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*Citizenship Foundation*



**The business of**

# **school councils**

**An investigation into democracy in schools**

Don Rowe



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# Foreword

This report is based on data collected in 1995 as part of a study into the workings of School Councils. The National Curriculum had introduced citizenship as an official cross-curricular theme and under that banner schools were encouraged to 'lay the foundations for positive participative citizenship [...] by providing opportunities to participate in all aspects of school life' (National Curriculum Council, 1990).

No doubt the new status, albeit a relatively minor one in the national framework, gave some schools the incentive to look again at the contribution that school councils can make to students' personal development and the life of the school as a community. This was why I decided to examine the issues in some detail through the experiences of staff and students in a range of schools. My report, which was cautiously optimistic, was made available by the Citizenship Foundation to any teachers who asked for it, but it was never formally published. Now the establishment of citizenship as a national curriculum foundation subject in 2002 places considerable emphasis on developing skills of 'participation and responsible action' (DfES/QCA, 1999) and there is much evidence of renewed interest in both primary and secondary schools, in the contribution schools councils can make towards improving the school environment as a learning and social community.

This is why we have decided to formally publish this report as a second edition. Its findings still have currency and its formal status will make it easier to find and reference for students of citizenship. None of the issues raised by the teachers I interviewed have gone away and recently a study led by Monica Taylor for the National Foundation for Education Research (Taylor and Johnson, 2002) came up with many similar findings to my own.

Schools councils are still controversial amongst the profession. Not everyone is convinced of their value. Even within the same school there can be sharp divisions over the purpose and wisdom of going down the road towards greater student involvement in decision making. Personally, I became even more convinced of the importance of seeing young people as 'experts' with regard to many aspects of school life. Teachers will never know what it is like for students if they do not ask, and if they do not ask they cannot take steps to address the issues consultation inevitably raises. I hope this small study will help colleagues see the issues in their own school a little more clearly as a result of listening to the voices of staff and pupils agonizing over the same issues they face. There is no single solution to any of the problems, that much is clear. Nevertheless, it would be my hope that this report will provide support and even inspiration for many colleagues committed to making schools better places to be.

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# Chapter 1 – Introduction

## Aims, methods and outline of the study

The issue of democracy in schools has, over the years, continued *sotto voce* beneath many a noisier educational debate. For the majority of schools the issue of student participation in the running of the school is subordinate to the principle task of delivering the curriculum. By contrast, a small number of schools have attempted to run on highly democratic lines, and during the 1970s, a number of new state schools were self-consciously set up on democratic lines and became celebrated as such. These included Sutton Centre, Countesthorpe in Leicestershire and Stantonbury in Milton Keynes, though in these schools the emphasis was often more on democracy at staff level. In fact, there is evidence in the literature that, despite its non-authoritarian atmosphere, the individualism of the regime at Stantonbury strongly militated against a sense of community and democracy amongst the students. This suggests the observer needs to approach self-styled “democratic” schools with some caution – it is important to know what the school itself means by the term and how it actually works in practice for both staff and pupils.

Leaving aside the rare examples such as the independent school, Summerhill, which operates under very different organisational and social constraints from state schools, it seems that few schools feel able to devolve power to the student body to any great extent. For perfectly proper reasons of public accountability, state funded schools have very clear limitations placed on their autonomy and this limits any major experi-

ments in the direction of genuine democracy. Nevertheless, there has continued to be a debate concerning the extent to which schools can or should involve students in decision making and it is the nature of this debate which is the principle object of this present study. Put simply, teachers do not agree on the extent to which it is practicable or appropriate to involve students in decision making in schools. There are those for whom the language of “student democracy” or “pupil power” is anathema although teachers who take this view often do so for very different reasons. On the other hand, amongst the “pro-democracy” group, there is a strong feeling that it is right for students to have a say in the running of schools but little agreement about how to achieve it or what it should mean in practice. And this is not only an issue between different kinds of school – colleagues within the same establishment often take very different positions on the issue.

This study was undertaken in the belief that democracy in schools is an issue in need of some clarification. Busy teachers often have no time to stand back and reflect on such matters. The isolation of schools can also mean that good practice is not always widely disseminated, particularly since the reduction of the influence of the LEA. In the present study, I did not set out to discover what proportion of schools have student councils or consult students in other ways. On a 28% poll return (271 secondary schools), about half of the schools replying operated student councils (Ashworth, 1995), though it seems

likely that schools with councils would be more likely to return the questionnaire, so that figure may be on the high side. This is a useful survey but it leaves several important questions unanswered. What does it mean in practice if a school claims to have a council? How well is it functioning? Are students satisfied with what they achieve via the council? Does the existence of the council have any real impact on the general levels of involvement in school governance or is it something of a club for certain types of student? To what extent do heads take account of, or solicit, student views? Certainly, the existence of a council does not guarantee a head's willingness to listen, as students often complain. So is there a possibility that student councils might actually be counter-productive and a cause of student disaffection rather than a remedy for it?

Though I set out with, I hope, a open mind, I was in no doubt about the difficulties of running a school council well. So often one hears of councils stumbling along, concerning themselves with little more than the trivialities of school life. Are there, perhaps, inherent weaknesses in typical school council structures that condemn them to operate at the level of tuck shop and toilets? Are students mature enough to be involved with more significant issues? If they are, why does it seem to happen so rarely? And how capable are they of running a school council independently of the staff? Indeed, is this independence a good thing?

I was particularly keen to seek some clarification of the term "student democracy" because this itself is controversial. Is it possible that the term is an obstacle to some teachers or that the notion of democracy in school should be replaced by some other

more appropriate organising concept? Teachers appeared to be divided on the issue.

## **Methodology**

To seek clarification on such points, eight schools were visited and interviews conducted with both staff and students in each school, in order to understand the problems in some depth. The method employed was the semi-structured interview. In each school, wherever possible two staff were interviewed – the head and the senior teacher most closely involved with the council. Then, where possible, I interviewed two students at the top and two at the bottom of the school, except in the junior schools where only the top juniors were interviewed.

Schools were not selected randomly. Schools were invited to participate which, to my knowledge, had given thought to this matter because I wanted to explore the reasoning of colleagues who attached some importance to the issue and who had grappled with problems of implementation. It was not felt necessary to visit any school obviously hostile to student participation, although I encountered, even in these "pro-democracy" schools, many criticisms of councils and the way they run. All the schools in the study were non-selective mixed state schools, within the normal size range. All the schools serve mixed areas socioeconomically, with a preponderance serving working class and urban populations.

Following the interviews and my analysis, I presented a first draft of my findings to each of the participating schools, for comment and correction. Whilst I have tried to repre-



sent what was said to me as accurately as possible, I am aware that the speakers may disagree with my analysis of the problems we discussed. I am, of course, very grateful to all those teachers and students who cooperated with me. This study was made possible by a grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Also worth mentioning is the work of School Councils UK (SCUK), an organisation established to promote school councils. SCUK has published its own recommendations on how school councils could be run.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Ellie Keen, my colleague, who carried out two of the interviews on my behalf.

### **Note on referencing**

In quoting from transcripts of interviews, I have distinguished between headteachers (H.T.) and senior teachers (S.T.) as indicated. I also indicate whether the school is primary or secondary. In designating students, I indicate the school year from which the speaker comes. Generally, there were no more than two students in any one interview and these are given numbers to distinguish the speakers in the extract. Also I have designated each school with a letter and this is supplied at the beginning of every interview extract.

## Chapter 2

# What is meant by democracy in school?

### **Democratic schools and education for democracy**

It is hard to define what characterises a democratic school. As we have already seen, attempts to establish genuinely “democratic” schools are notable for their absence, particularly within the state sector. Harber, who has been a consistent campaigner for democratic schooling over many years, suggests that a democratic school would be marked by some transference of *power* from the head to the students (Harber, 1995 p10), and would include both organisational and curriculum issues.

“Any such school must involve a shift of power and authority away from staff to students, both in terms of decisions about how the institution as a whole is run, and in terms of what is learned in the classroom and how.”

Harber insists that this power must extend beyond the trivial level of planning social events or providing drinks dispensers.

Before proceeding further, we need to look at how the teachers and students in the present study conceptualised the idea of democracy. Bernard Trafford, in describing his attempts to “democratise” his school, (the independent Wolverhampton Grammar School) admits that he uses the term loosely because the school is far from democratic but maintains that “democracy” is a useful concept symbolising the intention to treat students more as active partners in the learning process than as the passive recipients of an imposed and rigid curriculum. Whilst admitting that the process is not

complete, Trafford claims that the school council acts as a symbol of the teaching staff’s willingness to engage in dialogue with students.

In the present study, even though there was a high degree of commitment amongst the staff I spoke to about consulting students there was considerable ambivalence towards describing this process as “democratic”.

“...it’s not a term I use, either with staff or students and at the end of the day if decisions are made, I would say that it is my job to make those decisions. To that extent this is not a democracy. Having said that, I think I would try to avoid taking any decision which hadn’t taken full account of the views of the people involved. By that I would mean the staff, the students and their families.”

—T.: *School F (secondary)*

This head clearly wants to remain firmly in control of the decision-making processes and he therefore wishes to make this clear. At the same time, he wishes to consult all interested parties fully before coming to any decision. One reason why democracy is problematic for him is hinted at in his list of those to be consulted. Besides students there are the views of staff, parents and governors to consider. Unlike Harber, whose definition of democracy is devolvement of power solely towards students, this head recognises that full consultation should go in more than one direction and on this basis

there would be many occasions when the views of students would be overridden by those of other groups. Putting things to the vote is not always the appropriate mechanism for the taking of management decisions. Indeed, some heads might wish to signal that they are not “democrats” precisely because they fear that the interests of the students would be at risk if democratic power was devolved to some kind of body representing all the relevant interest groups. On curriculum matters, for example, parents do not always support what teachers feel professionally is right and, on other matters, teachers sometimes would want to side with students against the wishes of some parents – the perennial struggle over school uniform is an obvious example. In the following extract, for example, the headteacher sees himself caught in the middle between students and governors, with both of whom he needs to maintain positive relations. He is not himself in favour of tightening up on the school uniform and fears that the students may make things worse for themselves by pressing for change through the school council (or “Parliament” as it is called):

“I can guarantee next term, for example, that the issue of why boys need to wear ties when it’s so hot in the classroom, will figure yet again as it does virtually every summer, and then there’s the whole debate about school dress, and in fact School Parliament wants the governors to look at the business of school dress. The governors have responded to that one by setting up a new working party which wants to, as I see it, introduce a very strict dress code, which is not one that we actually operate at the moment.”  
 –*H.T. school H, (secondary)*

However, another head expressed herself strongly committed to the idea of a strong school council precisely because she saw this as a way of becoming *more* accountable to groups which generally do not feel they have much of a stake in society. To involve working class students in “democratic consultation” is, in her view, empowering for the students and sends clear signals to the parents who, in one sense at least, she would like to feel were more involved than they are:

“These models, it seems to me we work from, are nice middle-class, democratic, left-wing, European models and they’re entrenched in us. But actually when you start thinking about does that empower working class people, on the whole, no. Many working class people don’t vote, don’t engage in that process, don’t see that as a model for themselves. Many are very happy to send their children to school and don’t feel that the school is accountable to them. You have to give them, almost, the gift of saying “we’re accountable to you, now demand of me,” and that is quite a difficult process, I think, to go through.”  
 –*H.T. School C (secondary)*

This radical statement of the importance of maintaining a commitment to democratic accountability in education, nevertheless raises some difficult questions. What if the parents or pupils were, “democratically”, to demand the unacceptable? What, for example, if they objected to the school’s anti-racist policies or wanted to replace a curriculum area to which the school felt a strong commitment? Then, in this head’s eyes the notion of accountability takes on a different meaning. With regard to allowing children

control over their own learning, for example, she commented:

“I’m not into this kind of “let the kids go into whatever lesson they want”. We have a responsibility to them – part of our accountability and our responsibility lies in our professional knowledge... So along with accountability goes the child’s entitlement – I think that’s a really powerful idea – that the children have an entitlement to a certain curriculum...and it doesn’t abdicate the teacher’s responsibility.”

