

# SCHOOL COUNCILS



## THEIR ROLE IN CITIZENSHIP AND PERSONAL AND SOCIAL EDUCATION

Monica J. Taylor  
with  
Robyn Johnson



National Foundation for Educational Research

# **SCHOOL COUNCILS:**

## **THEIR ROLE IN CITIZENSHIP AND PERSONAL AND SOCIAL EDUCATION**

Monica J. Taylor  
with  
Robyn Johnson



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



Published in May 2002  
by the National Foundation for Educational Research,  
The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ

© National Foundation for Educational Research 2002  
Registered Charity No. 313392  
ISBN 1 903880 23 8

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
<b>1. SCHOOL COUNCILS AS A LEARNING STRATEGY FOR CITIZENSHIP AND PERSONAL AND SOCIAL EDUCATION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 School Councils in the Current Policy Context of Citizenship and Personal and Social Education	2
1.3 A Summary of Research on School Councils	10
1.4 The Research Project	15
1.5 Structure of the Report	17
<b>2. ESTABLISHING A SCHOOL COUNCIL: AIMS AND ROLES</b>	<b>20</b>
2.1 Types of School Councils	20
2.2 The Teacher Leaders of the School Council	20
2.3 Setting up School Councils	22
2.4 Aims of School Councils	24
2.5 Key Findings and Issues	28
<b>3. MAINTAINING A SCHOOL COUNCIL: ORGANISATION, REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION</b>	<b>29</b>
3.1 The Frequency, Timing and Duration of School Council Meetings	29
3.2 A Budget for the School Council?	31
3.3 Representation on the Council	32
3.4 (S)election of Councillors	35
3.5 Preparation of Students for their Role on the Council	40
3.6 Idea Generation and Agenda Setting	41
3.7 Topics of Discussion	43
3.8 Note-taking and Feedback to Others	48
3.9 Key Findings and Issues	56
<b>4. SCHOOL COUNCILS IN PRACTICE</b>	<b>57</b>
4.1 Practical Issues	57
4.2 The Role of the Chairperson	59
4.3 Participation and Non-participation	65
4.4 Representation or Expression of Personal View?	66
4.5 The School Council as a Strategy for Institutional Change	68
4.6 Key Findings and Issues	70

<b>5. PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL COUNCILS: THE VIEWS OF TEACHER LEADERS, STUDENT COUNCILLORS AND OTHERS</b>	<b>71</b>
5.1 Teacher Leaders' Perceptions of Councillors' Attitudes	71
5.2 Student Councillors' Perceptions of their Experience	73
5.3 Teacher Leaders' Perceptions of Non-councillors' Attitudes	76
5.4 Non-councillors' Perceptions of School Councils	77
5.5 Teacher Leaders' Perceptions of the Views of Other Teachers, Staff and Governors	83
5.6 Key Findings and Issues	85
<b>6. THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL COUNCILS ON SCHOOLS AND OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS</b>	<b>86</b>
6.1 Impact of the School Council on the School as a Whole	86
6.2 Positive Outcomes – Practical Changes	91
6.3 Learning Outcomes for Students	96
6.4 Councillors' Views of Their Learning from School Council Participation	101
6.5 Key Findings and Issues	116
<b>7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>118</b>
7.1 Summary and Issues	118
7.2 Guidelines for Practice	121
7.3 School Councils as a Strategy for Citizenship and Personal and Social Education: Implications for Student Learning and School Change	125
<b>8. REFERENCES</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>9. APPENDICES</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Research Methodology</b>	<b>135</b>
9.1 Sampling and School Selection	135
9.2 Methods	136
<b>Appendix 2: Case Study Schools and their School Councils</b>	<b>143</b>
School A	143
School B	146
School C	149
School D	152
School E	156
School F	159
School G	162

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Sincere thanks are due to the headteachers and others in seven schools (three primary and four secondary schools) who welcomed us into their school council meetings, allowed us to interview councillors and other students, and talked about the value they placed on student participation in the life of the school. It was a privilege to observe such an intimate part of school life and to see how some schools are enabling students to have a voice and influence in their school communities and develop their personal and social skills.

Sarah Blenkinsop carried out some of the telephone interviews with those in charge of secondary school councils, as did Robyn Johnson with some of those in primary schools. Other telephone interviews and the school-based work were undertaken by Monica Taylor, often accompanied by Robyn Johnson.

