
REAL DECISION MAKING? SCHOOL COUNCILS IN ACTION

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Introduction

In the 2005 White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*, the government made a commitment to update guidance for schools on involving pupils in decision making, with particular reference to school councils. This research, which included a review of the current literature, national surveys of pupils and teachers and a series of school case studies, will inform the revised national guidance.

Key Findings

- Nearly all (up to 95 per cent) of schools in England and Wales have a school council, and most teachers and pupils are generally positive about them. A majority of teachers (62 per cent) felt school councils should be made compulsory in England.
- Most school councils tackle issues relating to their school's environment and facilities. Very few are involved in decisions about teaching and learning.
- In practice, school councils vary a great deal on, for example, how representatives are selected, frequency and timing of meetings and teacher involvement.
- Successful school councils rely on a number of factors, but of particular importance is schools having a clear rationale for introducing provision for pupil voice. Other important factors include support from teachers, efforts to include all pupils and training and support for pupils.
- Just under half (45 per cent) of teachers would like pupils involved in the process of appointing teachers, and about a third responded positively to pupil representation on school governing bodies.

Background

National Policy

There have been a number of policy developments across public services, and within education specifically, that have encouraged the involvement of young people in decision making. These include, for example, Every Child Matters and the National Healthy Schools Standard. This research was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Children, Schools and Families) to support the updating of national guidance on pupil participation in school decision making, with a particular emphasis on school councils. The study built on earlier work of the Innovation Unit which worked to promote school councils in primary schools.

A number of the teaching unions have voiced their strong support for pupil involvement in school decision making. However, they also have concerns about the potential burden of statutory school councils, particularly if this was accompanied by detailed prescription on how councils should be run.

Pupil Voice

Within schools, pupil involvement in decision making is often referred to as 'pupil voice'. Pupil voice is about pupils having the opportunity to have a say in decisions in school that affect them. It entails pupils playing an active role in their education and schooling as a result of schools becoming more attentive and responsive, in sustained and routine ways, to pupils' views (Hargreaves 2004).

There are a number of different drivers for, and potential benefits from, pupil voice, including:

- *Children's rights*, which recognises that children have rights, including the right to have their opinions taken into account in decisions that concern them
- *Active citizenship*, which highlights how pupil voice can contribute to preparation for citizenship by improving pupils' knowledge and 'social' skills and, in doing so, enhance the quality of democracy
- *School improvement*, which recognises that consultation with pupils can lead to better school performance, whether in terms of improved behaviour, engagement or attainment among pupils
- *Personalisation*, which utilises pupil voice to ensure that schools are meeting the specific needs of their pupils as consumers or 'co-producers' of education.

However, demonstrating causal links is more problematic. Robust research on the links between pupil voice and improved attainment would be particularly valuable.

The particular role of school councils

School councils are a very tangible manifestation of pupil voice. They can be important in offering a formal, democratic, transparent and accountable whole-school forum for pupil participation, linking to the broader governance framework of a school (Alderson 2000).

Large scale surveys on pupil voice suggest that the proportion of schools with a school council has grown rapidly in recent years – with some suggesting an increase from around 50 per cent in the mid-1990s to over 90 per cent in 2007 (see Kerr et al 2004, Cleaver et al 2005).

Aims

This new research aimed to:

- understand the role that school councils play in supporting pupil voice
- explore the current range of practices of school councils, such as their role and prevalence in school decision making processes
- identify examples of good practice in relation to school councils.

Research design

The research consisted of three main strands. Full details can be found in the main report.

- *Literature review and scoping interviews*: a review of the recent literature on pupil voice and interviews with representatives from relevant agencies were conducted to inform the research.
- *National surveys*: to establish a robust national picture on the prevalence and practice of school councils in the UK, questions were included in the 2006 MORI Teacher Omnibus Survey and in the 2007 MORI Schools Omnibus Survey, which gathered pupils' views. An on-line survey of independent schools was also conducted.
- *School case studies*: fifteen schools, including primary, secondary and special schools, were visited in order to generate detailed case studies.

Findings

National Surveys

The teacher survey showed that 95 per cent of the 999 teachers (England and Wales) surveyed worked in a school that had a school council. The majority of respondents, 62 per cent, felt that England should follow the example of Wales and make school councils statutory. Forty-six per cent wanted pupil involvement in the process of appointing teachers, and 35 per cent of the teachers in England wanted pupil representation on school governing bodies. The independent schools survey revealed similar levels of school council activity and support regarding the extension of pupil voice.

Of the 2,417 pupils surveyed, a significant proportion attend schools which already have some form of provision for pupil voice in place. For example, eighty-five per cent reported that their school had a school council. Areas in which pupils had been able to input into decision making

included anti-bullying initiatives and recycling policies. Only a small percentage (12 per cent) had been involved in decisions around teaching and learning.

Just over half of pupils (55 per cent) agreed with the statement that “every school should have a school council”. A further 22 per cent were unsure, but only six per cent disagreed with the statement. The pupils’ comments suggest that any concerns they have about school councils may be due to deference to staff or cynicism. This perhaps reflects the relative novelty of notions of ‘pupil voice’ in schools in England and the fact that practice is still developing within schools.