–*H.T. School C (secondary)*

It is difficult, I think to square the two notions of accountability used in juxtaposition here. Whatever the rhetoric, there emerges again the idea that schools need to be in a position to make judgements in the face of competing claims. It is not self-evident that fully democratic structures would always be in the best interests of the school or the students.

Head teachers are very aware of their wider democratic accountability under the law and this offers another reason why some see it as their duty not to devolve power to students or any other interest group.

“A school is set up by Parliament which is democratically elected. The powers which I have, which governors have, which teachers have and the restrictions on us are all placed there by a democratically elected body, so that is how I see a school – as part of a democracy. I don’t think you can say that a democracy means everybody equally sharing the power.”

–*H.T. School G (junior)*

On occasions, the argument is used that schools should become democratic communities in order to *mirror* the democratic structures of society (Harber, *ibid*) so that students learn experientially what being part of a democratic community really means but one head teacher I spoke to much preferred the model of a quango to that of democracy, with teachers being appointed in executive fashion and imposed on the establishment, rather than answerable to them directly as would be the case in a democratic organisation.

“A quango would still seek to represent the people it is working for and involve them but it is a kind of democratic participation rather than a democratic responsibility... It doesn’t fool children by telling them they have more power, more responsibility, than you can actually give them.”

–*H.T. School D (secondary)*

Another head likened the student council more to a pressure group than a power-sharing branch of the executive. This he felt, was not necessarily a bad thing since it prepared students for a role they would be more likely to encounter later in life:

“Now you might not actually call that a democratic process – it tends more to be preparation for being part of a pressure group – but it seems to me that that’s the reality with a lot of political life in this country. It is built on pressure group work.”

–*H.T. School H (secondary)*

It seems, then, that there are several senses in which it is possible to see parallels between the structures of schools and society but there is less agreement on how these

parallels are to be construed. Whilst some teachers feel it necessary to distance themselves from the concept of democracy, in order to maintain professional autonomy, others see school life as involving so strong an obligation to prepare students for democratic participation, that it should require bringing the whole of the school's management structure into line with this aim. Harber (ibid.) has argued that our so-called democracy is not in fact very democratic but this fact can be used as justification for democratising schools, so that schools become agents of social change.

Given the difficulties with the term, one wonders why the term is used so regularly. For Trafford (ibid.) its appeal lies not in its descriptive quality but in its symbolism. The word has a ring about it which presumably would be absent from a term such as "consultative". However, if what seems to be a morally appealing idea to staff, in fact turns out to be a source of disillusionment for students, it would need to be used with care. As one student at Trafford's school put it:

"I have found over the last year that no matter how good the suggestions are, they seem to get dragged into a black hole of 'I'll look into that...' and basically, the School Council does nothing but talk."

Do teachers want students to equate this situation with "democracy"? This is not about the difference between teachers who recognise students' rights and those who do not. One head, who is highly sympathetic to the recognition of students' rights, feels it necessary to engage with students on the very clear basis that discussion of *any* issue has to take place within a very clear framework

of rights and responsibilities and that makes *democratic* control, in effect, unacceptable because he is not confident that fully democratic decision making would always respect what he insists are non-negotiable standards for the school.

"There aren't any areas we won't discuss. There *are* non-negotiables about the way the school runs and they are:

- it's a place of work, that's not negotiable;
- everybody has the right to be happy, that's not negotiable;
- and everybody has the right to be safe, that's not negotiable.

Given these three, and those are pretty large I grant you, pretty much anything is, I think. Now the students might see it differently, but in my view anything else is up for discussion. I think the difficulty comes in enabling students to embark on those discussions."

—H.T. School F (secondary)

So, whilst being very favourably disposed towards on-going discussions with students at all levels, this head rejects *democracy* as the most appropriate model for these discussions and is quite clear that a school council is not the way to promote the most effective dialogue. The danger of sending out conflicting messages to students leads him to, as he put it, "prefer honesty":

"I don't want to be blasé and pretend that everything is a bed of roses and that every student feels that their voice is heard all the time because I am sure this is not the case, but I do think that the atmosphere and the basic ground rules on which you operate are more important than a quasi-democratic structure which, is in fact, not at all

democratic because always, in my experience, there are limits to the powers of school councils. [...] The one thing adolescents can spot at 500 metres is bullshit and I reckon schools typically are full of bullshit. The words don't fit the music. They say one thing and immediately they do another thing."

—H.T. School F (*secondary*)

In rejecting the idea of democracy, this head, nonetheless, takes an inclusive view of the school community. The problem is how to communicate to students that their views are welcomed and respected without the formal structures to make this possible. Should students be obliged to wait until the head seeks their opinions before raising an issue? This head partly resolves this by making it a priority to know all his students by name and to be out and about in the school very frequently during breaks and lunchtimes, so access is relatively easy if students want to raise an issue. But is this enough?

### **Student participation – right or privilege?**

All of the teachers I spoke with were in broad agreement that students had a right to be heard. As a philosophical justification for student participation, this appears to be much less controversial and to have greater conceptual clarity than the concept of democracy, which involves accountability and shared decision making. However, even with this less demanding idea, some heads saw the right to be heard as still controversial for some teachers.

"I would say that on the whole, we are still at the stage where teachers feel they are doing young people a favour

by listening to them, whereas my view is that that is their entitlement, to be heard."

H.T. School C (*secondary*)

This view was echoed by many of the students I spoke to. Despite being often quite cynical about the extent of their influence, they commonly stated that they felt that it was important to be able to have a say. And "having a say" includes the idea that what is said should be listened to with respect.

Student 1:

"What we, the students, are trying to say is, 'We don't want total power.'"

Student 2:

"We just want to have a say."

Student 1:

"Yeah. We want to have a say that is listened to. You shouldn't just hear us say it then throw it aside. We want to have a say and then you [ie staff] think about it and come back to us and tell us the reason why you don't like the decision that we have made. If you give us the reason then fine, but you can't just look at us and go 'No!'"

—School A, students, Y10

Schools which see themselves as "just communities" (Power et al. 1989, Cunningham 1992) as distinct from "democratic communities" would certainly place considerable weight on recognition of students' rights to be heard. The rights discourse has become more prominent in recent years in society at large and amongst parents and students. Changes in legislation, notably The Children Act 1989 and a number of Education acts, have facilitated these

changes and to some observers, these commitments have been reinforced by Britain's becoming a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 12 states that governments should ensure "to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child". Arguably, on this basis, such rights of consultation should extend to a wide range of issues in school, including the curriculum, provision for pupils with special learning needs, and disciplinary procedures.

One obvious problem with the notion of students' rights is that it can be in tension with the idea of the school as a disciplined community. There is no doubt that some teachers are uneasy with the idea of conceding too much in the direction of students' (and indeed, parents') rights for fear that the students themselves will push too far, limiting their ability to ensure that the school runs smoothly for the benefit of all. It is sometimes the case that students and parents who stand on "their rights", do so for the purpose of challenging the power of teachers and this contributes to an underlying unease on the part of some staff about the wisdom of conceding too much in the direction of students' rights:

"I think a number of teachers thought that the students were less involved than they should be and some of them thought they shouldn't be involved so much, so we had that kind of conflict amongst the staff."

—S.T. School C (*secondary*)

It is not only the out-and-out authoritarian teachers who would prefer that consultation with students should remain within the gift

of the school, a privilege rather than a right.

"There are a lot of staff who I think would feel quite threatened with the idea of a powerful, effective student council, because they would feel the onus and responsibility was taken by the students and it shouldn't be."

—S.T. School B (*secondary*)

Partly it seems, in response to the unease about the dangers of the "rights discourse", one of the schools I visited had established its council on a totally different basis, drawing its inspiration not from the language of "democracy" and "rights" but of "community" and "service". In classical political philosophy, the difference is between the liberal notion of citizenship as a contractual relationship between citizens, based on the reciprocity of rights and duties, and the "civic republican" tradition (Heater, 1990) which emphasises the interdependence of community members and their obligations towards the community. Expressed in terms of a school, this strand of thinking has much to commend it. Indeed the language of the school as a social and moral community has a long history and very broad appeal within the teaching profession.

The senior teacher who set up this service-based council had already seen one, established on the standard democratic lines, falter and collapse. In his view, several of the students elected to the council had not taken their responsibilities seriously enough. When he set out to establish a new council, he envisaged it as part of the school's life as a caring community. As head of PSE, he wanted to base his new council on the model of service to the school in the same way that he encouraged students to look for ways of serving the outside community.

Accordingly, students in Year 11 were invited to volunteer to become members of the council. They would not be elected as representatives of year or class groups. This was explicitly to reject the claim that school councils are about securing rights for students. This did not suggest any lack of respect for the students but a personal feeling that the assertion of students' rights in the setting of a school was not a helpful one:

If the emphasis is on asserting their rights – they will ask us to do things we can't grant. A classic example is, say, "We don't want to wear school uniform". We know we can't grant that – and we have no intention of doing that – so there is no point in pretending otherwise. In fact they have actually changed the uniform, not by asserting their rights but by suggesting an improvement, and you are better able to concede their viewpoint.  
—S.T. School D (secondary)

The difficulty with the language of *service* is that it tends to have unequal application within the community, appealing to the capable and pro-social to offer service to the less capable or under-privileged. Whilst this certainly reflects the reality of school communities, as a theoretical model it may be problematic for some teachers. Such an approach may leave the more disadvantaged members of the community with no knowledge or sense of their rights and no mechanism for claiming them. Some will feel uncomfortable with this model but others will, I think, recognise that in some respects it has a better fit with the idea of the school as a community (albeit hierarchical) than a democracy. It may also have other advantages, one of which would be that it seems capable of reducing the frustration created

by the constant rejection of students' demands if these come to dominate the work of the council.

Of course, these two approaches are not completely incompatible. In reality, the more conventional rights model still seems to rely on the more confident, community-minded students to take the lead. Nor is the service model incapable of addressing many issues of student rights. The school in question, in fact, established four committees including a student welfare sub-committee. This sub-committee concerns itself with issues very similar to those which seem to pre-occupy most councils (ie, the "locks on the toilet doors" type of problem). I asked the senior teacher whether his approach did not have the effect of neglecting students' rights.

"I don't think that happens. The basis of membership is service but actually when the school council is formed and the students are working towards the welfare of the school, it is a natural thing to listen to those students and if they say, 'Wouldn't it be a good idea if the girls had shower curtains', you take notice."  
—S.T. School D (secondary)

Arguably, a service model has the potential to shift the basic mode of the school council away from "talking and asking" towards "doing". Certainly, built into the council structure is the idea that the councillors do more than simply represent the views of the student body. At the time of my visit, the students were negotiating for the installation of shower curtains for the girls with the PE department whilst, at the same time, raising funds to pay for them. Nevertheless, much constructive dialogue on behalf of "students' rights" also seems to have taken place. For example, shortly before my visit, there had



been a major consultation process on the school's code of conduct, stressing students' responsibilities towards each other. When the first draft of the document was published one student councillor pointed out that the document only spoke of the students', and not the staff's, duties to be pleasant, courteous and polite and show respect towards others. The matter was brought to the staff and after a heated debate, the code of conduct was amended to apply equally to staff as well as students.

However, it seemed to me that a major criticism of the way the service model was applied in this school was that it involves only one school year, denying opportunities for participation to members of other years. I wanted to know whether the views of students in the lower years were ever sought:

"There are two school councillors assigned to each form in years 7,8 and 9. They are in the process of fixing this up. I've let them do it themselves – I don't tell them to do it. They go to each form and say, "We are your student councillors. If you have anything you want to say about the school – how it can be improved, made a better place – come and talk to us or write to us through the student council mail box in the office."

–S.T. School D (secondary)

So, this model of a school council based on non-representational lines, does have the capability of being consultative. It is, however, an obvious danger that this is not an integral part of the model and it is perhaps significant that it appears to have been several years before the council in this school decided to initiate a formal consultative process with students in the lower years.

In summary, then what can be said about the usefulness or otherwise of the concepts "democracy" and "rights" for students? Both appear to bring with them certain difficulties, especially in relating them to the particular characteristics and circumstances of schools. On balance, the idea that students have the right to have a voice in the way schools are run, seems to be less problematic and possibly less open to being misunderstood. Whilst the concept of rights can be qualified and circumscribed according to the situation, the term "democracy" as a concept offers much less flexibility and in many ways is inimical to the way schools are set up. Not only are there difficulties in applying it directly to any state school, and certainly the majority of independent schools, it is by no means clear who should be included in the franchise and those who argue that this should be pupils, and only pupils, have not shown how this can be justified. We have seen that teachers interpret the idea in a number of different ways, and some, even amongst the liberal/progressive camp, are inclined to reject it as unhelpful and even dishonest.