We are grateful to our colleagues Sarah Blenkinsop, Rosalind Morton and David Sims for reading and commenting on the report, to Maureen Greenaway and Jill Ware for secretarial support and to Mary Hargreaves and Rose James for producing the published version.

.....

# 1. SCHOOL COUNCILS AS A LEARNING STRATEGY FOR CITIZENSHIP AND PERSONAL AND SOCIAL EDUCATION

There is currently a revival of interest in school councils, in terms of their contribution to the life of the school, young people's experience of democratic processes and practices, and as an aspect of the school's provision for Personal and Social and Citizenship Education. In this opening chapter, we consider why school councils might be seen as an important strategy for learning and why we might want to undertake research on school councils. We examine the way in which school councils feature in the current national policy context of citizenship and personal and social education in England. We also summarise existing research on school councils as a context for our own work. An outline of the research project is given and the structure of the report is set out.

## 1.1 Introduction

In the last few years, approaches to young people's personal and social learning have been under review. Among several government reviews, that of the Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools had particular influence. The Group's Report (Crick Report, 1998) recommended the statutory introduction of citizenship education into schools. It identified three strands that should run through all education for citizenship: social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy. The Crick Report and subsequent government guidelines have stressed active learning approaches in citizenship education, strongly endorsing school councils.

From August 2002, secondary schools will have a statutory responsibility to teach citizenship at key stages 3 and 4 while primary schools are being encouraged to include citizenship in their personal and social curriculum. Citizenship education is expected to: contribute to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development; facilitate key skills; and provide opportunities to



promote other aspects of the curriculum. Schools are thus considering how they can demonstrate their provision for citizenship education and are seeking appropriate pedagogical strategies. In current educational policies and guidelines, school councils are advocated as able to contribute to the development of pupils' social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy, thereby in one strategy addressing the three main strands of citizenship education. Thus there is likely to be an increasing interest in and establishment of school councils to demonstrate schools' delivery of citizenship education.

There is an existing and growing research literature on school councils. But most such research predates the current focus on political literacy, and will not necessarily address the social and moral responsibility and community involvement strands as currently formulated. Thus the intention of our research was to pay particular attention to student participation in the processes and practices of the school council and students' own reports of personal and social learning and understanding of democracy as a result of this experience. By providing rich textual data from primary and secondary school council case studies set in a wider framework of school council practices, our work aims to inform current national policy initiatives and schools' responses. In particular, our research provides an up-to-date account of some of the procedures involved in establishing and maintaining a school council and the perceptions of teachers and students, councillors and non-councillors, involved with school councils. The report raises some conceptual, practical and experiential issues about this pedagogical practice as a contribution to citizenship education.

## **1.2 School Councils in the Current Policy Context of Citizenship and Personal and Social Education**

### **1.2.1 Towards citizenship education**

The current interest in citizenship education and the potential contribution of school councils is not new but is the result of curriculum review and a revised focus. More than a decade or so ago, increasing concern about the preparation of young people for *'the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life'*

(GB. Statutes, 1988) had led to the elaboration of citizenship as one of five cross-curricular themes (NCC, 1990). The emphasis at that time was on enabling students to '*develop a personal moral code and to explore values and beliefs*' by means of participation, acquiring information and developing positive attitudes, '*essential if pupils are to value democracy*' (p.4). It was claimed that education for citizenship was likely to be most successful in schools which, among other things:

- ◆ *encourage the development of a climate which supports the proper exercise of responsibility*
- ◆ *offer pupils an opportunity to be involved in decisions about features of their life at school*
- ◆ *allow pupils to have some control over the use of their time, e.g. ...school councils (p.10)*

Exhorted to provide curricular and extracurricular opportunities for citizenship education, the response of some schools was to set up school councils. As a cross-curricular theme, however, due to constraints on delivery, the timetable, resources and staff expertise, citizenship education was not well integrated into the curriculum (Saunders *et al.*, 1995).

There followed, during the 1990s, a series of initiatives in the broad domain of personal and social education, including: a discussion document on *Spiritual and Moral Development* (NCC, 1993; SCAA, 1995); the National Forum on Values in Education and the Community; and, most importantly for its impact on schools' provision and practices, the introduction of the inspection of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development, which includes citizenship elements. Indeed, OFSTED reports frequently comment on the contribution of school councils to students' personal and social development (see Appendix 2 for some examples).

