Priscilla Alderson 2000 School students' views on school councils and daily life at school *Children & Society*, 14:121-134.

Abstract
This article reports a survey conducted in schools in the UK and Northern Ireland during 1997-1998 with 2,272 students aged 7 to 17 years.. The 24 page booklet questionnaire included six groups of questions about school councils. The question of whether pupils who have a council see it as effective was cross-tabulated with a range of other questions, in order to examine associations between students' views about their school councils with their views on other aspects of school. About half the students reported that they had a school council. Of these, the ones who thought their council was effective generally had positive views about their school's social and academic activities, whereas the ones who said their council was ineffective generally had more negative attitudes. Some schools find that creating an effective school council can considerably improve standards of behaviour, but this process has to involve further changes in systems and relationships in the school. Simply introducing a token council can increase students' scepticis

Introduction

During 1997-1998, a survey in schools in the UK and Northern Ireland investigated students' views about children's civil rights. The booklet questionnaire broke down the so-called participation or civil rights in the United Nations 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child into practical questions about everyday experiences in schools. Six groups of questions about school councils, included two about having a council or not, and about having a council which the pupils see as effective.

This paper briefly reviews the literature about children's rights in schools, and describes the survey. About half the students reported that they had a school council. The views of those who thought their council was effective or ineffective are compared. The survey findings are discussed in relation to education about citizenship and democracy in schools.

Background literature about children's rights and school councils

The survey's theme, the 1989 UN Convention, has been ratified in by every nation except Somalia and the United States. It is by far the most widely supported international human rights treaty. A Convention is stronger than a Declaration and, in ratifying the Convention in 1991, the British government undertook to implement it is law, policy and practice. So the survey enquired how well known and used the Convention is in British schools. .

Very little research has been conducted about schools councils in British schools from the perspective of children's rights. A critical overview of how the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 has been understood and implemented in the UK is soon to be updated (Lansdown and Newell, 1994). The chapter on education in the *Handbook of Children's Rights* reviews how structures in British schools inhibit respect for rights (Jeffs, 1995) and is confirmed by more recent research (Griffith, 1998). Schools Councils UK encourage schools to form councils and publicise good practice, but avoid talking about rights (personal communication). The Commonwealth Teachers' Report (NUT, 1997) discussed children's rights solely in terms of their rights to protection and education, and confined civil rights to the paragraph on teachers' interests as adult concerns. Occasional accounts from within schools, such as the one of a head master's long hard struggle to make his school more democratic, show the complexity of these efforts and the strong opposition to them (Trafford, 1997).

A book written as part of this rights project with a primary school reports the benefits achieved when the governors, staff and pupils all work together to make agreed changes (Highfield, 1997), and in this the school council played a crucial part. The Crick Report (1998:12) mentions a primary school in Toxteth, a socially deprived area which similarly avoids excluding children and where behaviour has very much improved; the head teacher attributes these improvements to the creation of an effective school council. One report links school councils with effective ways of preventing pupils exclusions (Davies, 1998). Effective school councils may be far more common than the literature suggests, and teachers in schools which promote democracy may too busy and practically involved to have time to publish reports about their school.

The survey

The Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) research programme 1996-9, Children 5-16, has 22 projects about children's own perspectives, including the rights project. We contacted every local education authority, scanned schools listed on the Internet and compiled a varied sample of 250 schools in the UK and Northern Ireland. Letters asked primary school deputy heads and secondary school personal education teachers to take part in the survey. Only 58 teachers replied to the single sheet teachers' survey, and only 49 agreed to conduct the

pupils' survey which yielded 2,272 completed questionnaires from 7 to 17 year olds (Alderson, forthcoming b, c, d).

The 24-page booklet questionnaire gave out information about the 1989 UN Convention to schools, and collected in evidence about young people's views about rights in the Convention, and how these are respected in British schools. The survey concentrated on civil rights, the most abstract type of rights, and showed their practical relevance in schools by linking civil rights with many issues of great practical interest to young people. Many issues are therefore briefly covered in this article, in order to indicate the breadth, richness and practicality of concepts of children's rights, and the potential influences of school councils.