It is possible that the lack of clarity with which the term *democracy* is often used may be making it more difficult to discuss the issue of student participation in some quarters. Teachers, governors and parents resistant to the idea will surely find it much easier to argue against pupil "democracy" than against the position which many "democratisers" in fact hold, which is that students should have the *right* to be consulted. The choice of language in this debate needs to be very carefully considered.

## Chapter 3

# The benefits of school councils

Having examined the way teachers and students approach the principles underlying student representation we turn to look at the more practical issue of assessing its benefits and disbenefits. Particularly when the principles are less than clear, it is important to be sure that councils are worth the effort. That can only be answered by assessing outcomes.

From my enquiries, I would suggest that the beneficiaries are variously seen as:

- i) individual students,
- ii) the student body,
- iii) the school as a whole community and
- iv) the staff.

### Individual students as beneficiaries

A number of benefits to students were enumerated by my interviewees. Firstly, there was general agreement that councils benefit students because they provide opportunities for them to take part in a process resembling that of a Parliamentary democracy. For one teacher, this was the first of several strands of justification for councils:

"I think that the first strand is the citizenship strand – that this is what students are expected to deal with when they leave school, to be citizens of the country and take part in elections, vote and make decisions."

—*S.T. School C (secondary)*

Some evidence was provided that individual

students benefit a great deal by being asked to take on such responsibilities:

"One of the boys you didn't interview this morning would be described as SEN, but last year he was a representative on his year council and the improvement in maturity was remarkable. So yes, I think there are major benefits for the children."

—*S.T. School A (secondary)*

Then there are also general educational benefits from engaging in democratic dialogue, which can be seen as enriching and reinforcing the mainstream curriculum, providing opportunities to develop skills which have a spin-off in class.

"...the point is that if you don't engage them [in consultation], when you get to the stage where you *want* to engage them, like in English and other subjects such as languages – you want them to speak out and become good orators and you want discourse on things – they can't do it."

—*S.T. School C (secondary)*

And later in the interview, this teacher elaborated a broader statement of the benefits of being socially pro-active in terms of greater self-esteem, a greater sense of involvement in school life which in turn results in a more positive attitude to learning:

"I think they engage more and they

become better students, better learners and therefore they end up with better results."

—*S.T. School C (secondary)*

Trafford (ibid.) makes a similar point in his analysis of the effects of an authoritarian school atmosphere on student motivation and learning. During the process of "democratisation", he claims that the very process of consulting and "giving power" to students has an automatic effect on teaching styles and on the whole atmosphere of the school. In making more demands on students, they themselves were becoming more independent and empowered and more responsive to the choices being offered them. In Trafford's view, the passive learning style, which was part and parcel of the top down paternalism of his school, seriously undermined students' motivation to accept responsibility for their own learning, particularly in the upper school. Since he began the process of consulting students more, A level results have steadily increased and Trafford makes the claim that these two things are causally linked.

Student interviews also provided evidence that involvement in council business gave them valuable insights into the economics of running the school and the difficulties of management:

"...if someone says, you know, we need something new in this school, then he [the head] will always say, "Well, we haven't got enough money for this and so I think that it is a bit unfair to say about that because a lot of the time he doesn't have the money and so we can't get everything that we want. So we have to take that into mind."

—*Student, School G, Y6*

In another school, a student told me of an important political message she had learnt:

"That it's quite hard to get things across to the teachers and you have to really push at it if you want things done."

—*Student, School B, Y 12*

For more than one student, another valuable lesson concerned the importance of working effectively in a team:

"The fact that we often take for granted institutions in our society, we think everything just works in harmony. In fact getting together 12–14 people to sit down at the same time, have something to discuss, have people who fill all the supposed roles, is very difficult. And actually communication is vital."

—*Student, School B, Y12*

Several other student councillors mentioned the personal satisfaction they obtained from being able to have their say and, to some extent, to be more "in the know" than other students. The privileged status associated with being a councillor can boost the confidence and self esteem of pupils. In two schools, councillors were involved with plans to introduce mediation schemes and were doubtless gaining very valuable interpersonal skills in the process. And for other students there were other, more overtly instrumental benefits to be had:

"There are two reasons why I initially joined [the council]. One, because I like to have a say in things that go on, and I wanted to see things happen. I wanted to see changes in the school and I suppose that's selfish but it's also I think that I don't want to see everyone

getting a raw deal. ..But also I think what is selfish, I can put it on my UCAS form and it was very helpful and got me five offers from university. And it looked good and it meant that I have a chance to go into the student union with some experience."

*Interviewer:* "Did you think of that when you stood first of all, though?"

*Student:* "Yes, I'll have to admit it was a very important criteria and I joined the Social Committee for the same reason, because I wanted to put it on my CV – that I have actually done it and it's shown that I've been involved in team work."

*Interviewer:* "Would you do it again, even without the UCAS benefit?"

*Student:* "If I had the time, maybe yes, because I would like to see things happen."

In addition to the educational benefits and the social skills which students acquire via participation, it should not be forgotten that other students benefit as a result of the council attending to their needs. In one school, for example, the student council installed a Bully Box in the library, by means of which individual students or their friends could lodge anonymous complaints. The councillors delegated members to look into such issues and no doubt some good has been achieved as a result.

So there is considerable agreement that the existence of a school council can mean that students who become involved are likely to benefit not simply in terms of social skills but also in their knowledge and understanding of institutional processes and political *nous*.

Furthermore, claims have been made that there is a spin-off as far as overall academic progress is concerned. Such claims are much harder to substantiate but they seem to be based on the belief that an improvement in student motivation to learn can be brought about by the fact that the "system" as a whole becomes less authoritarian or paternalistic as a result of "consultation" and more flexible and responsive to student needs. Students themselves become less reliant on the staff and more willing to take responsibility for their own progress.

### **Benefits to the student body as a whole**

There is certainly a good deal of evidence that student councils can achieve improvements in conditions for students as a result of the process of representing students' grievances. Improvements to the toilets, obtaining new, secure lockers, instituting a tuck shop, revision of school uniform, and gaining access to school buildings at lunch times were among many examples of success recounted to me. A fuller list is provided in chapter 4. There is little in the list which could not have been achieved by alternative means but it does seem fair to claim, as Ashworth (*ibid.*) does, that the very presence of a school council greatly facilitates the process of bringing such problems to light. Many of them are minor issues, of course, and many students feel that councils spend too high a proportion of their time addressing such low-level student welfare issues.

This is not to say they should not be addressed – decent toilets, bullying in the dinner queue, the prices of school food and school transport arrangements are all of importance to the quality of the overall school experience. Arguably some kind of

arrangement to review such matters routinely is the most effective way to identify and remedy them. Not having a council with such a brief seems to put a considerable onus on individual students to raise matters of this kind. Presumably also, the presence of a council benefits the student body by filtering out frivolous complaints whilst acting as an “amplifier” for more serious ones.

### **School councils benefit the ethos of the school**

In addition to benefits to the students body, several of my interviewees mentioned that healthy consultative procedures contribute much to the overall atmosphere of the school, affecting the quality of relationships between pupils, staff and others adults.

“... it will improve the ethos of the school generally if the children aren't seeing it as just a place where they are given orders.”

—*H.T. School G (junior)*

And another head put it this way:

“I would like everybody in it, staff and students, to have (and parents to have) the confidence for it to be more open so that people won't be afraid of criticism. Where the students felt able to make suggestions and expected to be asked for suggestions about things – where there was that sort of climate.”

—*H.T. School C (secondary)*

In such a climate, conflict can be replaced by cooperation and partnership which is widely felt to be beneficial to all parties if it can be achieved. However, the last speaker acknowledged that the partnership of the school is an unequal one and that the

idealised picture of the school, where teachers and taught always cooperate to mutual advantage, is not necessarily the daily reality for teachers struggling to maintain discipline. Not all staff will be convinced that there is more to be gained than lost through dialogue.

“I would be trying to say [to the staff] actually this is very empowering to the school for the staff and students to be able to talk about what the students have said about something. [It will] give you the kind of information to help you work better in your work as a teacher.... But somehow, I think it feels fairly challenging professionally. I think you have to be fairly secure in your professional understanding of yourself and so on to bite that level of criticism that I've just mentioned. And I think that people aren't always confident of that at school level. It's not normal given practice is it, to go out and say, “tell me what you think is wrong with me.”

—*H.T. School C (secondary)*

Students also felt that schools work better when there are shared corporate attitudes. Even some of the top juniors I spoke with were convinced of this.

*Interviewer:* “Why should children have a say in what goes on in schools?”

*Student:* “Because otherwise they are not going to... the children are probably more willing to do the work when they actually get a choice and more willing to sort of like, make it a better sort of school. They, sort of like, prefer that.”

—*Student, School G, Y6*

Creation of a good whole school ethos was frequently referred to as a major benefit of consulting students. For example, the poor behaviour of a troublesome minority of students can be tackled more effectively if students and teachers work together to generate positive peer pressure against the spoilers. Where staff and students are not in dialogue, then the burden of control rests more on the shoulders of staff and the potential power of student opinion is not harnessed as it might be. The view was commonly expressed to me – indeed, it seems to have become an orthodoxy – that discussion of school rules with students brings positive results for the vast majority of students and the school as a community. Not only will they know what the rules are, they will have contributed to their formulation and will feel a greater sense of ownership of them. School councils are certainly a possible vehicle for such discussions, although, as we shall see, heads often by-pass the council on issues of this kind in order to involve all members of the school. Whether this is the best way to proceed is a question we shall return to.

### **Benefits to the staff**

Although school councils are generally thought of as being established for the benefit of students, there were several examples in the interview data, where they were seen as ways of making the task of management easier or more effective. In one school, the head made the very important point that management decisions can be improved as a result of the extra input of information from students:

“The latest example is that they asked if the next fire drill we have could be done without the prior knowledge of

staff. Normally staff are told in advance so their first reaction when the bell goes is that it’s a false alarm. We agreed with that and we are due to have one tomorrow morning without staff knowing in advance.”

–*H.T. School D (secondary)*

Another advantage of councils can be to provide a channel of communication concerning management decisions which can assist in reducing misunderstanding and possible resentment. For example, one senior teacher felt it was important that students:

“...fully understand the importance of school uniform in the eyes of the community, in the eyes of parents, in the eyes of bus people, in the eyes of shopkeepers and therefore they understand why we still maintain it.”

–*S.T. School A (secondary)*

And in the same school, faced with a difficult choice of spending priorities, this senior teacher recognised the value of consulting students fully on the stark choices, again not simply so that they could assist with the choice of what to forego, but to reduce the possible criticism that staff are not heeding students’ requests or suggestions:

“The other area that I would like to consult them about – the perennial problem in schools – the toilets are a disgrace. I would like to involve them as to why they are a disgrace, what could we do, how much would it cost. Should that, for instance, take priority over providing what has just been requested and that’s new kit for the year 10 football team. [...] It’s unfortunate that in these last three weeks we’ve had some particularly bad graffiti.

It needs cleaning off. The graffiti gobbler as its called is incredibly expensive. If we buy that we have no money left to furnish the [students'] social area. So I think we need to go to them with the choices."

—S.T. School A (secondary)

In the above quotation, there seems to be more than the spending issue. There is a hint that if only students properly understood the consequences of the bad graffiti in the toilets, then perhaps the students as a whole might rise up in protest against something that staff on their own feel unable to tackle. This was not the only school in which the staff felt that the best means of solving the problem of the toilets was, in effect, to delegate it to the students themselves:

*H.T.*: "One of my goals with the student council is to give them a budget, which would be substantial enough to completely refurbish one set of toilets a year, but from which would be deducted all damage."

*Interviewer*: "Have you done that?"

*H.T.*: "Well, if it weren't for the budget cuts it would have happened for the first time this year[...] But that seems to me to be a good mechanism, so I would have presented monthly the bill for any damage that had been done, in the hope that they would be going round saying, 'look we can do another one next year but only if we have no damage done'."