Towards the late 1990s, many questions and concerns were being raised about the degree of correspondence between these various initiatives, in particular as to how the values embedded in guidance and inspection documents were articulated, perceived and interpreted and how provision influences students' values and attitudes (see e.g. Smith and Standish, 1997). Whilst there were plans to rationalise guidance to schools, with the election of a new Labour Government in 1997, this domain of education came under renewed scrutiny and political influence. There had been lobbying

by various interest groups, which felt that their concerns were not being adequately covered in the curriculum. In addition to the perceived changes to the social fabric, there were concerns about the decline in civic and political culture and, in particular, growing apathy about the political process, with fewer voters, especially young people. To inform its review of the National Curriculum, the Government appointed advisory groups on citizenship and the teaching of democracy in schools (Crick, 1998), personal, social and health education (PSHE) (DfEE. NAGPSHE, 1999), and creative and cultural education (DfEE. NACCCE, 1999), as well as a panel for sustainable development.

The Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy, chaired by Professor Bernard Crick, was asked to address:

*A statement of the aims and purposes of citizenship education in schools;*

*A broad framework for what good citizenship education in schools might look like, and how it can be successfully delivered – covering opportunities for teaching about citizenship within and outside the formal curriculum and the development of personal and social skills through projects linking schools and the community, volunteering and the involvement of pupils in the development of school rules and policies. (Crick, 1998, p.4)*

This latter implicitly included strategies such as school councils. In its final report (Crick, 1998), the Advisory Group set out a clear definition of citizenship education and a framework for its delivery in schools which it recommended should be made statutory. The definition of 'effective education for citizenship' focused on three separate but interrelated strands. These should be developed progressively through a young person's education and training experiences, from pre-school to adulthood:

- ◆ *social and moral responsibility: children learning from the very beginning self-confidence and socially and morally responsible behaviour both in and beyond the classroom, both towards those in authority and towards each other;*
- ◆ *community involvement: pupils learning about and becoming helpfully involved in the life and concerns of their communities, including learning through community involvement and service to the community;*

- ◆ *political literacy: pupils learning about and how to make themselves effective in public life through knowledge, skills and values. (Crick, 1998, pp.40-41)*

The Advisory Group sought to establish a flexible but rigorous framework to encourage schools and colleges, in partnership with their local communities, to develop effective citizenship education, which would take account of the local context, meet needs and provide meaningful experience for young people. This approach has informed subsequent proposals to incorporate citizenship into pre-16 National Curriculum and post-16 education and training (DfEE, AGEC, 2000).

### **1.2.2 Citizenship and personal and social education in the National Curriculum: policy, guidance and school councils as a learning strategy**

Following revision to the National Curriculum, citizenship education is being incorporated explicitly for the first time in the school curriculum 5–16. The rationale given for citizenship education is as follows:

*Citizenship gives pupils the knowledge, skills and understanding to play an effective role in society at local, national and international levels. It helps them to become informed, thoughtful and responsible citizens who are aware of their duties and rights. It promotes their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, making them more self-confident and responsible both in and beyond the classroom. It encourages pupils to play a helpful part in the life of their schools, neighbourhoods, communities and the wider world. It also teaches them about our economy and democratic institutions and values; encourages respect for different national, religious and ethnic identities; and develops pupils' ability to reflect on issues and take part in discussion. (QCA, 1999, p.12)*

Such a rationale has implications for active learning strategies, such as school councils. Citizenship education is taking different forms in primary and secondary schools:

- ◆ for primary schools (key stage 1, age 5–7, and key stage 2, age 7–11) citizenship is part of a non-statutory framework for personal, social and health education (PSHE) from August 2000;

- ◆ for secondary schools (key stage 3, age 11–14, and key stage 4, age 14–16) citizenship is a new statutory foundation subject. This means that from September 2002 schools will legally be required to deliver citizenship education at key stages 3 and 4.

At primary level, the framework for PSHE and citizenship at key stages 1 and 2 has four components, of which the most obvious citizenship element is defined as *Preparing to Play an Active Role as Citizens*. Links are made with the National Healthy School Standard, a whole-school approach is recommended, and many suggestions and examples are given as to how PSHE and citizenship can be taken forward (QCA, 2000a). Included amongst these are explicit and implicit references to school councils: '*Examples of how PSHE and citizenship can be reflected within the values and ethos of a school include ... consulting and valuing all members of the school's community*' (p.9); '*Involvement in the running of the school through school or class councils and other decision-making also promotes responsibility and learning about democracy*' (p.10).