The survey included visits to schools for 34 group discussions, each with six pupils, usually lasting half an hour. Linked research was valuable in informing the survey design and interpretation and in revealing details of actual practices in schools (Highfield, 1997; Alderson and Goodey, 1998; Cleves, 1999). Visits to the schools showed that teachers' views about school councils ranged from seeing councils as central to positive activities and relationships in the school, or as merely a formality, or as unnecessary, an extra burden for over-stressed staff, or even as a danger to be avoided. Which view is the most realistic? The survey replies show almost no difference overall between schools with or without a school council. However, there are clear difference between the views about their school of pupils who thought their council was either effective or not effective.

In ratifying the Convention in 1991, the British Government undertook to publicise it "to adults and children alike" (article 42). Of the 2272 pupils in the survey, over 75% said they had not heard about the Convention, and almost all the rest had heard only "a bit about it".

The 1989 Convention's rights are often divided into three kinds:

provision rights such as to education or health care;

protection rights from neglect, abuse or discrimination;

participation or civil rights which adults who live in democracies can take for granted.

This was explained on the shiny green questionnaire booklet cover, which each pupil kept, and which paraphrased the main civil rights:

to respect for your worth and dignity;

to express yourself and to develop your skills and talents fully;

to be heard and to have your views taken seriously in matters which affect you;

to share in making decisions about your life;

to have all kinds of useful information and ideas;

to freedom of thought, conscience and religion;

to learn to live in peace, tolerance, equality and friendship;

to privacy and respect and to fair discipline;

to work together for rights and to see that these are shared fairly in your school.

Perceptions of school councils

The aim of designing a clear, interesting, long questionnaire for pupils aged from 7 to 17-year-olds worked well. In the 7 to 10-year-old group, 88 per cent said the booklet was interesting. To achieve this, questions had to be very simply and clearly worded. Although councils vary so widely, the types of council could not be overly defined because this could confuse the reader and complicate the responses. The question simply asked "Does your school have a council where pupils and teachers meet to decide about things that happen in the school?" This may have excluded schools with pupil-only councils, but these are unlikely to be effective when the staff are not involved. Table 1 shows that about half the students said they had such a council, and less than a fifth said they thought that they had an effective school

council.

School councils are a key practical and symbolic indicator of respect for children's rights. There are other useful methods for pupils to contribute to school policy and to raising standards (see Highfield 1997, Cleves 1999) and councils are likely to work better when linked to systems such as class circle times before and after council meetings. Yet only councils provide a formal, democratic, transparent, accountable, whole-school policy forum.

The visits illustrated how much the council was generally respected by the pupils, as in one pair of primary schools. In the first, a deputy head described how she had set up the council which was producing a newsletter. She seemed to see the council as a kind of product to use in records of achievement. She arranged for journalists to put a report and photograph in the local paper about the research visit to the school as a similar marker of success. The pupils did not see the council as useful, and said that they could not raise or discuss matters at meetings as they had to spend all their time working as instructed on the newsletter.

The second, much less formal school, had an induction meeting for the new members in September of a well established council which met fortnightly. The members, a girl and boy aged from 8 to just 11 years from each class, relaxed on easy chairs in the head teacher's room round a coffee table while she sat on the floor. They had all brought notes from their previous class council circle time, and made notes of the reports that they would take back to their class. Everyone in the school knew that the council dealt with discipline and bullying problems if the classes could not resolve them, as well as reviewing a budget, and planning some of the activities, amenities and policies in the school. Teaching and support staff and pupils respected and relied on the council.

Other schools gave fairly clear indicators about the status of their council. Some staff, who said confidently that the council met regularly, or posted monthly bulletins, were not verified by a 9-month old bulletin on the notice board, or by pupils' groups which said the council hardly ever met, or that council decisions had to be approved by the head who never found time to meet council members. The staff may sometimes have been correct and the pupils incorrect but the measure used here is the pupils' *reported perceptions of the existence and effectiveness of their school council.*

Views about daily life at school

The pupils' views are reported in three groups:
A) 19% who think their school council "helps to make the school a better place to be in";
B) 33% who think the council does not make their school a better place or are not sure;
C) 48% who say they do not have a council or are unsure, and who do not reply to questions about councils. When groups A and B are taken together, their average replies are almost always the same as group C. Big differences emerge when A and B are reported separately, as in this section. Replies were analysed by spsspc computer package. Not all the percentages quoted add up to 100; either the rounded up totals may exceed 100, or some replies "not sure", "it varies", are omitted for clarity.)

