

School council importance of student voice



It is being widely recognized that young people have the right to be heard and also to speak out about their school experiences. International policy makers are urging the contribution of young people to today's and tomorrow's world. The U. N. Convention on the Rights of the Child have included the right of children to be heard as one of their four basic principles. How to listen and learn, as well as to teach and lead, is the challenge for teachers, schools and their communities (TEACHING AND LEARNING, JUNE 2003).

A study by Helen Demetriou showed that consulting the young people could be a way to responding to the needs of teachers and also the pupils. It shows that pupils' voice have the potential to harness the thoughts and feelings of pupils which will ultimately lead to effective teaching and learning. The study carried out interviews on 11 secondary school science teachers to ascertain the quality of their teaching and the extent to which they felt they were successful in communicating with the students. Thus the research highlighted the merits of consulting children in both primary and secondary schools about their teaching and learning (Helen Demetriou, university of Cambridge).

What must the students be consulted about?

Firstly the students must be consulted about the School-wide issues Like revising school mission statements, system of rewards and sanctions, revising school rules, what qualities are needed in a new teacher, and how to get the school council to work well the contribution of pupils as researchers. Secondly they must be consulted about the Year group issues like the

induction plan for next year, parent's evenings, qualities in a year tutor, suggestions for timetables and organizing homework. Thirdly students must be consulted on issues in their class like their preferences in learning styles, way of understanding, peer support, improving group works and way of catching up so that you don't miss work.

Consultations at all these three levels have a similar purpose but are shaped differently i. e. in the context in which they occur. In the classroom teachers must always consult pupils and check whether they've understood the module or need help in their learning. At school level the consultation is based on a different set of condition, skills and sensitivities (TEACHING AND LEARNING, JUNE 2003).

ADVANTAGES FOR THE PUPIL

It develops in them a stronger sense of membership. They feel more positive about school and the organizational dimension. They will also build a stronger sense of respect and self worth, making them feel positive about themselves. It also creates a sense of self-as-learner and enables them to better manage their own learning. It gives them a sense of agency making them feel like a part of the school matters which will contribute in the improvement of teaching and learning.

ADVANTAGES FOR THE SCHOOL

It helps build a practical agenda for a change which the pupils can identify with. The changes can lead to enhanced engagement with school and school learning. It helps in building a deeper relationship between the pupils and

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the teachers. It also creates a sound basis for developing democratic principles and practices. It will also enhance the capacity of the school as a learning organization.

SCHOOL COUNCIL

A school council is thus built on this foundation of student consultation, making their voice heard, and thereby integrating them as a part of the organizational system. A school council is a group of students who are elected to represent the views of all pupils and also to improve the school. The term means collectively stands for all kinds of school-based groups run by students, which includes student forums and youth parliaments (Newsround, school councils). The functions of the school council are to organizes meetings; usually with a teacher present, on topics such as school lunches, behavior or ideas for fundraising events. The members of the school council are also responsible for carrying out the final ideas that have been agreed at the end of each session e. g. planning discos, writing newspaper articles, or meeting with catering staff. The important features that will enhance the working of a school council are firstly it should not be too big. Secondly they must conduct regular meetings and representatives with strong communication skills must be chosen. Training should also be provided for the members. The council can be again spilt into smaller sub-committees that will work on specific events. The council must also carry out annual evaluations and also decide their curriculum time so that they don't miss out on their lessons. The concept of School Councils has been around for around for almost 40 years, but now with citizenship being taught, there are many more around. The government acknowledges that school councils

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are important; but still they will not force schools to have one. In some countries there however there are laws which state all secondary schools must have councils. Eg:- Ireland, Germany, Spain, Sweden (Newsround, school councils).

Every school council is a legal entity in its own right i. e. they are a group of people who are given the power to set the key directions for the school. This means that a school council can directly influence the quality of education that the school provides to its students. They endorse the key school planning, evaluation and reporting documents which also includes the School Strategic Plan, the school budget and the Annual Report to the School Community. School councils make sure the school's running effectively in terms of how it spends its money. The council is accountable to the Minister for Education in respect to how it fulfills its functions. (Introduction to school council).