*Interviewer*: "So there's a philosophy of encouraging corporate responsibility."

*H.T.*: "Yes, and some peer pressure."  
—H.T. School B, (secondary)

And this understanding that the efforts of pupils can be harnessed to assist the senior staff in managing the school was also to be found in primary schools. As this head succinctly put it:

"And [...] it is sometimes more efficient in solving a problem to give it to them."

—H.T. School G (junior)

One useful example from this school concerned an area of school life which probably features a little more prominently than in secondary schools – conflicts between pupils over the use of playground space. One option open to the staff is to impose a solution but the experiences of the students in this school show how much more beneficial and probably lasting can be a solution worked on by the students themselves. The girls had been in dispute with the boys about use of the playground area. A system had been introduced whereby there were netball days and football days but the girls were not utilising the space on their days as much as the boys thought they should. The matter was raised with the head at the reps' meeting and, following that, in class.

*Student 1*: "And there was a really big discussion ... and everybody in our class actually said something because they all had different viewpoints."

*Student 2*: "When it rained on a netball day the netballists don't play netball because they get their hands mucky but the footballers were still keen to play."

*Interviewer*: "And how was it resolved?"

*Student 1*: "The netballists said, "We do play on there" and they completely denied that they don't play on it and in

the end they just said, "We're going to have it as normal because it isn't fair on the netballists if you like have football every day. And people also said that boys can actually play with the netballists and we think that the girls should play with the footballists as well, so both boys and girls get to play a game every day."

*Interviewer:* "Were the boys satisfied with that, after they had had a discussion, do you think?"

*Student 1:* "I think so. because it had actually been discussed and they had got their say, so it felt that, even though they hadn't actually won the discussion as such, they did get their say and it was actually brought up."

—*Students, School G Y6*

The benefits of having a school council, then, appear to be many and not merely in the direction of students. If councils work well, they have the potential to address a very wide range of issues and can make a positive contribution to an inclusive school ethos based on respect for all its members. However, it also has to be said, from the evidence gathered during my enquiries, that councils seem to be difficult to operate well and so often seem to wither on the vine. If the benefits as listed above are really so numerous, it is a little surprising that this is allowed to happen.

Is it because councils are structurally prone to failure or is it perhaps that, although teachers may claim to support the idea of strong and effective school councils, they do not believe in them enough to provide the kind of support they really need? This problem is considered in the following chapter.



# Chapter 4

## The Structure and Functioning of Councils

### Structure

Most councils in secondary schools have a structure similar to that described by Ashworth (*ibid.*), and School Councils UK (SCUK, *ibid.*), although there are variations to the model. Standard practice is for each form group to elect two students, one boy and one girl, to attend the year council and from this two students are elected to the whole school council. This arrangement gives the school council a membership of some 10-14 students, depending on whether years 12 and 13 are members. In two of the schools I visited, years 12 and 13 had separate councils. Some schools have no year council structure, students being elected direct to the whole school council whilst others have year councils but no whole school council, though this particular variation was not operating in any school I visited. Typically, the councils meet every month or half term, although it may be more often than this. Some school councils have sub-committees, as recommended by SCUK, though this is more demanding operationally particularly when the total number of councillors is small.

The structure chosen for a council should be seen as reflecting the way it is expected to function. There is, of course, a significant amount of business which is year-related and need not come to a whole council – such as the state of a year group’s toilets or the organisation of its homework timetable. On the other hand, it might be beneficial to deal with such matters by means of sub-committees of the main council such that

the business of the toilets comes first to the student welfare sub-committee and the homework timetable comes before a curriculum sub-committee. The latter approach may have the benefit of allowing a specialist committee to develop an overview of certain types of issue which could not emerge if they remained privy to each year. All the toilets in the school might be in need of attention, but not in as urgent need as something else. Problems of this kind are regularly subject to prioritisation because of limited resources and students can usefully become involved in feeding back to staff where they feel the available money should be spent.

There seem to be advantages in the “main council with sub-committee” structure. The first would be that there is a steady flow of business to be attended to, making regular meetings meaningful. The second would be that year councillors are able to give each other support across year groups and, further, that year groups with less accommodating or sympathetic year heads may be more able to have their problems discussed than if they had to take them direct to their head of year.

In my discussions with both staff and students, there were frequent references to the structure and functioning of councils and the difficulties of getting these right. Several references were made to the effect that councils had “not been running all that smoothly lately”, though it was not always easy to see why not. It seems to me that

decisions concerning the optimum size of the council, and of how business is dealt with, including the formation of the agenda, can be crucial.

What is the optimum size for a council to be? It was once said to me by the head of a large comprehensive school (not in the study) that he was not in favour of a whole school council because of the size factor. In a school with 10 classes per year group, assuming one councillor per class, there could be 70 members in all. Not only could this be very daunting for many councillors, meetings could become very lengthy and this, in turn, makes their timing difficult. Council meetings are generally held either in the lunch hour or a form period (after school meetings are not possible in many schools) and therefore there are strict limits to the time available. It would seem that the typical model of the whole school council (ie two councillors from each year group making a total council of around fourteen students) may be the result of this kind of organisational difficulty. However, I was struck by the fact that the council which seemed to be functioning in the most healthy way, with four active sub-committees and the whole council meeting every two or three weeks was the council where membership was highest in number (upwards of 20 councillors). It is barely possible for a council of fourteen students to divide into sub-committees, without placing an unacceptable burden on the students. Where there are no sub-committees carrying forward the council's work between meetings, it must surely mean that meetings become rather isolated and disconnected events, occurring, perhaps, only once a term. It is not too surprising that councils fail to function well where they meet so rarely, where councillors have few opportunities to work together as a team, where momentum

is hard to generate and visible achievements are few and far between.

One senior teacher (in a medium sized 11-16 school) was grappling with this very problem. In this case, the option being considered was the appointment of councillors from every class direct to the school council, obviating the need for year councils which were not proving successful due to what he described as the "disenchantment" of year heads:

"I think we have two options. We either run the school council as 10 people, just two from each year or we run it as 20 odd people – no, 30 people.... I'd rather have it with every class being represented once a month."  
—S.T. School C, (secondary)

He felt this would avoid an over-bureaucratic system, with minutes being referred between year and school councils in an unnecessarily fragmented way. One advantage of setting up a council with perhaps thirty or more councillors, would be that more students from each year group could be involved, which would probably reduce the apparent isolation that councillors reported feeling. Several times during my interviews, student councillors admitted not having been recently to a meeting and not knowing when the next one would be held:

*Student 1:*  
"Teachers do not read it out. I mean I've only ever received – I received the one for this meeting – but I've only ever received about three of them."

*Interviewer:*  
"Which are what?"

*Student 2:*

"Notices saying there's a student council meeting in SAVE [ie PSE] or whatever it is, and unless we receive these, then you don't know and you can't obviously blame it on them because they've got a lot to do and things but the teachers don't read out messages like that. They think "it's not important" and just forget it."

—*Students, School B, Y9*

In this state of affairs, it is easy for the interest and involvement of young people to become dissipated.

It is very common for form representatives not to be given sufficient opportunity to report back following council meetings even where the councillors are members of that form. I also found quite frequent reference by students to the fact that form tutors were either unaware of the need for council business to be discussed or seemed to give this a low priority. In the following extract, the speaker, a tutor, describes how he rarely knew what was going on in council and relied on students to take the initiative:

"I mean, I've been a form tutor for nearly all the time I've been here and it has varied very much how much contact there has been. I remember a form I had who I was close to and they had as a representative, a girl called Melanie. She was elected as a representative when she was 13 and she remained a rep all the time they were here. Melanie would come back from the School Parliament and say to me, "Can I talk to the group?" and I would say, "Yes". So she would ... stand up in front of them, she had an enormous personality, and say, "Right, be quiet, I want to talk to you" and I would then sit down and that was how I found out about what

went on at School Parliament meetings, just the same as the young people in the class."

*Interviewer:* "And now there's nothing like that."

*S.T.:* "No, and I don't know how many forms, even lower down the school, work that way. Melanie always did. I'm not sure that many forms actually work that way."

—*S.T. School H (secondary)*

There seemed a certain ambivalence on the part of this teacher towards the school council. Indeed, elsewhere he says he prefers the "direct representation" approach as head of sixth form. Notwithstanding the difficulties associated with larger councils, an obvious advantage of having every form represented on the whole school council is that communication in both directions should be that much easier than it is when there are only two representatives per year group. I found that poor feedback from councils is a common difficulty undermining the effectiveness and credibility of the council in the eyes of student body.

Not infrequently, poor feedback from the council means that students are unaware of the council's on-going business and equally oblivious to its successes, further undermining its status and demoralising the hard-working councillors.

*Interviewer:* "Would you be sorry if they said...we've decided that the school Parliament isn't really getting things decided, people tend to be going to a member of staff directly, so we've decided to stop it now. Do you think people would be hurt by it?"

*Student 1:* "To be honest, I don't think people would notice, because one of the major things we did last year was, there were some toilets which were in a terrible state, and the parliament had built up a certain amount of money and we recommended that they should be repainted. Parliament actually paid for the toilets to be repainted and then I actually heard from someone else that people were saying it was the school painting the toilets at last. So we were actually doing things but whether the parliament gets the credit that it deserves is not really in the children's minds."

*Student 2:* "Basically, ninety per cent of the school isn't really bothered about the school Parliament. To be really honest it doesn't have that high a status at all, does it? [...] It's just "Right, who wants to be on Parliament?" "Oh, all right, I'll do it" and the other pupils see that as someone from their form disappearing for four periods once every three months or something...It's not got a high enough profile with the pupils or with the teachers for that matter."

—*Students, School H, Y12*

And from another school, a strikingly similar tale of students' failure to recognise the council's achievements. No wonder there is a sense of frustration in the following quotation, though this student does provide us with some indication as to why feedback from council is often handled carefully.

"Well, we don't actually tell anybody until everything's been confirmed, because we don't want to go and say "Right we're re-doing all the toilets or something...that's going to get their

hopes up, maybe saying we're abolishing school uniform. I mean I know it wouldn't happen but if you went out and said that and everybody started talking about it and that, and then it never happened, you know, they'd think the student council was a bit of a waste of time. So, until it's been confirmed, nothing is really said. I mean, you'll say to people if they come and ask. [...] I don't know there's a bit of a communication problem, really. Nobody really sort of notices what happens, they just take it for granted. Like, we've got outside tuck shed again, but nobody thought "That's the work of the student council". They just thought "The tuck shop's open again". It was just sort of taken for granted. [...] Like several people have said, "What do you do at meetings?" Do you just sit and talk, or do you work with money, or look at budgets and things?" and I say, "Yes, we've done this and this" and they say, "Well, we didn't know that"."

—*Student, School B Y10*

In this school, where two representative per year attend the council, no mechanism was in place to ensure that forms with no reps in them could hear about current council business.

*Interviewer:* "How do they get feedback after a meeting?"

*S.T.:* "I suppose they talk to their own individual form group about it. That would be the only answer at the moment. Really the rest of the year group aren't *au fait* with what the council are doing."

*Interviewer:* "So they might not hear? [...] What would be the best way

then,... of getting the right amount of feedback back from the monthly school council?"

*S.T.*: "Well probably either through assemblies, and get them to stand up in Year Assembly every so often and give feedback to the whole year group on what the council generally does. That would probably be the best way, or to put something in the registers or on our daily bulletin that tutors can read out. But 10 to 1 tutors are quite busy with lots of other things and they don't always promote it as they should. [...] We started off doing it quite well but then other things superceded. You know, we had exams and all sorts of things."

—*S.T. School B (secondary)*

So student councils seem often to be trapped in a downward spiral of low status, poor support from staff and students, few achievements, little credit, low profile and further diminishing status. In this kind of situation, students would need a very high level of personal commitment not to become dispirited.