Activities enjoyed at school

The booklet listed ten activities, asking which ones pupils enjoy doing in and/or out of school. The two examples in table 2 are computers, where A and B are more enthusiastic than C, and being with friends, on which the three groups have similar views. However, group A are much more likely to think they have chances to do the activities they like at school than B or C. Group B are about twice as likely to say they do not have enough chances at school than A or C.

A later open question was what do you most enjoy about school?(table 3). Again, group B

show rather less satisfaction with school, except when they report greater satisfaction in seeing friends, and in break and home times. Teachers were not mentioned often enough to be one of the ten most liked items to be coded. The strength of replies to open questions is that they are volunteered and so presumably matter fairly seriously to the person giving them; their weakness is that they cannot show how widely each reply would be supported if it had been asked as a closed question. The general consistency of the replies possibly strengthens their validity.

Dissatisfactions

To the open question "what do you least like about your school?" (Table 4) after named lessons, teachers were most frequently mentioned, followed by rules, too much work or home work and physical conditions in the school. Assemblies, the behaviour of other people, and bullies were mentioned less often. There are slight difference between the questions about "enjoying" and "least liking"; enjoy could refer more to processes, and dislike to things or people. This difference might partly account for the different placing of teachers in the replies, because enjoyment of lessons presumably signifies good teaching, although if so, this is balanced by dislike of lessons which may signify poor teaching.

In response to a closed question on bullying (table 5), the B group were more likely to say there is "a lot" of bullying in the school, than the A group, but the C group were least likely to report bullying. The combined replies do show a high *reported incidence* of bullying in schools - a lot of people said that it occurred. Yet this does not mean that they all experienced bullying themselves, or felt *severely* affected. The open questions on dislikes shows more dissatisfactions with adults (with teachers and rules) than with other pupils, in contrast to almost all the literature on schools and bullying which assumes that problems are mainly created by pupils. In answer to closed questions about rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, a minority said they like school assemblies (table 6).

School rules

When asked how they feel they can express themselves in how they look, and what they think of their school rules "about what you can wear and how you can look" (table 7), group A are about twice as likely to think the rules are "all right", and half as likely to think the rules "too strict" as group B; group C are near the middle. Most pupils supported the right to wear religious dress.

Listening teachers

The UN Convention emphasises children's right to be heard, to have their views taken seriously and to be able to share in making decisions in matters which affect them. This depends on teachers being willing and able to listen. When asked, "do your teachers listen to you?" (Table 6), group A were far more likely to say "yes", and group B were by far the most likely to say "no". Replies to "Before any one is punished, do teachers first explain clearly to them how they will be punished and why?" also show clear differences (A 49%, B 25%, C 38%). Being heard also depends on the pupils being willing to speak, and feeling that they are listened to and respected. Table 6 shows mixed views about feeling respected.

"Do you trust your teachers to keep a secret if you tell them?" In all the replies, only 35 per cent replied yes, 31 per cent said no and the rest said that it varies or they are not sure. Group discussions showed that respect for privacy was extremely important to them. To the usual opening question, "What did you think about the booklet survey?", the most frequent reply was, "We did like it saying on the cover that it is private and the teachers would not see our

answers."

Choosing their school (table 7)
Groups B were noticeably more likely to think they should be allowed to choose which school to attend, and not to wish to share the decision with their parents. They were more likely to want to attend another school (or perhaps no school, that was not given as an option) and less likely to say they would not rather be at another school.

General rights in school
Group B were clearly more likely to consider that pupils' rights in their school were not sufficiently respected (table 8), and they were slightly less likely to have heard about the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child than groups A and C although all the groups appeared to have heard little about the Convention (table 9).