Objectives of a school council

A school council's objectives must include assisting the schools in their efficient governance, ensuring that decisions affecting students of the school are made keeping in mind first and foremost the students interests. It must also include, enhancing the educational opportunities of the students at the school and ensuring that the school and council comply with all the legal requirements.

Functions of a school council (Introduction to school council)

The 3 critical functions of a school council are to firstly participate in the development of the School Strategic Plan. Secondly it is to approve the

annual budget and the monitor the expenditures. Thirdly they must be involved in developing, reviewing, updating and monitoring of the school policies

Drawbacks of a school council

The drawbacks of a school council includes that firstly it does not manage day-to-day functioning of the school. It also does not discuss the individual issues that relate to teachers or staff or parents. Thirdly school councilors are not appointed to represent specific interest groups. Also school councils do not renew the principal's contract or recruit or dismiss the principal. The school Council is also not allowed to grant license in terms of land; purchase a motor vehicle or plane etc.

Co-operative forces in school councils

In order for school councils to operate effectively, it's important that the school council is able to work in a team. An important relationship is that between the principal and the school council president. They need to co-operate and work together, and when necessary, be prepared to acknowledge any personal differences so as to be able to work in partnership for the good of the school. Even the school council president and the conveners of the subcommittees must maintain respectful and cooperative relationships. Subcommittees are advisory bodies to school council and do not make decisions by themselves. Therefore it's important for subcommittee to remember this. School council members need to work as a team, which means respecting the different skills, knowledge and experience that each member brings to council, sharing the workload and responsibility. School council also needs to be able to work cooperatively with the parents

and staff at the school. This does not mean that counselors have to like everyone, rather they need to be able to listen and ask the school community, about their views on various topics; example: – uniform policy or dress code. The school council needs to discuss and document a process for consulting with its community.

Role of school council members

For the school councils to operate effectively, it's very important that its members respect each other's opinions, even with the ones with whom they disagree with. It's very important that after a council reaches a decision, the school counselors must support that decision in the school community.

Parent members who are on the school council can share their experiences as parents at the school, thereby bringing a wider school community to school council meetings. If any community members are on a school council, they can introduce a particular skill to school council like accounting , building skills or some other skill that the school is looking for at that time.

To be on the school council one must be keen, not necessarily an expert. It's helpful if one likes to interact with people, because of the need to be able to work as a team. One also needs to be prepared to commit time and effort to ensure the work of council gets done. School councils work best only when they have people from different backgrounds with different experiences.

Being on the school council is thus a great way to get involved and have a say in what the school does for its students. It is also a very good way to help the present and future students. One important role of the school council is to help set the future direction for the school. The school council must meet at least 8 times every school year, and at least once per school term. It's a

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good practice to have 2 meetings per term. The meetings should be restricted to approximately 2.5 hours duration at most. Most schools require that all school counselors are expected to sit on at least one subcommittee. Subcommittees also meet at least twice each term (Introduction to school council).

School council elections

The principal arranges and conducts these elections according to the procedures that are outlined in the school's council. The Elections are held each year. If one decides to stand for election, they must arrange for someone to nominate them as a candidate or they can nominate themselves. The nomination form must be returned within the time stated on the notice of election and call for nominations. Ballots are held only if more people are nominated as candidates than there are positions to fill. Every student must vote and even encourage the parents to do the same. The details of the election process are available from the school. To find out more about what a school council involves, one can talk to the principal or the school council president or the past and present school counselors.

Officer Roles in school council

The School Councils have officer roles such as the Chairperson whose duty is to has to draw up an agenda at least two days before a meeting. He/she has to take views of the other Council members. Second officer duty is that of a Vice-Chairperson who takes the Chairperson's place if he/she is not available. A vice chairperson has to assist the chairperson. The third officer position is that of a secretary who has to take down the minutes of the meeting, write any letters/communicate with others. If a member seeks

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election as Chairperson, and proves unsuccessful, they automatically go forward for election as Vice-Chairperson.

Need for a School Council

To help children develop responsible attitudes, improve their behavior; give children hands-on experience of issues in the National Curriculum. It also creates a feeling of belonging, encourages listening to others and develops self-confidence. And above all to improve pupil/teacher relationships (SCHOOL COUNCIL).