At secondary level, there are programmes of study for citizenship and an attainment target for key stage 3 and key stage 4, based on three elements:

- ◆ knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens;
- ◆ developing skills of enquiry and communication;
- ◆ developing skills of participation and responsible action.

The framework programmes of study for citizenship are to be interpreted by schools in their own context (see QCA, 1999, pp.14–15). Schools are exhorted to build on present practices, vary depth of coverage of aspects of knowledge and understanding, differentiate according to student need, be innovative, and promote continuity and progression. Guidance indicates three different approaches, based on concepts, skills and enquiry, to teaching and learning in citizenship (QCA, 2000b). For example, by the end of key stage 4, age 16, the attainment target states:

*Pupils have a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the topical events they study: the rights, responsibilities and duties of citizens; the role of the voluntary sector; forms of government; and the criminal and civil justice, legal and economic systems. They obtain and use different kinds of*

*information, including the media, to form and express an opinion. They evaluate the effectiveness of different ways of bringing about change at different levels of society. Pupils take part effectively in school and community-based activities, showing a willingness and commitment to evaluate such activities critically. They demonstrate personal and group responsibility in their attitudes to themselves and others. (QCA, 1999, p.31)*

It is suggested that schools should have a whole-school approach to citizenship, develop a policy, audit current work and identify gaps. For example, under the section 'A whole-school approach' the initial guidance suggests that students may '*participate in the running of the school through school and class councils or committees with a variety of voting systems ...*' (QCA, 2000b, p.10). It is recognised that the political literacy strand might be new and that at key stage 4 the programmes of study might require discrete provision (QCA, 2000b). But citizenship is also seen as contributing to learning across the curriculum, for example:

- ◆ *Promoting Pupils' SMSC Development: moral development*, through helping pupils develop a critical appreciation of issues of right and wrong, justice, fairness, rights and obligations in society;
- ◆ *Promoting Key Skills: working with others*, through sharing ideas, formulating policies and taking part in responsible action in communities;
- ◆ *Thinking Skills*: through helping pupils to engage in social issues that require the use of reasoning, understanding and action through enquiry and evaluation.

Moreover, other areas and aspects of the curriculum are perceived as related to the knowledge, skills and understanding to be developed in citizenship, such as PSHE, (QCA, 2000c), careers education (DfEE, 2000a) and an emphasis on a global dimension (DfEE, 2000b).

In the most recent guidance, a citizenship work scheme for key stage 3 (QCA, 2001), a document in the pack, 'Getting involved: extending opportunities for pupil participation', includes a small sub-section on student councils, suggesting strategies by which a student team could investigate the effectiveness of their school council. Unit 14 within the pack on 'Developing skills of

democratic participation' enables students to work together to develop a democratic group decision-making process, with specific reference to school council practices.

Furthermore, the government has signalled its ongoing commitment to citizenship education with explicit mention of school councils in its Green Paper (DfEE, 2001). Under the heading 'We will promote "Education with Character"' it announces support to:

*Encourage schools to involve pupils much more actively in decisions, not just about their own individual learning, but about their class and their school as a whole. This can be done through the establishment of school councils, through regular surveys of pupil attitudes and a range of other means. (p.61)*

### **1.2.3 The perceived contribution of school councils to citizenship education: evidence from inspection and research**

#### **Inspection**

Prior to the statutory introduction of citizenship education, there seems to be a greater consciousness of citizenship education and sometimes of the potential contribution of school councils in official documents. For example, the latest available Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in relation to citizenship in primary schools includes mention of school councils:

*Social development is also effectively promoted in a large majority of schools. Pupils are encouraged to take responsibilities which increase as they get older. They help with tasks around the school and take part enthusiastically in activities such as school councils or for fundraising for charity. (OFSTED, 2001, p.29)*

*Although school councils are not specifically mentioned in HMCI's Report about secondary education, it claims Pupils' social development in part depends on the extent to which schools recognise and provide opportunities for the pupils to play an active role in the life of the school. Such experiences often continue to be confined to older pupils. (p. 42)*

Placing these statements together identifies a paradox which suggests that the level of responsibility sometimes given to primary students, such as in school councils, is not always transferred to, or

built upon in the secondary context. Continuity of experience may be an issue, which, in turn, suggests that schools at both phases may need to pay attention to how effective education for citizenship can be progressively and explicitly developed as recommended in current national guidance.