Similarities between groups A, B and C
In answer to the closed questions about the main purposes and aims of being at school, the groups gave similar replies, though B group were rather less likely to say yes by ringing each potential advantage (table 10). The final questions asked for the students' views on the questionnaire. Group B, the generally most critical group, were twice as likely as groups A and C to say that the booklet was "too short" (22%), but they were also more likely to say it was too long (20%). Most people thought it was "about the right length" (A 77%, B 58%, C 76%). Group B were the most likely to find the booklet boring (A 10%, B 31%, C 15%) whereas nearly half group A found it "very interesting (A 48%, B 29%, C 34%), replies to "quite interesting" were (A 41%, B 40%, C 50%).

The question about whether groups varied in their views about streaming was "Some schools have groups or classes for fast learners, and others for slower learners. Some schools put everyone together in wide-ability groups. Which do you think is the best way?" There were similar replies, faster and slower groups were preferred (A 44%, B 52%, C 50%) and wide-ability mixed groups were less favoured (A 30%, B 26%, C 28%). The A group, which were generally more positive, were slightly the most in favour of mixed-ability classes.

Age groups
The replies are linked to age. Most people who were critical tended to be 13 or older. Among the groups aged 11 years or less, the overall response to "does the council make the school a better place to be in?" was yes from 13 schools and no from one school. From the groups aged 12 years and over, the majority of replies were yes in six schools, no in two schools and mixed replies in six schools. The other 21 schools did not have councils. The secondary schools tended to return more questionnaires then the smaller primary schools, which explains why the individual responses show different, showing more dissatisfaction, from whole school responses.

Discussion
The sample
The 250 schools were selected to cover the very varied range of types of school and school settings. The low response rate, less than one fifth, may have been from unusual enthusiastic schools. If so, the standards of student satisfaction across the UK are likely to be still lower than those shown here.

Democracy and rights as thinking and doing

Civil rights, such as to freedom of thought, conscience and peaceful assembly, raise questions about if, or when, children become aware of these rights and have the maturity to exercise them by organising assemblies or club meetings at school . Babies learn to talk by being spoken to as if they already understand so, arguably, children become members of democratic communities through practical involvement. Certainly at Highfield Junior School (1997) 8-year-olds listen carefully to one another, take minutes, brainstorm, provide creative solutions to problems, and peacefully resolve disagreements. Unpublished reports show that councils can be effective in infant schools (Hannan, 1998). In early years centres and infant schools, young children show sophisticated skills when adults expect and encourage these. Children take turns to listen and speak by rolling a ball to the next speaker during circle time discussion, for example (Mosley, 1993). In groups, they can plan healthy menus, budget, shop for, and cook meals (Miller, 1996). These reports suggest that schools where the staff and pupils work together through school councils channel much positive understanding and enthusiasm from even the youngest children.

Almost all the literature on citizenship and rights discusses these in mental terms: rational understanding, discussion, negotiation, informed decision making, abstract principles of respect and justice, and concepts that are taught through verbal instruction and "curriculum materials". The Crick Report (1998) puts this emphasis on democracy as a set of mainly abstract ideas taught formally by teachers so that one day students will become informed adult citizens. Yet citizenship and democracy are also activities, involving strong feelings about how to share actions, resources and power fairly (or unfairly), through bodies and relationships: by playing and labouring together, creating and celebrating, fighting or negotiating, campaigning, organising elections, and struggling towards resolutions within intricate emotional encounters.

The Cartesian mental approach ("rights" developed as a modern concept in Descartes's time) tends mistakenly to exclude young children, by under-estimating their mental understanding and their many practical contributions to their families and communities (Alderson, forthcoming a)

Older children are also excluded from sharing in democracy and citizenship by adult-centred notions of the age to vote or to give consent. I have spoken at many conferences about the age of legally valid consent to surgery, and I ask the audiences to state or guess the age. Teachers, who nurture children's minds, tend to say 16 or 18 years whereas, ironically, health staff who care mainly for children's bodies tend to have greater respect for their minds, and increasingly treat young children as competent to make very serious decisions about surgery. They can respect young children's consent in English law (although this is complicated, see Alderson, 1993). Health staff describe how, through working with young children, they learn to trust children at increasingly earlier ages. Adults and children learn about rights together through this practical experience.

Rights and responsibilities: education about or through democracy

Rights are often contrasted with responsibilities. Yet civil rights are mainly about taking on more personal and shared responsibility and decision making, being trusted, and helping one another, as shown in the many practical issues raised in the survey. All the groups talked about wanting to be heard more and respected, not so much to make demands as to contribute idea and helpful suggestions.