NSPC SURVEY (School Councils: the Views of Students and Teachers)

In 1989 NSPCC ran its first “ Listen to Children” week with an aim to encourage parents and professionals to listen to children. The underlying message was that a child who is heard is more likely to turn to a parent or other adult if she/he needs help. And the schools have a particular role in encouraging and empowering young people. In a previous research conducted by NSPCC, pupils across the Midlands and Wales were consulted about their school life. The major recommendation from this research was that schools must find effective ways of consulting pupils. School councils have been an essential feature of the British education for many years but very little was known about how effective teachers and students believed they were (School Councils: the Views of Students and Teachers).

The previous NSPCC activities and research have reinforced the importance of listening to children as part of their protection. Schools in particular have an important part to play in supporting this process of empowerment. NSPCC

also believes that school councils have the potential to encourage children and young people to be more resilient and better protected. NSPCC did this research as a first step in the process of attempting to learn more about school councils and how they were perceived by those who participate in them, as well as collecting the views of the staff and students who don't have school councils (School Councils: the Views of Students and Teachers).

NSPCC conducted a survey of school councils in partnership with School Council UK and the Advisory Centre for Education (ACE). A questionnaire was sent to a random sample of teachers approx in 200 state primary schools and students and teachers in 600 state secondary schools in England and Wales. The findings were as follows (School Councils: the Views of Students and Teachers)

The staff from 294 secondary schools and 89 primary schools responded; 226 of 240 secondary schools with councils also submitted a student response. Student replies were from 30 of the 54 secondary schools without councils. Three quarters of the council meetings were attended by a senior member of the schools' management team. In 92% of the school councils in secondary schools and in 12 of the 16 councils in primary schools the student members were elected. The frequency of meetings varies enormously. In 4% of schools, meetings were held every week; in 9% they occurred once a month; and in the other 9%, three times a term; in 45% twice a term and in the remaining 27% once a term. 44% of schools meetings were held in that curriculum time; 35% were during the lunch break; 25% after school, and 2% before school and 2% in assembly time. In 91% cases students contributed to the agenda and in 66% the staff did. But <https://assignbuster.com/school-council-importance-of-student-voice/>

there was, however, considerable variation in the consultation processes around these agendas. About 54% of council specific topics could not be discussed. They were matters relating to members of staff (44% of councils) or individual pupils (19%). Areas other than that included uniform, the length of the school day, curriculum content and disciplinary matters. Most frequently mentioned agenda items were the matters related to canteen, uniforms and toilets. Twenty percent of the responding councils had discussed staff appointments, and majority of them had been involved in some way in the interviewing process. Comments from both staff and students indicated that most of them thought that councils played an important role in communicating. Student respondents in schools with councils rated the performance of their councils in relation to certain criteria. And the ratings showed that they were more optimistic about their potential for improving relationships between students (73%) than for securing an improvement in the relationships between staff and students (50%). The main advantage identified by the staff and students was that the councils gave the students a voice, providing the link between staff and students, and also allowing the students to have a role in the management of school. The areas in which the staff wanted to see councils develop was in developing of a proactive student council, improved communication between councils and all other sections of the school community, particularly governing bodies, and student involvement in the development of school policies. Students placed more emphasis on raising the profile of councils in their schools, on contributing in areas where a student perspective was seen to be extremely important, such as the development of anti-bullying or discipline policies, and on obtaining appropriate training for student representatives so they

could be more effective partners. The staff identified two main issues standing in the way of the development of some council, which were time constraints and staff resistance. The obstacle identified by students was to establish a higher level of trust between students and staff in many schools before real progress could be made. A third of the schools which responded did not have school councils although the majority of them were willing to see one established. Staff and students alike viewed them as a way of giving the students a greater stake in their schools. Only few of the respondents opposed the introduction of a council in their schools. In the primary sector this was mainly because teachers thought their pupils were too young to participate effectively or because they felt staffs in these schools are already operating under extreme pressure which should not be augmented. Only a quarter of the staff respondents in schools without a council identified disadvantages in having one and that was related to the time that a staff would have to the council, if it were to develop into an effective force within the school (School Councils, the Views of Students and Teachers).