### **Research**

Several recent research studies, conducted to inform the development of current policy and guidance on citizenship education, incidentally provide some further insights into school councils.

A study of citizenship education in England, undertaken as part of an international IEA study in 28 countries, which included a survey of the civic knowledge and attitudes of 3,043 14-year-olds, found that the English students' greatest difficulty was in answering questions on civic content regarding democracy and government (Kerr *et al.*, forthcoming). Students' knowledge about the processes and practices of decision making and government was poor. This was especially the case in schools with a higher level of racial or religious intolerance, suggesting the particular significance of providing opportunities to experience participation in democratic practices in such schools. However, students held positive views about how working together could bring about changes in schools and solve problems. Indeed, 70 per cent of all the young people in the English study agreed that *'electing student representatives to suggest changes in how the school is run makes schools better'*. Yet only 18 per cent of the English students reported that they were involved in a school or class council – a figure which may reflect only those who saw themselves as direct participants, such as councillors. By contrast, 89 per cent of 118 headteachers from the same schools in the study claimed that their school had a school or class council. And 75 per cent of 348 teachers in these schools saw their main functions as to empower students to decide, solve school problems (71 per cent), or provide opportunities for students to participate in the political life of the school (50 per cent). Thus there seemed to be a gap between the perceptions of students and teachers. Most 14-year-olds did not see themselves as actually participating in democratic school processes. The authors observe that *'Schools that model democratic values and practices by encouraging students to discuss issues in the classroom and take an active role in the life of the school are effective in promoting civic knowledge and engagement'* (Kerr *et al.*, 2001, p.5).



Other pilot studies support these findings. For example, a pilot project on citizenship at key stage 3 (Kerr and Greenaway, 2000) noted that school ethos was important in influencing how students viewed their experiences of citizenship and there was a need for schools to offer more positive examples of democratic procedures and experiences of participating more fully in the running of the school. In particular, there was a perceived need for developing the skills of active citizenship – skills of discussion, debate, analysing information and communicating ideas. Moreover, another recent study, mapping resources for citizenship education (Kerr *et al.*, 2000), found that representatives of key organisations surveyed claimed that there were gaps in the availability of published resources to promote participation in school councils and political literacy (at key stages 1 and 2) and community participation and democratic skills (at key stages 3 and 4). Thus in order to support the development of participative and active citizenship, such as through school councils, schools may need more resources.

## **1.3 A Summary of Research on School Councils**

If school councils are being advocated as likely to make a strong contribution to citizenship education, what evidence exists about the extent to which school councils help young people to understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens? Reference is made to a previous survey of international research on school councils (Halstead and Taylor, 2000), updated here with recent UK references. Whilst we should be cautious about transferring to this context the findings of research undertaken outside the UK, nevertheless work elsewhere on pedagogical practices, such as ‘just communities’ and ‘communities of inquiry’, which involve some similar skills and approaches, can reveal relevant insights.

### **1.3.1 What is a school council?**

A school council may take several forms, depending on its aims, but it is always to some extent a forum for students to express their views and possibly to facilitate school-wide change. Where there is a school council, each class or year group usually elects representatives (councillors) who take concerns and requests to the full school council meeting. Issues typically discussed by school councils include school uniform, facilities, school trips, food provision, behaviour and bullying, fundraising, and possibly the

curriculum and homework. Minutes of meetings are taken and reports made to staff and class groups. There exist resource packs for setting up a school council in primary and secondary schools (School Councils UK, 2000, 2001) and guides to making school councils effective (Devon Youth Council, 1996). Several publications provide descriptive case studies of school councils in operation (Pupil Eye, 1989; Allison, 1991; Rowe, 1992; Power and Power, 1992; Elton, 1994; SCCC, 1995).