Voluntary work "in the community" is recommended for students to learn how to contribute and be responsible. (Blunkett, 1999) These policies tend to ignore how young people already contribute extensively at home and through local organisations, and how their work is mainly devalued, unpaid and not even seen as real work (Morrow, 1994). The policies also ignore how

schools themselves are communities, where children's knowledge, imaginative ideas and energy are used far more creatively when students are treated as present rather than future citizens (Highfield, 1997).

If democracy is seen as the right of competent adults, then adults' expertise and maturity tend to be contrasted unrealistically with young people's ignorance, immaturity and need for firm control. This split thinking, which denies the mixture of strengths and weaknesses in every age group, encourages disrespect towards students to pass unrecognised or even to be endorsed by authorities, despite the negative effects like those reported in this survey. Students' disaffection then tends to be blamed on to them as evidence of immaturity (Pearce and Hillman, 1998) preventing fair assessment of how problems are created in schools by adults as well as by young people. The small groups in the survey discussed the contradictions that arise when students are taught theories about democracy, freedom of the press, and a fair judiciary, in schools with no forum for listening to individual and majority views, or with a tightly controlled newsletter, or where students cannot appeal about punishments and exclusions.

In contrast, when daily school life is more democratic, education about democracy includes practising equal respect and justice. School assemblies, for example, help everyone to enjoy being a member of a positive, worthwhile community in which they are all valued, achievements are celebrated, and shared ideals and values, religious or humanist, are considered (Cleves School, 1999). The same applies to school councils. Some teachers told us that school councils were not useful because pupils want to talk only about uniform and other forbidden questions. Some teachers and pupils told us that meetings are ineffective because they are restricted to trivial matters, and have no impact on school life. Yet when primary schools show how fully younger children can understand and act out democratic principles (Highfield, 1997), how much more would secondary school students be able to take part in useful school councils?

Perceptions and realities

The most critical B group may have held unfairly negative views about their schools. Yet, in practice, their *perceptions* matter more than what other observers might believe is "really going on" in the schools. This is because personal attitudes appear, from the survey and much other evidence, to be linked to more general views about the benefits of being at school, ambitions to become well qualified, and the sense of mutual trust and respect between and among staff and pupils. These views and feelings can add up to having powerful effects on individuals' academic and social experiences and achievements at school, as well as their effects on their peers and teachers.

The survey findings suggest that schools cannot simply ignore democracy; they either promote democratic practices or actively contravene them, there is no neutral middle ground. Some teachers who are deeply concerned about human rights try to find positive ways of working within undemocratic structures set by senior management and by the British government. It is illogical to expect students to understand lessons about rights and democracy and at the same time not to realise when their rights are disrespected at school, or not to be sceptical about discrepancies between what teachers practice and preach. The survey and discussion group replies show that students from 7-years onwards see these discrepancies.

The survey suggests that a council that is seen by students as token has as much or more negative impact than having no council. Simply starting a council, without ensuring that other aspects of the school improve, does not necessarily improve a school. It could increase disaffection about the tensions between rhetoric about democracy and reality in school life and about the school generally. Setting up a democratic council with the students involves related

changes throughout the school in routines and relationships.

An anonymous reviewer of this paper commented "Given the level of apathy and scepticism in the adult population the response of students was encouraging. Age was critical but this would make sense to teachers in secondary schools with significant changes at around 12/13 yrs." Yet to many people, the survey replies are discouraging. Can society afford to have young people becoming apathetic and sceptical? Recent official reports express alarm about the future of democracy given the increasing alienation of many young people. Although reported disaffection which rises with age may be familiar to teachers, how can it "make sense"to them? Surely this is such a wide-spread and serious problem in schools that raising questions and reporting research about why and how young people become alienated and how to prevent this is vital.