HISTORY OF SCHOOL COUNCIL

Prior to the 1960s, political education was in the form of ‘hard’ academic learning about constitutions and institutions especially for the high status students; or they were reminders of observing the rules by the low status students. Then with the introduction of the Program for Political Literacy (Lister 1987), procedure values and skills were being encouraged. (Ian Davis school council)

During the 1980s a new era of education became prominent. Education based around global peace, gender, anti-racist etc were being emphasized upon. The focus was now on political literacy and specific political issues.

In early 1990s citizenship education had been developed emphasizing on voluntary activity by individual young people in the context of a declining welfare state. However the current version of citizenship education (from Crick's notion) is about social and moral responsibility; and also the community involvement and political literacy.

A number of key thinkers have outlined the importance of school councils (Palmer; Davies, Gregory and McGuinn 2002). A few of them are mentioned as follows-

Dewey postulated that thinking is the instrument for solving problems and that knowledge is the process of accumulation of wisdom gained in the problem solving process. (Westbrook 1993, p. 279).

Rousseau outlines a number of key ideas like childhood is not just a preparation for adulthood but rather a stage of life in itself; individualization of education and also that children learn by discovering (Ian Davis, school council).

Vygotsky argues that culture plays an important role and one cannot talk about learning as such, but has to judge the nature of learning in relation to the culture that produces it. Individuals can also develop their own learning by interacting with the environment and not waiting for learning to be imposed on them. (Ian Davis, school council).

Rowe's arguments for and against school councils

FOR

The students have the right to be heard and live in justice. They also learn how to serve each other.

The council promotes citizenship learning and social confidence that will enable decision making in challenging situations.

It's a democratic process which is effective and efficient in developing a consensus.

AGAINST

The Schools must not deceive the children into thinking that they have more power; its important that teachers exercise their professional responsibilities.

It emphasizes service rather than rights.

The councils create a low status and cynicism.

ROWE'S CONCLUSION

He concluded that it's rather easy to underestimate the obstacles that come in between a good communication between teachers and students. The size of the council does matter. Momentum also is necessary because counselors will lose interest if nothing is happening. Also the staff needs to be responsible and make the students feel worthwhile. The head and administrative staff must make the counselors' feel valued. The Staff must also be aware of vulnerable times of the year.

SCHOOL COUNCILS IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Danish Education Act 1996 requires that the secondary schools must create and maintain pupil councils when the majority of the students want to have one.

The Irish Education Act (1998)

The school board has to establish and maintain procedures for the purpose of informing students about the activities of the school. A procedure that's been established under section 1 will enable the involvement of the students in the operations of the school having regards for the age and experience of the students in association with their parents and teachers. A board of a post primary school should encourage the establishment of a student council and facilitate by giving assistance to

The students who want to establish the council

Councils when they have been established

Australian secondary schools have a student representative council and in USA the National Association of Student Councils is active.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF PARTICIPATION IN A COUNCIL

Levels of participation (Hart 1992).

“ Manipulation- The children are engaged for the benefit of their own interests, formulated by adults, but the children themselves do not understand the implications.

Decoration- The children are called in to embellish adult actions. Adults do not pretend that all this is in the interest of the children themselves.

Tokenism- Children are given a voice, to serve the child friendly image adults want to create, rather than the interest of the children themselves.

Assigned but informed- Adults take the initiative to call in children but inform them on how and why. Only after the children understand the intentions of the project and the point of their involvement, the children decide whether or not to take part.

Consulted and informed- Children are intensively consulted on a project designed by adults.

Adult initiated shared decisions with children. In the case of projects concerned with community development, initiators such as community workers and local residents frequently involve various interest groups and age groups.

Child initiated and directed- Children conceive, organize and direct a project themselves without adult interference.

Child initiated shared decisions with adults”

It's up to the school to choose what they prefer (IAN DAVIS, SCHOOL COUNCIL).