### 1.3.2 Aims

A review of the international research literature available in English on school councils (Halstead and Taylor, 2000) suggested that establishing a school council may involve a number of *aims*:

- ◆ helping children to understand democratic procedures and awakening the motivation to engage with the exercise and negotiation of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in everyday life (Bottery, 1990); Power (1992), who researched 'just community' schools in America, calls this the '*apprenticeship approach*', arguing that students need direct experience of democracy if they are to become fully participative citizens in society;
- ◆ recognising a duty to respect children's rights (as in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child);
- ◆ offering children opportunities for service (learning to care for others);
- ◆ promoting better behaviour by giving students more responsibilities and opportunities to express their views (Elton, 1989; NCC, 1990).

The diversity of these aims raises questions about the extent of the overlap between moral, social and political education, about the meaning of democracy in a school context, and about possible clashes between a philosophy of service and a philosophy of empowerment (NSPCC, 1995).

### 1.3.3 Quantitative surveys

In 1992 an Advisory Centre for Education (ACE) survey of 480 randomly selected schools in the UK found that about one-third had school councils. They were twice as common in secondary as in primary schools (Ashworth, 1995). Problem areas were feedback

from staff to students, attendance of a range of school staff, lack of a budget and reporting to school governors. Schools with school councils were more likely to involve students in a range of management issues, giving students a greater sense of ownership and increased understanding of management issues, as well as enhancing problem-solving abilities and improving behaviour. However, a survey of student councils in British Columbian primary schools found that they mainly focused on planning and organising activities for fundraising (Robinson and Koehn, 1994).

Alderson (2000), researching students' views about children's rights in 1997–8, found that about half of the opportunity sample of 2,272 students aged 7–17 surveyed in the UK reported that they had a school council. But less than one-fifth of these students said that they had an effective school council. The students claiming to have an effective council were more likely to have positive views about their school's social and academic activities in general and to be in the primary phase. Also in 1998 the NSPCC, in partnership with School Councils UK and ACE, conducted a questionnaire survey on school councils of a random sample of schools in England and Wales (Baginsky and Hannam, 1999). Of the responding schools, 16 primary and 240 secondary schools had school councils and provided information about their practices. Most of the secondary school also provided student responses. The main advantages identified by staff and students were that councils gave students a voice, made a link between students and staff and allowed students to have a management role in school and to work with their peers of different ages. The only actual or potential disadvantages mentioned (by about half teachers and students) were lack of time for students and teachers to develop the council and its work and for staff participation, lack of resources and some student feeling that some decisions were disregarded in favour of what teachers wanted. Whereas staff focused on developing a more proactive student body and improved communication, students were more concerned about the status of the council, their contribution and effective training for participation. Time, staff resistance, trust between staff and students and apathy were all identified as development constraints.

### 1.3.4 Qualitative research

Reviewing evidence from five studies in the USA, Hepburn (1984) concluded that '*democratic experiences in the school and the classroom do contribute to the participatory awareness, skills and attitudes fundamental to life in democratic societies*' (p.261; cf. also Nadeau and Burns, 1989). A case study of four secondary schools in the USA (Mosher *et al.* 1994), which had operated different forms of democratic organisation for several years, showed that: debate in school councils could raise students' levels of moral reasoning and understanding (see also Mosher, 1980, p.296); students learned self-governance and found solutions to school problems; students developed skills, such as how to conduct meetings, took others' views into account, had increased consideration for the rights of others and an awareness that their actions could make a difference.

Importantly, a practice explicitly agreed by students within a democratic school community was likely to have more influence on the social behaviour of adolescents. By contrast, evidence suggests that students in schools without democratic practices may feel little or no responsibility for upholding school rules even when they believe that violating such rules would be wrong (Power *et al.*, 1989). A case study of ten schools showed that school councils were a key strategy in promoting inclusion and identified ways in which they had a direct, semi-direct and indirect impact on supporting the reduction of exclusions (Davies, 1998).

In the UK, John and Osborn (1992) suggested that the schools with more class participation and freedom of expression had a stronger influence on students' values than the 'traditional' school; in the former, students were more supportive of race and gender equality, but also more sceptical about the democratic operation of government. An investigation into the Pupil Councils Programme in five Liverpool schools (Khaleel, 1993) also showed that school councils often have mixed effects. Positive outcomes were: increases in student confidence, maturity, responsibility; shared problem-solving; less antisocial behaviour, partly due to student monitoring; a better school environment; better student-teacher relationships; and greater participation in extra-curricular activities initiated by students. Most councillors were seen to set a good example to other students. Rowe (1996) found that there was

student disillusionment at the poor level of discussion, the low status of the school council, the élitism of representatives, poor communication between councillors and other students and lack of action. Student councils were sometimes sidelined to a student welfare role, with consultation on behaviour policies taking place via tutor groups. The NSPCC study (1995) found that students often felt that a school council gave an appearance of consultation rather than real interest in students' views. A small study of children's participation found that opportunities to express their views and to be listened to were very limited even when school councils were in place (Wyse, 2001).