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Table 1 School councils

	%Yes	%no	%not sure/	no reply
Does your school have a council where pupils and teachers meet to decide about things that happen in the school?	52	33	15	varies -
The next figures show the percentage of the 52% who said they had a council.				
Can the council talk about any topic?	65			
Or only about things the teachers allow?	20			
Is the school council good at sorting out problems?	28	26	14	30
Does the council help to make the school a better place to be in?	39	25	25	

Table 2 Things I enjoy at school (closed questions)

		A	B	C
Do you enjoy computers		84	76	69
Do you enjoy being with friends		92	93	92
Do you do these (ten) things mainly at school:	yes	39	23	28
	no	11	24	14
Do you think your school gives you enough chances to enjoy doing these things?	Yes very much	18	5	11
	Quite a lot	35	14	32
	It varies	23	31	28
	Not enough	13	28	18
	Hardly at all	5	16	7
	Not sure	7	6	4

Table 3. What do you like enjoy most about your school?
The 10 most frequent replies to this open question were coded.

	A	B	C
sports/PE	24	17	17
particular lessons	23	15	19
seeing my friends	13	18	17
combination of things	19	17	22

break times	6	10	5
art	4	3	4
parties/celebrations	1	1	1
home time	.4	5	2
general atmosphere	2	2	2
craft and design	.4	2	.3

Table 4. What do you like least about your school?

The 10 most frequent replies to this open question were coded.

	A	B	C
Particular lessons	30	21	23
teachers	10	21	11
nothing	8	2	6
too much work/home work	7	8	7
physical conditions in the school	5	5	7
assembly	4	.8	2
rules being too strict	3	7	9
rule about appearance	3	4	5
bullies	3	3	2
behaviour of other people	3	1	2

Table 5 Is there any bullying in your school?

	A	B	C
yes a lot	20	36	18
some	46	41	42
not much	22	14	21
none	3	2	4
varies	4	2	5
not sure	6	6	9

Table 6 School assemblies

			A	B	C
Do you like the school assemblies?	%Yes	23	10	16	
		No	31	59	41
Do you think girls and boys should be able to choose if they go to assemblies?		Yes	44	71	56

Table 7 Views on rules about dress

What do you think about your school's rules about what you can wear and how you can look?	A	B	C
All right	50	26	42
Too strict	27	50	38
not strict enough	3	5	2
we don't have rules and I like that	7	9	3
we don't have rules but we need some	1	-	1

Do you think young people at school should be able to express their religion if they want to, such as boys wearing turbans, or girls wearing scarves?	84	77	77

Are most of your school rules fair?				
	Yes	67	29	50
	No	16	42	19
	Varies	14	28	29

Table 8 Listening teachers

		A	B	C
On the whole, do you teachers listen to you				
	A lot	23	7	16
	Quite a lot	41	27	39
	Not much	21	43	26
	It varies	11	22	18
On the whole do your teachers believe what you say?	Yes	35	14	24
	No	14	29	18
	Varies	40	49	48
	Not sure	12	8	10

Table 9 Choice of school

		A	B	C
Do you think you should be allowed to choose which school you go to?	Yes	50	68	52
	No	4	2	3
Share choosing with my parents		42	25	41
Would you rather be at another school?				
	Yes	9	19	11
	No	82	56	68
	Not sure	9	25	21

Table 10 Views on rights

Do you think that, on the whole, the pupils at your school have:

	A	B	C
too many rights	6	9	3
enough rights	49	10	30
too few rights	17	38	27
almost no rights	5	26	20
varies	7	8	9
not sure	17	9	12

Do you think your school has got the balance right between respecting each person and looking after the rights of the whole school?

	A	B	C
yes	57	16	32
No	9	55	20

Table 11 Have you heard about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child?

	A	B	C
yes, a lot about it	10	5	3
yes, a bit about it	23	19	18
no	49	64	66
not sure	18	12	13

Table 12 Main purposes and aims of being at school

We asked, "What are the main things you want from your school? Please ring all the things that matter most to you.

	A	B	C
* time to be with friends	81	81	83
* good teaching to help me to pass tests and exams	88	81	86
* the feeling that I belong to my class or to the school	59	46	55
* good teaching to help me to get into the job/career I will want to do	82	74	80
* learning to be part of a groups and to get on with other people	68	50	58
* learning about my rights	61	49	53
* getting ideas about interesting new things I could try	70	50	60
* learning about the real world, such as that I might be unemployed	66	59	60
* other main things (none)	87	85	89

(those who replied here mainly mentioned a type of academic lesson)