Partly in order to empower their councils and generate a greater sense of achievement, some heads have delegated a small budget to the council. We have already noted, in chapter 3, how one head had hoped to delegate a sum of money large enough to refurbish one toilet per year and I encountered this idea elsewhere. Other ideas in this vein are that councils can be allocated any money they manage to save through anti-vandalism measures, a device again designed to exert peer pressure against the minority. In another school, the head, one year, committed £50 to each year group for the improvement of the area immediately

outside its block, although he had forgotten to do the same the following year, despite his good intentions. In the same school I learned that, whilst not delegating a sum of money, the deputy head was hoping to consult the students closely on how it should be spent, so that they would appreciate what had been done rather more than they had previously, when they had been less involved:

"I have suggested already – the head and I have discussed it – that I allocate money. As I mentioned we did do this once before and the furniture was vandalised but I had asked the staff at that point to suggest what should happen to these areas. I have now discussed with the head that we go to the school council and say we are able to spend £800 – you tell us what you would like it spent on for these areas, so that they can choose and I think that is the best way forward because I don't think as teachers and staff that we very often choose the things that they would, so I am hoping that we will get a better feeling about it – more ownership."

—*S.T. School A (secondary)*

However, despite such efforts, it is clearly difficult to overcome all the other factors which militate against the effective running of school councils. One striking fact to arise from my interviews was the number of references to council "failures". School councils do seem to be fragile creations, often in poor health, suffering frequent breakdowns, and sometimes premature death. Why should this be?

"When I first came here ten years ago there was a student council ... It only lasted 18 months before it disinte-

grated and I could see why. Many people who were elected to it, didn't turn up to it. That, and a number of pupils who had little to contribute intellectually or in ideas."

—*S.T. School D, (secondary)*

Also contributing to this inherent fragility are problems associated with the cyclical nature of school life arising from the fact that every year the council has to be re-created and is very dependent on the qualities and characters of the councillors in any one year:

"To tell the truth I reckon that the first two student councils were really good, the third one was argumentative, with tremendous inter-personal differences between the student councillors themselves. Last year's was full of brilliant kids but it was a very poor student council. They never ever seemed to be able to get anything organised – charming and polite, but little was done. This year is quite different."

—*S.T. School D, (secondary)*

An additional problem is that at the end of every year a considerable amount of expertise is lost as senior or experienced councillors leave and new ones join, leaving positions of responsibility in inexperienced and possibly less willing hands.

"As I have said, I have attempted ...to get them to elect their own chairperson. That worked last year for the first time, but then the boy elected moved on to the sixth form and so that's fallen by the way, and we discussed that again and nobody's willing to pick it up."

—*H.T. School H, (secondary)*

And from a third school, a neat picture of the ups and downs of councils life as seen by the long-suffering link member of staff:

"What was happening was that the year councils weren't meeting and the school council ... wasn't going very democratically or participatively ... so it kind of went downhill a bit. So this year we're trying to make it more high profile and build it up to be more participatory and get the students involved more. The students, even two years ago, were coming to staff meetings from the school council but it tended to fall away."

—*S.T. School C (secondary)*

Not only are the council structures influenced by the yearly cycle of school life, but the agenda can also be "cyclical", insofar as issues dealt with by the council one year, may well re-emerge one or two years later, as if the earlier discussions had not taken place – hence the constant re-visiting of issues like school uniform. This in itself is likely to generate frustration amongst regular councillors and with staff who have worked with the council over a number of years.

However, contrary to this cyclical view of things, I was also struck by the fact that several members of staff spoke to me in optimistic terms about the future of their council, as if there were likely to be steady year-on-year improvements. This idealism was noteworthy not least because of the lack of fit with the picture just outlined. Part of this feeling of optimism seems to be associated with the idea that experiments in different formats will lead eventually to discovery of "the right formula" and when this happens, all will at last be well:

“We’re still experimenting and I have a feeling that – I think that the structure we’ve got now will work, with me calling the meetings, probably chairing them and rotating them through the week. Now, that isn’t the pure model I really wanted, which was the students running it, with us attending.”

*S.T.*: “But I think that will come ultimately once we, perhaps—”

*H.T.*: “It may, when these first years are in the sixth form perhaps, if it’s the same people, perhaps they’ll have learned and acquired all the skills.”

—*H.T. School B, (secondary)*

And from another school, a senior teacher looked forward to engaging the council in a progressively wider range of issues.

“I think there are areas that could be opened up more to them and I do see it. I’m happy with what we have but I don’t see it as finished. I see it as progressive. I would like them to be more involved.”

—*S.T. School A, (secondary)*

And from another teacher, came an embryonic 5 year plan:

*S.T.*: “Then I took it on and I realised I wanted it to be something slightly different. I wanted the students to have slightly more control over it and take charge of it slightly more, participate more and get more action and be more active.”

*Interviewer*: “And has that happened this year?”

*S.T.*: “It’s started to happen. ... We’re on the way, but I look at it now as a kind of 3 or 4 year process – to perhaps eventually students participating in more meetings in the school that they haven’t yet been invited to, as representatives of the students.”

*Interviewer*: “Such as...?”

*S.T.*: “Governors, maybe even senior management ... I mean I wouldn’t suggest that as next week’s aim but you’re saying in about 4 or 5 years time.”

—*S.T. School C (secondary)*

In one sense, this progressive model is realistic and important, particularly where there is strong and continuous staff support. Lessons *can* be learned year on year, but the interview evidence suggests that many teachers and councillors underestimate the vulnerability of their councils. Greater recognition of the tendency to flourish and then fail, or to go through an annual cycle, could alert staff to be more supportive at the beginning of each year during the induction period for new councillors. It could also help to prevent the onset of weary cynicism when a council re-opens discussion on matters successfully dealt with in earlier years. It may even guard against over-optimism that in a year or two the ideal participative structures will be in place in perpetuity and a new age of mature student democracy will at last be ushered in.

### **The role of councillors**

Form representatives generally stand for election for a year. Voting is sometimes preceded by a hustings in which candidates

make speeches and present “manifestos”. This model might appear almost over-elaborate given the often modest level of council activity but it is clearly modelled on the “democratic learning” model and there is obvious value in assessing potential councillors on their ability to argue a case in public.

Some schools, as noted earlier, deliberately foster a council ethic based on the idea of *service* in preference to *democratic representation* but in practice the democratic model is also likely to embody values of public service. What is important is that students understand what they are likely to be asked to do before standing. The way we frame a particular role (even the title we give it) can have a powerful influence on the way it comes to be interpreted. By this I mean that student councillors may well have a minimal view of what being a councillor entails, (i.e. they will act as a mouthpiece for the members of the form and an information conduit between the form and the council), unless a broader, more service-oriented role is spelt out. Schools perhaps need to ask themselves whether they wish explicitly to encourage councillors to see themselves in this wider kind of role, as the following senior teacher did in his school where council membership is restricted to Year 11 and there are no elections:

“I felt the emphasis had to be on service to the school. It had to attract kids who saw the school as something they could improve and want to serve. [...] It was to be a body for improving our school and contributing to its welfare and making it a better place to be. I was very clear about these terms and if anybody had other ideas that would have been unacceptable to me and I would have let someone else do

it in a different way. But I had no trouble attracting the students on that basis – the basis of service. What we then decided to do – to focus that a little bit more was to divide the student council into committees. So we had a charities committee which focused on charitable issues – because the school traditionally has collected a lot of money for certain charities – and we thought that the student council could act as a focus for certain charities. There was a committee that would produce a magazine of some sorts and the only ground rules were that it should be offensive to no-one and would not shame the school. We had a third committee called the environment committee which would look at the buildings and the grounds of the school and see ways of improving them. Over the years, a fourth committee emerged, which was a student welfare committee. The committee structure immediately had a purpose and we had about 20 children who wanted to take part. They very quickly and quite happily nominated themselves to contribute on one of these committees on the basis that they couldn’t contribute to more than one.... We met once every fortnight in a general student council, talking about issues and we immediately had an agenda because part of the agenda was reports from various committees. Particularly in the first two years it was marvellous.”

*Interviewer:* Let me clarify. The membership of the council was on a voluntary basis. You said, “If you would like to serve, be there”.

*S.T:* “Absolutely, and that is the basis on



which it works today. There is no election and everyone in year 11 is entitled to be a member.”

*Interviewer:* “What percentage of pupils avail themselves of this opportunity?”

*S.T.:* “What happens is you get an initial subscription. In a year of about 100-110, I would expect about 20-25 to enrol. In the first few weeks about half a dozen drop out – almost immediately. Then I get an intake of kids who did not initially show an interest but join later.”

–S.T. School D, (secondary)

In the same school, year 11 students may also volunteer to be prefects on the same basis. They all have the right to be prefects unless they have shown themselves to be incapable of holding this responsibility. One strength of this service model, it seems to me, relates to students’ expectations when they join the council. Students attend the council knowing that what will be expected is far more than attending one meeting during lesson time per half term. This may also be a way of discouraging those who frivolously stand for election on the popularity vote, a problem I noted in more than one school.

This service oriented model has the obvious strength of being able to recruit a good number of senior students, willing to make a contribution and who can do so with friends who also attend. This undoubtedly overcomes some of the problems of isolation which councillors can encounter when there are just two from any one year group. However, critics of this approach could well argue that it denies representation to stu-

dents in the lower years or that it fails to provide opportunities for younger students to engage in discussion of council business or to serve the school in other ways. Another problem could be that it expects council members to take on too much. One way the role of councillor might be extended, as it was in the school just described, is through involvement in mediation and anti-bullying initiatives. This was not the only school in which this particular extension of the councillor’s role was under consideration:

“We wanted to run a project on mediation in the school and we went to the school council and said “Right, what do you think?”. Talked to them about it and brought a consultant in who spent time with them. ... They liked it and the ones who were old enough to do it, (because we had to have years 9 and 10 who were going to do it), said that they didn’t want to do it themselves but they thought it would be good for the school.”

–S.T. School C (secondary)

If not actually taking on this extra role themselves, the school councillors were an obvious group to consult on this suggested innovation. It seems to me that this was a very constructive example of two-way dialogue between senior management and the student body.

### **Agenda formation**

Perhaps the biggest cause of frustration and disillusionment with school councils arises from the experience of discovering how hard it is to raise the level of discussion above the banal or the trivial:

“My first experience of student councils was at a boys’ grammar school – a sixth form council – and these were highly intelligent kids, and the debate was about whether or not they could have a dart board in their common room and the answer from the sixth form tutor was always no. There were long wrangles as to why and after 18 months of this argument a dart board was provided only to be taken away three months later because of damage. The triviality of that kind of thing made it seem utterly pointless and the kids themselves voted with their feet and didn’t turn up to meetings because they were a waste of time. Nothing worthwhile could be discussed – the parameters were so limited.”

–*H.T. School D (secondary)*

Schools need to give very careful consideration to the matter of what business is to come within the remit of the council and then to consider what structures can best bring this about. One of the most striking findings arising from my interviews is the repeated sense of disappointment, particularly amongst senior students, that their initial high hopes of discussing important issues had not been fulfilled. There may be a number of reasons for this but I gained a strong impression that councils can easily become doomed to the trivial because, structurally, they have few ways of bringing genuinely important issues to the agenda. In many schools, agenda items are generated

largely by councillors themselves or suggested by pupils in their forms. Some student councillors doubtless exercise judgement about which items to raise but others I spoke to saw it as their duty to bring up whatever they were asked to:

*Student 1:* “At playtime they sort of come to me or [girl’s name] and they say what they’d like us to say, or in a class thing they like to come to us and say, and then when we go to the rep meeting we try to remember and try to say as much as possible.”

*Student 2:* “Sometimes we don’t actually agree with what the people have said but we – still it is our duty to pass it on.”

–*Students School G, (junior) Y6*

This is not of course, a black and white issue and even where the dominant model of agenda formation is bottom up, important items do emerge from student concerns:

“Post Dearing [the Dearing review to slim down the National Curriculum], for instance, we now have got a little bit of time for options in years 10 and 11 so last year was the first time since National Curriculum that we had options and at the last meeting the year 10 reps, very sensibly and in a very mature fashion, brought up that, although they were grateful for the options, they would actually like more practical subjects in the options. I wouldn’t have known that without the council and I thought the way they did it was very sensible and very mature and well thought out so that’s moving me on this afternoon in a meeting I have with all the heads of faculty to reconsider

the content of the choice columns and I'm quite pleased with that."

*Interviewer:* "Did they raise that or did you raise it?"

*S.T.:* "They raised it."

*Interviewer:* "Do you think that otherwise it might not have occurred to you to bring that up and consult them?"