Methodology

In order to investigate the functioning of the school council, a multi-method approach of gathering data (triangulation) is used to ensure maximum

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reliability and accuracy. The purpose of this is to ensure validity of data and ensure that the results of the research are a true a true representation of the school.

INTERVEIWS

All members of the school council are interviewed (one class at a time-two members per class-one male and one female providing all participants agree to participation). An interview of the person setting up the council was taken to find out what the aims for the council were. Also an interview of 3 staff members who are present at school council meetings was taken

Pupils are approached during break time or lunch time, and are asked to answer if they agree or disagree with a series of statements. And depending on their answers, the questionnaire for further investigation is developed.

The advantage of this method is that it yields good results and the researcher can be assured that he/she knows exactly what the pupils mean. Additionally the researcher can also notice the students' reactions to the questions. The disadvantage however is that not so many results can be gathered by using only the interview method. For the interview to be successful, the children must have the freedom to describe their views; they must feel comfortable so that they answer accurately. (misconceptions in science education).

OBSERVATION

Observational techniques are a very important aspect of several research and case studies. In a way we all are already well versed in the art of observation. We all observe human behavior and tend to draw conclusions based on that. In research however it's important to go beyond the subjective approach and eliminate bias. Also it's important to be systematic and open about the procedures of the study, so that others can check the bases on which the conclusions have been reached. (ANDREW HANNAM, 2006)

Non-structured observations are used in this study because the aim is to measure staff influence in meetings and council agenda and this can be best measured only without the constraints of structured and semi-structured observation methods.

PUPIL QUESTIONNAIRES

A questionnaire provides a pool of questions that can be used to explore the barriers and supports for the pupils in school. It uses open and closed questions. It can use symbolic faces to rate their experiences or more conventional response options. It also helps explore a pupil's feelings of the different events and happenings in the school. Therefore this method of data collection will help to find out a student's problems. Even though the students complete the questionnaire by themselves, they still must be briefed initially about why they are being asked these questions; and who will have access to the information and how will it benefit in bringing about a desirable change. The questionnaire can be designed in an online format as pupils are more engaged with an online format and it also adds a feeling of anonymity. Whereas a black and white photocopy is completed as

compliance without any personal thought or reflection. An important advantage of questionnaires is that the pupils' responses are not influenced by an adult (pupil questionnaire).

This questionnaire that has been made for this study is anonymous with the option for pupils to write their name, especially if they wish to have a follow up conversation with an adult.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. How many times did your school council meet during the current school year?

2. Does your school council meet the minimum membership requirements outlined by in the provincial regulation?

Yes No

3. What efforts has your school council made to ensure that it has met the school council membership requirements?

4. What kinds of consultation and activities was your school council involved in during the current school year? (tick against the options you feel right)

Consultation Activities

Local school year calendar Fundraising

School code of student conduct Workshops and/or seminars for parents

Preparation of the school profile Extracurricular activities

in the schools

Input to the principal profile School community

communication strategies

School budget priorities Reporting to parents/guardians and the community

Curriculum and program goals and priorities Local coordination of services for children and youth

Responses of the school/Board to achievement Schoolbased services and community partnerships,

In provincial/Board assessment program such as social, health, recreational programs lunch/nutrition

Development, implementation, and review of Community use of school facilities

Board policies at the local level

Others, please list below Others, please list below:

5. How does your school council seek input from parents and the school community?

i- School council meetings ii- Subcommittees iii- Casual Discussion iv- Parent email list v- Surveys

6- What were the top three priorities/goals for your school council for the current school year?

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a)Addressing School Transfer Procedures and winter lineup problem.

b) Investigate School Transfer Policy options.

c) Establishing better communications (via more frequent “ Lisgar Links” e-newsletters and a new web site).

7. Were you successful in achieving these priorities/goals? Yes No

8. Why/why not?

9. How could we best communicate with school councils?

10. What are your school council’s top three priorities for the coming year?

11. What are top three biggest challenges facing your school council for the coming year ?

12. Any additional comments or suggestions to improve our efforts to support school councils?

13. What should the focus of School Council be for the upcoming (year) school year?

14. We would like to increase involvement in the school and need new members of School Council.

(OTTAWA CARELTON SURVEY)