Case Study Schools

Practice between school councils varied in many respects – for example, on how councillors are selected, the frequency and timing of meetings, means of involving the whole school and the extent of senior leadership involvement. In considering this practice the case studies identified a number of important factors for effective school councils:

- *The need for schools to have a clear understanding of why they are introducing provision for pupil voice.* There is a danger that as school councils grow in popularity schools will concern themselves with the processes of school councils, rather than the purposes they should fulfil (Fielding and Rudduck 2006). The result could be that provision, including school councils, is set up only to fade away.
- *A willingness on the part of schools to change their ethos and structures where necessary.* School leaders need to be clear that they are ready to involve pupils in decision making, listen to their views and act on those views where appropriate. They need to assign sufficient time, space and funding for pupils’ involvement in decision making and for pupil voice mechanisms to gain sufficient status and respect from the whole school. The extent to which a school council is involved in the routine business of the school (e.g. drafting policies and providing feedback on teaching and learning matters) can be indicative of the seriousness with which pupil voice is taken, as can a council’s influence on spending decisions and its links to the school governing body.
- *Teacher support for pupil voice.* This is important for the growth of pupil voice within a school and crucial if its influence is to move beyond facilities issues to the heart of teaching and learning. Teacher concerns

include workload, already busy timetables and what pupil voice might mean for the balance of power in the classroom (Fielding and Rudduck 2006). Training events, visits to other schools and starting with small scale consultations are ways to overcome such concerns. Longer term, teacher training can equip teachers for working more collaboratively with pupils. Even where other members of the school workforce take the lead on encouraging pupil voice, this does not obviate the need for teacher support and involvement.

- *The inclusion of all pupils in provision for pupil voice.* This will help to ensure that feedback from pupils speaks for the whole school. To achieve full participation, schools could consider a system of class/year group meetings feeding into the whole school council, provide different opportunities for pupils to raise agenda items (including anonymously) and ensure good ongoing two-way communication between the school council and the rest of the school. Approaches which combine ‘representative’ and ‘participatory’ forms of democracy seem to be particularly effective. Schools would benefit from greater support in designing provision for pupil voice that can accommodate a wide spectrum of abilities and disabilities. Where pupils require very high levels of direction, ‘action competence’ – awareness of role and the skills required to be an active citizen – can be a valuable focus (see Blake and Muttock 2004).
- *Training and support for pupils.* This is essential if pupils are to contribute effectively to decision making. Pupils involved in school councils will need support to manage their new responsibilities and role. They can also benefit from specific skills training, particularly in relation to managing meetings. Council members may need help in managing the expectations of their peers and benefit from guidance that helps them and their peers understand the purposes of pupil voice, what proposals will and will not be feasible and the time it can take to achieve change. The extent to which local authorities provide training and support, and their arrangements for doing so, vary considerably. Although training is increasingly available from national organisations, this is often still overlooked by schools or considered too expensive. Increased use of pupil voice websites may prove helpful here.

Conclusions and recommendations

It is clear from the research that schools would indeed benefit from new national guidance to help them embed pupil voice and develop their school councils to the full. While schools were not necessarily aware of the *Working Together* (DfES 2004) guidelines, most had seen the Healthy Schools publication *Promoting Participation* (DfES/NHSS 2004). They found the practical suggestions in this publication helpful and liked the descriptive case studies for showing them what others schools were doing. However, respondents did comment that the *Promoting Participation* document was out of date and insufficiently ambitious now.

Despite the many potential benefits of provision for pupil voice, including school councils, the argument for school councils often lacks clarity. This means that school councils and related activities are often being introduced with insufficient strategic thinking in relation to the purposes they are meant to serve and without a clear idea of success criteria against which they can be properly evaluated. This can lead to neutral or even negative outcomes. The four drivers outlined in the research – children's rights, active citizenship, school improvement and personalisation – provide a starting point for thinking about aims and objectives for provision for pupil voice.

Related to this, policy makers and schools should beware of viewing pupil voice as merely a means of supporting the current policy agenda. Genuine provision for pupil voice requires some power and influence to be passed to pupils, at which point it becomes unpredictable. Where this does not happen, there is the danger that pupil voice, and school councils in particular, could produce a cohort of young people who are cynical about democratic processes. Ensuring that pupils have a good understanding of their rights, but also their responsibilities, will help to prevent any moves towards inappropriate expressions of pupil voice. Despite these caveats, the research team did encounter some excellent, even inspirational, examples of pupil voice in action. These examples of good practice did not, though, fall into a common pattern. There are arguments for making school councils a requirement, particularly in secondary schools. For example, schools would have more of an incentive to allocate resources to them. It would also help to ensure that all schools were represented in local authority, regional and national initiatives, which often draw on (secondary) school councils (e.g. Youth Parliaments). But it would clearly be premature, at the very least, to stipulate in any detail the frequency, membership and functions of school

councils. An alternative option might be a requirement for schools to have a policy on pupil voice to guide and support their work in this area. Whether or not school councils or pupil voice policies are made a requirement, the government should continue to encourage pupil voice through other mechanisms (e.g. guidance and curriculum, inspection and self-evaluation frameworks).

References

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- Further information about this research can be obtained from Victoria White, Area 4Q, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, Westminster, London SW1P 3BT

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (DCSF-RR001) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

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Further information about this research can be obtained from Victoria White, 4Q, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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