*S.T.:* "No, it wouldn't have occurred to me because I had not heard either on the grapevine or officially from children or staff that there was any discontent with the option columns so I was continuing quite happily along my way thinking that all was well with the world."

—*S.T. School A, (secondary)*

Incidents like this are rarer than they should be, I suspect. Not all students are equally confident at questioning major aspects of the way school is run, and the mechanisms should not require exceptional students to work them effectively. It seems that staff need to be prepared to bring matters to the council as well as students if the level of engagement is to be as high as it could be:

*Interviewer:* "Can you think of any examples where, rather than allowing pupils to bring things to the council, the council might be used for consultation in a pro-active way, from the point of view of the staff?"

*S.T.:* "It hasn't been used in a pro-active way. I am beginning to think that perhaps it ought to."

—*S.T., School A, (secondary)*

Students obviously do have a significant contribution to make concerning curricular matters, though, as has been noted, this seems to happen, relatively rarely. Feedback from students on levels of satisfaction with courses, especially those developed by the school itself can be invaluable and should not be perceived as a threat. This is particularly important because where courses are designed to look at social problems, such as drug abuse, students are often more knowledgeable about their needs than teachers. Two senior students put it to me like this:

*Student 1:* "Well, we've recently had... a letter sent home about drugs awareness. You just had to get your parents to sign it to say that they'd read it. It wasn't giving any particular information at all, it was saying about drugs awareness week and all this and I think it was a pretty feeble effort really, considering. A waste of paper, when they're complaining about lack of resources and they waste it on that. I mean parents aren't going to know, a lot of the time, whether the kids are doing drugs or not. It's other kids who are going to know, so they've got to tackle the kids themselves, not send letters through them to their parents."

*Interviewer:* "Right, so you feel that was a way you could help the teachers tackle that better – if the teachers engaged constructively with you, the students, in that kind of issue."

*Student 2:* "That's what the student council, I think, is all about. We're not here just to, say, improve the toilets – you know, paint a classroom – but actually here to give our opinions on what happens with us. Drugs is our

generation's problem. We are the ones who actually know about the problem, the good, the bad effects, it's not the teachers, because it's not their generation. [...] I mean, it affects, like, nearly 1300 pupils here and it is such a big issue, I don't want to say problem, for our age. We once had, when I was in the fourth or fifth year, this bloke from the police come in and talk to us, and afterwards, I laughed. He came in and said, "Right, if you do this, you do that, you're going to go to prison" and it was the wrong approach completely. O.K., he was quite informative, but he was so – I don't know what the right word is—"

*Student 1: "Pompous."*

*Student 2: "Yeah, pompous. He just came in and told us what we should and shouldn't do. "You're going to be strip searched and all your money will be taken away." And that is completely what you do not want. What you want is someone, maybe ex-addicts, people from counselling units, to come in and talk to us about being realistic. Ex-addicts is quite a good way, because they're people who've been there, done that and actually know what they're talking about, not policemen. As he said, he'd never touched a drug in the whole of his life. Well, I'm sorry mate, you don't know what you're talking about, then."*

*—Students, School B, Y13*

And the same students had equally clear views about the school's programme of sex education:

*Student 1: "O.K., we're supposed to be working to educate people to get*

*jobs but we need to actually look at issues that concern everyone. I mean, again, it's a life or death situation, in many cases – you don't just need to know about sex, you need to know about STDs, about certain things and people are so ignorant... We have the insight that we've been all the way through the school, we're a bit older, we're nearly 19."*

*Student 2: "It seems to me that the parents think that it's the school's responsibility and, in many cases, the school thinks it's the parents' responsibility. So the kids aren't being taught in a way it should be taught."*

*—Students, School B, Y13*

I have quoted extensively from this interview to illustrate not only the strength of the students' feelings but also the quality of their contribution. Their concerns are realistic, well articulated and mature and yet, sadly, they feel disregarded and ignored. To my mind, this illustrates the importance of talking regularly with students about the quality of the curriculum on offer, particularly where it is the students themselves who are in a position to say whether it is actually meeting their needs or adopting a credible approach. There might be a strong case for a curriculum sub-committee to include students and staff, which could regularly take soundings as to the extent of student satisfaction with their courses and the way they are delivered.

So far, this chapter has touched on a number of aspects of the structure and function of school councils, many of which can give rise to students disillusionment, frustration or cynicism. The view was advanced to me by more than one teacher that this is a major argument against school councils. Some heads I spoke to recognised that the estab-

ishment of a school council could quite easily create expectations which cannot be met. Unfortunately, if too many student proposals or requests are rejected, then almost inevitably the result will be frustration. In the following extract, one head describes the kind of unproductive cycle of events which can bring the whole process into disrepute:

*Interviewer:* "So this school tie discussion takes place practically annually does it?"

*H.T.:* "Yes."

*Interviewer:* "And what's normally the outcome of that?"

*H.T.:* "Nothing!"

—*H.T. School H (secondary)*

Teachers are, obviously, aware that many matters which are brought up at the school council achieve little or nothing for students. Is this fair on the students, or is there a better way to deal with these matters? One response to this critique is that however unsuccessful a council may be in bringing about change, it is all a valuable learning experience. Life is full of disappointments and indeed, a fundamental aspect of working for democratic change is that citizens must learn to live with disappointment and accept defeat gracefully:

"I see it as a process of preparing them for a society which has got systems and the frustrations that systems bring and to try to get some thinking about how you can operate to get what you want, when a system is saying something different."

—*H.T. School H, (secondary)*

This point of view is certainly a valid one. Within democratic societies there will always be groups who represent minority opinions, who need to be realistic about their slim chance of achieving social change but who nevertheless should refuse to be silent. In the same spirit, the following student seemed to be willing to continue working on the council despite her cynicism about ever achieving real change:

*Interviewer:* "Does that mean that you don't think it's useful having a council at all or would you stop being a student representative for your class?"

*Student:* "No, I'd still be there to represent them. Just being able to have a say is something in itself because you never know, they might one day in the end listen."

—*Student, School A., Y 10*

Certainly, the opportunity to experience failure within a protected environment can be valuable. Though it seems likely that disappointment may turn to disillusionment, if not sufficiently balanced by success. One pupil felt that students were heard on some occasions but not others. She took that to be an inconsistency on the part of staff:

*Interviewer:* "Do you think the staff really believe in this idea of giving you the opportunity to raise issues?"

*Student:* "No. I think they might say it, but they don't believe it."

*Interviewer:* "How do you know they don't?... Have you got evidence?"

*Student:* "It's the feeling you get...If we want something and the majority of the

teachers think it's wrong, we won't get it if it's not to their liking and I suppose that's understandable...but they should compromise every now and again. I think sometimes they are treating us like adults but then they start treating you like little kids. They haven't got a steady position. It's not like adults all the way through. They treat us like adults when they want to and when they want us like little children you become a little child again. It's an uneven balance – it suits them, it don't suit us."

–*Student, School A, Y10*

It is not easy to see how frustrations can be completely avoided, but it would appear from what this student is saying that staff need to be prepared to engage in high quality dialogue with students, avoiding patronising attitudes and inconsistent levels of commitment. The student who begins this next quotation had spent a great deal of her own time drawing up the constitution of the new school council. One would imagine her to be amongst the most committed of students – yet here again, the sense of disappointment at the failure to address major issues is evident:

"It's a shame though that the student council only looks at what we say are the petty issues. Because let's be honest, it is a petty issue whether you can wear your tie or not in the summer. Sadly, we only get to look at those sorts of issues. We don't get to look at the ones that are really, that actually do matter. [...]

"We can complain until we're blue in the face about the lack of sex education and drugs awareness and all that,

but we're not really taken seriously unless we're talking about things like locks on the toilet doors and toilet rolls."

–*Student, School B, Y13*

If the above discussion emphasises the down side of trying to engage in regular dialogue with students, it is more encouraging to examine briefly the wide range of issues which, according to my interviewees, had come before their councils at some time or other. Issues included:

- the constitution of school council,
- school uniform,
- better facilities for students, including:
  - condition of and access to, toilets,
  - social areas for students,
  - lockers for students,
  - messy cloakrooms,
  - fair use of play areas,
  - play equipment,
  - shelter in bad weather, access to buildings,
  - bicycle racks,
  - school trips,
  - new kit for school teams,
- food related issues, including:
  - menu,
  - quality and price,
  - disliked metal beakers,
  - tuck shop,
- behavioural issues, including:
  - general codes of conduct,
  - charter of rights and responsibilities,
  - school punishment system,
  - staff behaviour,
  - racist and sexist behaviour in the school,
  - behaviour in the dinner queue,
  - bullying and violent behaviour,
  - mediation and conflict resolution,
  - violent games in the playground,
  - vandalism and smoking, especially in

- toilets,
- litter around the school,
- quality and reliability of school buses,
- charity and fund-raising events,
- school and local environment,
- school magazine,
- timing of school day,
- organisation of fire drills,
- school clubs,
- curriculum issues, including:
  - Y10 options,
  - PSE curriculum,
  - scheduling of homework and coursework,
- school development plan (ie for refurbishments etc).

The sheer range of issues impressively illustrates the potential of teacher/student dialogue although it does not address the question of whether the school council is always the most effective method of gathering feedback from students. I will say more about this below. Furthermore, the items are listed here whether they occurred once or many times in my interviews. For example, in every school I visited, the toilets featured as a major source of complaint and school uniform was another very frequent bone of contention. Some issues of student behaviour also occur frequently – in my sample most councils had fairly recently looked at the problem of bullying. On the other hand, I only encountered two schools which had discussed the quality of the PSE curriculum and two which had looked in some way or another at introducing mediation schemes. No conclusions can be drawn from this, however, since my sample was small and I never intended to produce a quantitative analysis of school council business. Nevertheless it is important to underline that the balance of council business in most schools appears to be on small-scale welfare issues.

Matters relating to the school as a learning community appear to receive much less attention.

### **The autonomy of student councils**

Several of the teachers I spoke with talked of their commitment to the autonomy of the school council. They believe that students benefit from developing the commitment and the skills to be capable of managing council affairs themselves. This obviously draws on the view that the council should be a vehicle for teaching political and bureaucratic skills such as chairing meetings, drawing up agendas, taking minutes and so on.

“...[W]hen for example, [school] Parliament itself said we don’t want you to be chairman of this meeting, I thought thank God for that. At last somebody has seen that there is really no need for this, and they then went ahead and elected somebody to be chairman and that was fine.”

—*H.T. School H (secondary)*

But as this head and others found, school councils as autonomous bodies often run into functional difficulties:

“One’s got a view that the student council is exactly that – it’s theirs to run; the problem is they don’t actually have the skills to run it...The life of a member of the student council is short, it’s maybe only a year, two at the most, so how do you go through the learning phase and then hand over and say, “Well you’ve now got these skills to chair the meeting, so I now hand over to your chair”? So what happened with us was that we got somebody to do the minutes and to chair the

meetings....but meetings didn't get called."

*H.T. School B, (secondary)*

Underlying this concern that councils should be autonomous is presumably a sense that, because they are set up to represent the student voice, they should be allowed on principle to do so free from interference, or perhaps even subtle intimidation, from staff. Will students feel genuinely free to be critical of the way the head runs the school if the head or a senior member of staff is present? However, the less support senior staff provide, the more important it is, it would seem, to get the mechanisms right so as to minimise the problems faced by students in calling meetings. In the following extract, the head just quoted goes on to describe several ways in which he tried to timetable the council to improve attendance, but was eventually forced to be more interventionist.

"We've tried various strategies to get the last SAVE [ie PSE] lesson of the month always, so they didn't have to remember the date...all those sorts of things, to try and get it so that people attended."

*Interviewer:* "But you're obviously very keen to give them this formal voice...and made huge efforts, from the sound of it to make sure it happens and happens properly."

*H.T.:* "Yes but I've now stepped back in, a year on."

*Interviewer:* "It wasn't happening before that?"

*H.T.:* "No, we set up a constitution and then the meetings just gradually tailed

away, partly because I was – it's a lower priority for me than other things and the students hadn't come to me and said they wanted a meeting. So it goes down on my agenda. But at the beginning of this year I wrote a note to say that I really can't allow it to just disappear. [...] So what's happening now is I'm actually chairing it.

