of the project will encourage others to become involved, and as PB experts and consultants have advised us, the level of community control will increase as more familiarity is gained with the model.

As identified by one of our parents, the PEF should be more widely publicised with an encouragement to parents and pupils to come forward with ideas about the support they require to break down barriers to learning and engagement.

In analysis of school and council reports on PEF it has been found that the cost of interventions are not routinely added to reports. This would be a useful first step in improving transparency and effective decision-making, along the lines that PB promises. It is a recommendation of this report that these costs be broken down and shared alongside a school's evaluation of PEF. Making such figures routinely available would aid the development of PB style community engagement and empowerment. The EIS should seek better evaluation and transparency around PEF. The greater use of PB would be one way of encouraging better evaluation and transparency, and fits with EIS values of community education and empowerment.

The benefits of PB are many, but in particular the promise of an engaged, empowered community should be a shared goal of all institutions within the education system. Within our limited enquiry the beginning of this empowerment was evident. However, it was also seen that control and power over resources will continue to be contested, especially where resources are stretched. PB offers a means of improving transparency around how these limited resources are allocated.

A larger study would be needed to determine how schools come to the best decisions in order to close the attainment gap: by PB or by headteacher decision making. Although this study suggests PB would be a popular mechanism amongst headteachers for at least some of PEF funding. While the Scottish government has been innovative in its changes to school governance it could do more to empower communities and encourage PB, notably by improving the evaluation of PEF spending.

Within the school, PB has become embedded as a process which can educate and empower. However, the significant barriers to engagement of disadvantaged communities will need ongoing outreach and study. PB is clearly not a one-off event or quick fix, but even in one incomplete cycle there has been enough empowerment and inspiration to develop more community voices. During this small pilot the educational capital of the school has been increased by our improved knowledge of the lives and choices of the community we serve. Such an increase in capital can only be of benefit in all our decision making as educators and school leaders.

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## Appendix A: PB Timeline

A brief timeline has been provided for the use of practitioners who wish to run their own PB schemes, and to help show the extra-ordinary and ordinary difficulties that can occur in a project like this.

May 2020	Agreement with SLT to run a PB pilot with PEF funds.
August 2020	Approval of research grant from EIS. New SLT and re-appraisal of funds available.
September 2020	New plan to run PB pilot with future funds. Consultation with Fife Council and GHS SLT.
December 2020	Schools close for Covid lockdown
February 2021	First phase of PB: idea gathering through consul, social media, parent council, and MS Teams
March 2021	Schools close for second lockdown
April 2021	Secondary schools re-open but with considerable new workload from the cancellation of exams.
May 2021	Preparations for phase two of PB: phone calls, texts to parents. Selection of learners. Social media advertising.
June 2021	Second phase of PB: decision making meeting with parents and pupils.