"We've tried to do all the right things. We've done it Christmas to Christmas, so that fifth years and upper sixth can participate to Christmas and then finish, leaving them clear to worry about their exams. So we've got all those structures right, but it still hasn't worked in the way that any of us would have wanted."

*–H.T. School B, (secondary)*

Talk of autonomously functioning councils represents an ideal for many teachers to work towards but the reality is that because of the maturity of the students, the difficulties in bonding the group, their scatter throughout the school, pressures of time, lack of experience, interest in doing other things in their spare time and so on, it seems unrealistic, even unfair, to expect too much. Can one sometimes detect a sense of relief when hard-working teachers suggest to the students that they get on and organise something themselves? With regard to ensuring information about student council meetings were fed back to students the same head commented:

"I've also asked that they have someone who keeps notes and publishes them in the bulletin. I refused to take on that particular responsibility, arguing that if they want the information, they should do something about it. And so,



it has, I think happened once or twice over a number of years, that's about all."

—H.T. School B, (secondary)

### **Age, maturity and experience**

The issue of independence and effectiveness of councils centres for many teachers around questions relating to the maturity, or lack of it, of councillors. Whilst clearly many teachers see the council as preparation for democratic participation, there is at the same time doubt about the extent to which it is possible to give students real decision-making powers. Is it ethical to allow students to make what decisions they like and then require them to live with the consequences of these decisions? Even teachers most sympathetic towards consulting students were aware that student immaturity poses problems. Genuine attempts to devolve even a little power can fall into disarray because of the inexperience and lack of responsibility shown by student councillors. Even the issue of voting for form representatives is not always taken seriously, resulting in unsuitable students being elected, and this in turn affects the working of the whole council.

"There are a couple [of councillors] who have not been very faithful and regular in their turn out to meetings and the various responsibilities in their office they've been given, which is obviously why things have fallen apart a little bit at the moment."

—S.T. School B, (secondary)

One consequence of student immaturity may be that what they ask for or suggest is unrealistic, forcing staff to be constantly negative. I put this to some Y7 students and felt that they had a reasonable idea that too

much power in the hands of students might not be in the best interests of all:

*Student 1:* In a lot of schools they should have a fair amount of power, they should be able to, kind of, if there is a big majority of people who want something to happen then it should at least be put forward. They should have a certain amount of power but they shouldn't have too much, otherwise that is going to just make the school into a dosshouse."

*Interviewer:* "What, if pupils had too much power, then would they vote for no school, lots of free time?"

*Student 2:* "Some would, some wouldn't. There are definitely people who would though."

*Interviewer:* "Would they be in a majority?"

*Student 2:* "I think so, yeah, because not a lot of them really like school. If they didn't have to come, they wouldn't come."

—Students, School F, Y7

But even if these pragmatic objections have some force, many teachers still seem to feel that these are outweighed by more important underlying principles concerning the rights, even of the younger students, to have a say:

"Every student has a voice, quite simply, and they may not be as experienced and as articulate but I think they can learn from the others. The actual skills you're transferring are very good for the younger ones anyway, aren't

they? Listening to others, obviously, learning to communicate their views, you know it's giving them more confidence and they're learning to be more tolerant, learning to go back to their own tutor groups and perhaps have more responsibility there."

—S.T. School B, (secondary)

Arguments against consulting students on grounds of immaturity may be more telling with reference to students in primary schools, but I met staff who saw no difficulties in engaging in dialogue with even the youngest school children.

"My little five year-old neice is on her school council; and she's a reception child. Admittedly, she goes along and I don't think she understand the systems and she says of the school head who has the school meetings, "We told Miss White about something in the play-ground and Miss White said, 'Yes, I've got that on my list'" ... I think they've got the right to be asked what they think, and how they feel about things."

—S.T. School C (secondary)

It's interesting that children in their first year at secondary school are sometimes regarded as less capable than they were when they were at primary school. In the following extract the head of year 3 in a junior school emphasises the importance of engagement in social issues even for 7 and 8 year olds:

"They are still very young but I still feel it makes them feel important, boosts their own confidence and helps with their decision making in many respects and valuing other people's opinions."

*Interviewer:* "How do you structure it

for them when they are this young? Could you give me some examples?"

S.T: "Well, obviously, at this age you get some bullying on a minor level. You start discussing about feelings and things like that and asking them what should happen to a bully, how should we treat a bully? How should we punish him? Should we talk to him or just punish him? You get their views and initially I think the majority of them are right wing and would like to string them up. But in time they start talking themselves out."

—S.T. School, G, (Junior)

And whilst he was referring here to class-based discussion, he equally took great pains to allow the regular meeting of the form reps with the head to be discussed:

"Obviously, the theme of the discussion would be reported back to the class by the reps and within the class if they didn't express all the opinions, or what I thought were all the opinions, I would open it out to the whole class then to discuss what their views were of the matter and perhaps then suggest to the reps that those views be taken back from the class to the next reps' meeting."

*Interviewer:* "Do you think they fully understand the nature of the democratic consultation that is going on or do they become disillusioned if the head is constantly saying, "I'm sorry, that's impossible," or, "You can't do this, you can't do that"?"

S.T: "They have a view that anything that is discussed will happen. They

expect it to happen irrespective of what arguments are put up against it by the head, be it budget or be it anything else. Adventure playgrounds have been discussed in the past and they all think we are going to have another adventure playground straight away and of course it doesn't happen. Initially, they are disillusioned but then they do get the idea, well, when you do suggest this, who is going to pay for it and things like that. They sort of start weighing up their ideas and thoughts and arguments."

—S.T. School, G, (junior)

This view was shared by the older members of the school who themselves are councillors.

*Student 1:* "The little ones do say things but they tend to not sort of do things quite as serious or more things that matter like the third years [Y5] or fourth years [Y6]."

*Interviewer:* "I'm really asking you – do you think it is a waste of time for them to come along to the rep meetings if they don't have very much to say or if you think it is a little bit silly?"

*Student 2:* "I don't think it's a waste of time because if they learn this year they can say more, like, next year."

*Student 1:* "And even though in all the meetings they don't have their say, one time they might want to say something."

—Students, School G, Y6

Interestingly, these junior school students can draw on some sophisticated arguments

in favour of involving even the youngest members' of the school in council business. Indeed, it was the Y3 pupils who, with the support of their teacher, made a highly significant contribution to the discussion of bullying in this school, because following their own discussion of bullying, they conducted a survey of incidents throughout the school, which brought about significant improvements in the way the whole problem was dealt with. This is how the top juniors regarded it:

*Student 1:* "Every single class got a sheet of paper and had to fill it out. And most people filled it out with honesty and the surveys did come up with people being bullied. It did come up quite high, the number of people."

*Interviewer:* "Was it discussed at rep meetings?"

*Student 1:* "Yes, it was. We have took two rep meetings up by discussing it."

*Student 2:* "I mean at lunchtimes we only have 4 to 5 dinner ladies and just since we have had the bullying questionnaire we have had one there and one up the top and two down here just walking around occasionally. But before that they just all stood round there and most of it is down round here where it happens because none of the dinner ladies can see."

*Interviewer:* "So now the teachers and the dinner ladies are more aware of where it happens, is that what you're saying?"

*Student 1:* "Yes, the bullying survey was a breakthrough. It was a good idea."

*Interviewer:* "Do you think it will be done again and followed up?"

*Student 1:* "Probably."

*Student 2:* "I think we should do another one in July or something to see if it has helped."

*Student 1:* "To see if the results have gone down or if they have gone up."  
—*Students, School G (Y6)*

In another primary school, the head recognises the difficulty of expecting too much from council representatives and for this reason much prefers to meet directly with all the junior school pupils for half an hour per week. In this forum the children have raised issues such as changing the school football strip, safe use of the infant climbing frame and bullying. They also resolved a timetabling problem where art and drama clashed, forcing some pupils to choose one at the expense of the other. On another occasion, the pupils raised the issue of play facilities in the local playground. The headteacher encouraged the children to write to the local council about it and work was put in hand to improve the facilities. One problem with a large forum, of course, is that it can be intimidating for many pupils, especially with issues such as bullying so the forum decided to introduce a suggestions box, which would allow ideas or complaints to be submitted anonymously."

To sum up this section on the structure and function of school councils, it seems clear that school councils are by no means easy to establish or run. It appears that by their very nature, they are prone to periods of success and failure and are more vulnerable at some points in the school year than others. They rely heavily on staff/student and student/

student communication structures which are often problematic. Furthermore, whilst there are reasons why student councils should ideally be thought of as capable of operating independently of staff, so as to be independent and true to student interests, there are also good reasons why many of the more significant aspects of school life are more likely to be addressed when cooperation between staff and students is close and dialogue is seen as the responsibility of both sides.

Determining the optimum size of a council is another difficulty. If they are too large, they become impersonal and intimidating, whereas if they are too small, they seem to be more prone to failure and disintegration because of the way student councillors tend to operate in isolation from their peers and other councillors.

These are difficult issues which are not susceptible to easy once-for-all solutions. Highlighting difficulties associated with council structures is a good deal easier than finding the best solutions. However, if consultation with students is to be genuinely worthwhile for staff, and effective and credible for students, then I suggest considerable changes need to be made in the scope of many councils' work and in the quality of staff/student dialogue. It may also be the case that more recognition should be given to the fact that consultation via delegates is not always the best way to determine the balance of student opinion on issues where, for example, it would be helpful to know what percentage of students supported a particular view. In these circumstances consultations via the school council should be supplemented by other means not as a way of ignoring student councillors but with their knowledge and support. These other approaches will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5

# Alternative methods of consultation

The preceding chapter outlined, amongst other things, the range and variety of issues dealt with in staff/student discussions. The conclusion was reached that the potential range is very wide indeed, given the political will, particularly of teachers, to engage with students. However, it was noted that all too commonly the reality for students is that school council business is dominated by the trivial, with more important issues tending to arise only rarely. Students, rightly or wrongly, often see this as hypocritical and patronising of teachers. However, I have suggested that there may be other reasons for this state of affairs, not least being that the structure and functioning of school councils often militate against important issues surfacing. It was suggested that this situation could be improved if staff/student committees could be set up in such a way as to facilitate the regular reviewing of all aspects of school life, including whole school policies and curriculum issues.

I noted, during the course of my interviews, several occasions when heads indicated a wish to consult students. For example, this commonly occurs during reviews of behaviour policies. However, it is notable that, on these occasions, consultation often seems to by-pass the student council, being undertaken by tutors at the level of the form group. Thus, there may be a number of different strategies adopted in any one school to enable staff and students to engage in dialogue. It is arguable that whereas school councils are well suited to certain kinds of dialogue, there are some issues which require other strategies. One

head, for example, described to me how his school went about setting up a whole school consultation process on bullying. This had followed an earlier project to develop a whole school statement of students' rights and responsibilities.

"First of all there was a questionnaire about being bullied. "Have you ever been bullied? Have you ever bullied? When? Where? Under what circumstances? How do you define bullying? Which part of the school? Are there places we can make safer?" – and so on. Then we got them to help us with the definition and then, as with the *Rights and Responsibilities* document, a draft was produced and put out to the various groups in the school for consultation – staff, students, governors, parents – and their comments were taken to tutor groups and students and the thing was refined in the light of those comments. I think we need to revisit this, actually."

–H.T. School F (secondary)

In this school, which has no formal council, the use of regular interviews with students is being seen as an increasingly worthwhile strategy.

"Then, one of the other things we do a little, but I'm keen that we should do more, is questionnaires of students. Now, I interview each year 10 student. I am in the middle of interviewing them about their work, essentially, but one of the questions that I ask – I've got a sort

of pro-forma which I complete on each one – is, “In what ways could the school assist you with your school life that it is not doing already?”

*Interviewer:* “Are these randomly selected pupils?”

*H.T.:* “No, I see the whole lot. [...] The deputy heads are seeing years nine and eleven respectively and they are working from the same schedule of questions....You don’t get many suggestions. Maybe it’s the way you put the question. Maybe it’s springing it on youngsters who haven’t – you know, they can’t think.”

*Interviewer:* “And maybe you are in the position of power and they are not.”

*H.T.:* “Of course!”

–*H.T., School F (secondary)*

Consultation exercises need not always be at individual or whole school level. An example of a limited but clearly targeted exercise came from one school where the senior teacher in charge of the school council is also responsible for the visually impaired unit:

“I do annual reviews and part of my job is to say to students “What have you got to say about the results of your support that you’ve been getting? What do you need, where do you need extra help in school? Do you like the way we’re supporting you? And I expect them to be critical. [...] And I feel they’re more involved in their support. [...] I think it is a theory and I hold it, that the more you engage people in discussions and don’t tell them what to

do, the more you make them citizens and not subjects, the better results you’ll get, of whatever kind you want. [...] It’s the empowerment process.”  
–*S.T. School C (secondary)*

This approach highlights the possibility of identifying different groups within the school community to which it may be worthwhile paying special attention, whether this is the new intake of students, sixth formers, or special needs students. We have already seen that students selecting options for Y10 may have opinions to express on the options system or it might be that the work experience provision would be improved with feedback from students.

Questionnaires can also provide a means of quantifying the strength of competing views amongst students. This would not emerge from a council discussion of the same issue. Questionnaires can also be a more sensitive instrument for determining the extent or the true nature of a problem. We have already noted examples of this kind with the bullying surveys, but there are other issues to be explored in this way. For example, I found that in one school an externally administered questionnaire, carried out as part of a university research project, unexpectedly provided a large amount of useful data on the students’ attitudes to their work:

“In March we had about two hundred of our children, about a third of the school population, surveyed by a university, about satisfaction with school. Well, it took a long time for the results to come but we’ve got the results and it’s taken us a long time to look at them and then work out what we can do with them. But what that’s actually doing is giving us a powerful

view of what the children feel and think of the school experience, and it's not entirely the same as what we thought it was."

*Interviewer:* "There were some surprises then?"

*H.T.:* "There were some surprises. I mean, one of them is, for example, compared with schools nationally, where fifty percent of children say that hard work is made fun of, here twenty nine percent of children said that hard work was made fun of. In other words, the children were telling us that in this school it's O.K. to work, there's more of a culture that it's O.K. to work. It's a very powerful thing for a school to know about its students and its culture and we hadn't really picked up on it."

—*H.T. School C (secondary)*

Questionnaires are also a good way of routinely obtaining feedback on curriculum matters such as course content, levels of student satisfaction with a course, or the provision of option choices.

Many of the concerns raised by students and brought to staff may be described as "bottom up" issues. By contrast when the staff wish to raise issues with students the direction is "top down". I have noted that there may be a tendency for consultations on these different kinds of concern to be conducted in different but discrete ways rather than being integrated into a coherent strategy. I have argued that efforts should be made to reduce the differential, particularly to avoid the situation where the school council only deals with more mundane "bottom up" concerns whilst the top down consultations, on policies or curriculum, take

place via another route altogether. Thought could profitably be given to finding ways of integrating these different strategies as far as possible. For example, where a questionnaire is likely to be the most effective means, consideration could be given to involving school councillors in designing or piloting the questionnaire, and even distributing or publicising it. Where appropriate, councillors might also be involved in the analysis of the data. The advantage of working in this way would be that a more integrated model of student consultation emerges in which the school council is seen as one of a number of mechanisms whereby staff, students, governors and parents can engage in dialogue with each other.

## Chapter 6

# Summary and recommendations

At the outset of this report, I suggested that the purpose of this study was to explore the tensions inherent in the idea of student “democracy”, with particular reference to the working of school councils. I have tried to throw some light on the theoretical and practical difficulties which teachers and students face when they attempt to engage with each other as members of the school community. One surprising outcome of this study has been the wide variety of arguments I encountered, both for and against school councils, even from sympathetic heads. This makes it difficult to come to clear conclusions either way, or identify a single, optimum solution.

Broadly speaking, it is possible to categorise the arguments I encountered into *normative*, *educational* and *instrumental or pragmatic*. Normative arguments derive from principles or social norms, including legislation. I found a good deal of principled idealism underpinning teachers’ efforts to create and sustain consultative structures in their schools, often in the face of many practical difficulties. These ideals are important motivationally but also because they can significantly influence the kind of practices established. For example, teachers with a strongly democratic model in mind, might be more inclined than others to try to replicate the structures of Parliamentary democracy, despite their limited application within the hierarchy of the school. Other teachers, drawing more heavily on ideas of justice and student rights to be heard, may reject the discourse of democracy as confusing in theory and unhelpful, even misleading, in practice.

Another set of arguments in favour of school councils emphasises the educational benefits for students who become involved. Unfortunately, it is also possible to argue that, unless great care is taken, what students may actually learn is that school democracy is a sham and that teachers too often say one thing and do another. One disadvantage of this educational justification is that so few students appear to benefit from involvement with council business because so many seem to work in virtual isolation from the main student body. If the benefits are to be at all widespread, there needs to be better communication and greater awareness generally of what the council is doing. Feedback mechanisms should be integrated into the routine of school life, giving tutors or Citizenship teachers responsibility for ensuring council business is regularly reviewed by staff and students.

The final set of arguments, and there were a surprising number of these, were what I have called instrumental or pragmatic arguments. My interviewees saw many practical benefits in having consultative structures in schools, some of these from a managerial point of view, such as, allaying suspicion of staff motives or getting the student body united against an anti-social minority of vandals. However, even here, there are also a small number of pragmatic arguments against involving students in consultation, including, perhaps, that fact they so often seem to achieve so little and I found that heads most likely to argue against having a school council as such, were those who had had very negative practical experiences



earlier in their careers and were no longer convinced they are worth the effort. It is worth noting on this point, that even highly committed teachers admitted to me, that in the face of other pressures it was easy for the council to slip down their agenda, suggesting that at times, the effort of maintaining a high level of commitment to student participation is very demanding.

I summarise below the arguments I encountered both for and against school councils.

## Arguments for

### 1. Normative, principled or legal

- i) students have the right to be heard;
- ii) students have rights to a humane environment;
- iii) school councils can promote justice by tackling important issues where student rights are infringed;
- iv) students should learn how to serve others. People have a duty to care for one another – schools should be caring places;
- v) teachers are democratically accountable to a number of client groups, including students;
- vi) in important ways, students are citizens and not subjects;
- vii) the Children Act (1989) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child both assert the right of children to be heard on matters which affect them. Schools should not undermine those rights.

### 2. Educational

- i) councils promote citizenship learning, political efficacy and democratic attitudes;
- ii) councils develop social confidence and personal qualities and skills;

- iii) students become empowered to challenge authority;
- iv) students learn how to make decisions in a fair and accountable way;
- v) students learn about the harsh realities of life, e.g. how to work within limited budgets or as a minority pressure group.

### 3. Instrumental/pragmatic

- i) democratic styles of management work better than autocratic ones, they are more effective;
- ii) democratic management encourages cooperation and not rebellion, it harnesses energy, and reduces alienation;
- iii) councils improve the atmosphere of the school, teachers are trusted more, rules are seen to be fairly based;
- iv) students will accept rules more readily if they think they have helped to decide them;
- v) however poorly they work, school councils demonstrate to students the good faith of the staff and commitment to important values, including respect for persons and justice;
- vi) councils can provide the basis for a staff/student consensus against the anti-social minority;
- vii) students are not always aware of the huge amount of work done on their behalf by staff, so communication via the council can allay cynicism that “nothing gets done about persistent problems”;
- viii) student councils can improve student motivation generally and better results tend to follow improved attitudes.

## **Arguments against**

### **1. Normative, principled or legal**

- i) honesty requires that school authorities should not establish structures which deceive children into thinking they have more power than they do;
- ii) democracy cannot exist in schools although they are democratically accountable. In any case, if the school were to become fully democratic this should involve parents and there would be no guarantee that the interests of students could be safeguarded. Professional responsibility should not be devolved in this way.

### **2. Educational**

- i) the school council model can encourage staff into thinking this is the most effective way to promote participation but it is arguable that an emphasis on service, rather than rights, can be more energising, more outward looking and developmentally beneficial;
- ii) school councils are too elitist in that on the whole, the students who become involved are already the most capable and mature. This can leave the bulk of student body no more democratised than before. Proof of this is that the councillors themselves often feel isolated from the rest of the student body.

### **3. Instrumental/pragmatic**

- i) school councils draw on democratic models which are inappropriate in a hierarchical structure;
- ii) school councils at best should be regarded as only one part of a complex consultative model which

- integrates consultation with students more interactively and routinely into the decision making practices of the school,
- ii) councils create a great deal of frustration and cynicism amongst students;
- iii) councils only involve a small minority of the student body in dialogue;
- iv) councils frequently fail because, in effect, the majority of staff and students do not attach much importance to them – that is not a good public message to send out about the importance of democracy.

## Conclusions and recommendations

In a study of this kind, it is often easier to identify difficulties than make recommendations which will guarantee success. It is clear from the interview data that the business of schools councils is complex and many factors are involved in their effective operation. Undoubtedly, one of the conclusions from this study has to be that many well-intentioned efforts to develop effective consultative procedures in schools fall short of expectations. Both staff and students expressed disappointment and disillusionment in different degrees about their own councils. This may be because a school council is dependent on a wide range of factors any one of which can seriously affect the way things work. Thus, however supportive the head and senior staff may be, a council may not work well if the staff generally are not committed enough to ensure that proper feedback sessions take place at the level of the tutor group. Equally, school councils, like other bodies, need to have a strong nucleus of committed and confident students to work really well. The need to re-establish the school council every year with a fresh wave of councillors may work in favour of democratizing the student body, but militate against developing a core group of effective councillors who have learnt the ropes over an extended period of time.

In the data presented here, there are clearly tensions between the different ways in which school councils are viewed by teachers. Many different reasons in favour of democratic involvement were offered, some educational, some principled and some pragmatic. The principled reasons often provide a reassuring fall-back for staff. When things are perhaps not going well, it is

comforting to remind oneself that pupil consultation is still the 'right thing to do', however ineffective it may seem to be. Equally, when pupils display frustration that 'everything they ask for gets refused', there is still the reassurance that they have learnt a little about the real world where campaigning for a cause is no guarantee of success. Interestingly, even the teachers I spoke with, all of whom were in favour of engaging positively with students in one way or another, were not all convinced that school councils were the best way to do this. Advocates of school councils should at least be aware of the arguments against them including the fact that school councils may produce a cohort of young people convinced that democracy is tokenistic and a sham.

Having said that, and having examined the evidence set out here, I am myself more than ever convinced that, along with other consultative practices, school councils have a genuinely important role to play in the life of schools. The evidence shows that even children in the early years can provide positive and useful feedback to teachers on school life as they experience it. We need to become used to the idea of young people as 'experts' on aspects of school life – including what goes on in the playground, in the cloakrooms, in the toilets, concerning the burden of homework and how good the PSE and citizenship programmes are. Students also know best as to how they feel about a whole range of issues from school transport, anti-social behaviour, racism in school and the provision of equipment. I am convinced from this study that there is no virtually no part of school life which school councils do not have the potential to improve provided teachers have the courage, the imagination and the appropriate methods with which to ask the questions. Indeed, my cumulative

list, showing the range of business addressed by the eight councils in the study, is truly impressive.

If I were asked to make definite recommendations based on these data, they would include the following:

- it is easy to underestimate the structural obstacles in the way of good communications between staff and students and between the students themselves;
- the size of the council may be an important factor, including whether there are sufficient councillors to enable a good team spirit to develop and a fair amount of sub-committee work to be done between council meetings in order to increase the level of achievement and maintain involvement;
- momentum is important; once student councillors feel that nothing is happening, they are very likely to lose interest;
- council meetings should not be called on an 'ad hoc' basis. Meetings should be regular and not less than once every half term. A timetable for the year would help underline the importance of the council;
- staff working with councils need to accept some responsibility for generating business which students feel is worthwhile. This needs to go beyond the usual student welfare issues;
- councillors should not feel undervalued by staff – they may need administrative back-up for their work and the rest of the student body must be kept informed of council business. Heads could ensure that they mention council business in a way which underlines its importance;
- staff working with councils should be very aware of those times in the year when councils are more vulnerable than usual and where extra support may be necessary;
- thought should be given to the induction of new councillors so that they are clear about what is expected of them and their early experiences are positive;
- consider ways in which students may take business to the school governors and may work closely with them.
- build in some forms of reward for the hard work put in by councillors to demonstrate how positively their work is valued by the school.

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