### 1.3.5 Evaluation

Such mixed findings have led experts to be cautious with their advice. Mosher *et al.* (1994) counsel that self-discipline and moral development fostered by democratic school organisations need to be supported by democratic practices elsewhere in school. According to Rowe (1996), the work of the school council needs to be integrated with other forms of consultation, such as course evaluation and tutor-group discussion. Research indicates that school councils operate most effectively where there is a general democratic ethos in the school and where teachers are committed to consultation, shared decision-making and to promoting the active involvement of young people in civic responsibility, through a range of learning activities supporting citizenship education (e.g. Jones, 2000). In order to support the processes involved in school councils, research suggests that explicit attention is needed by both teachers and students to learning the significance and practice of relevant skills, such as discussion and debate (see, e.g. Haydon, 2000), consultation and participation (Ruddock and Flutter, 2000), voting procedures, and generating confidence among students that by taking part they can make a difference and improve school life (Kerr *et al.*, forthcoming). Student participation in school councils may also be effectively supported by a range of other local citizenship education experiences between schools and in area consultative and council groups (see, e.g. Baker and Sillett with Neary, 2000).

## 1.4 The Research Project

This sub-section addresses the following three questions:

- ◆ Given that a certain body of research on school councils already exists, why was there a need for further research and what particular contribution might it make?
- ◆ What were the aims of the research?
- ◆ How was it undertaken?

### 1.4.1 The relevance of the research

As we have seen in the previous section (1.3), published research has mostly described school councils and focused on practical and operational issues. Research has also often been sponsored by interested parties engaged in promoting school councils. Existing research has not focused in depth on students' experience and perceptions of school councils and their participation as an influence on the processes and outcomes of their personal, social and citizenship learning.

Thus it was intended that the research would help to inform policy and provide practical guidance to schools. It was expected that it would indicate the issues and tensions in giving students a voice, airing their concerns about school matters, influencing change, taking responsibility for implementing decisions, and thereby learning the personal skills and social processes of becoming an active citizen.

### 1.4.2 Aims of the research

The aims of the research were to investigate and provide evidence of:

- ◆ how primary and secondary schools see school councils as contributing to their provision for citizenship education, the life of the school as a whole and to the personal and social development of students;
- ◆ whether, and if so, to what extent, students' involvement in school councils:
  - gives them a voice in school matters and enables them to act as agents of change;

- facilitates their political literacy, especially their awareness and understanding of democratic processes, practices and participation; and
- encourages them to participate in civic activities in and around their school community;
- ◆ issues in the development, implementation and review of the impact of school councils on young people's personal, social and democratic learning.

### **1.4.3 Research methodology**

The research employed a qualitative case study methodology grounded in a quantitative telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of schools. The project was conducted over three school terms in the academic year 2000–1. This facilitated a methodology of breadth and depth. The sequence of research activities was as follows:

- ◆ first, a broad picture was built up of the issues in running school councils and teachers' perceptions of their contribution to student learning;
- ◆ secondly, to provide focus and diversity, a selection was made of schools with flourishing school councils which operated on different models;
- ◆ thirdly, case studies of school councils were undertaken over two terms in primary and secondary schools.

Initially, the research drew on data from an earlier NFER-sponsored project in which approximately one-third of respondents in almost 550 nationally representative primary and secondary schools claimed that they had experienced staff development on school councils as part of their work in values education. From a representative sample of these schools, a total of 50 telephone interviews (25 primary, 25 secondary) were conducted with the teacher leader of the school councils. The telephone interviews asked about background to the school council, how it functioned, its status, teachers' and students' perceptions of the council, learning outcomes and impacts on school life.

As a result of these interviews, several schools with different school council models, where there was said to be a flourishing council with apparently genuine student participation, were approached for permission to undertake case study work. Eventually seven schools

(three primary and four secondary) allowed in-depth study of their school council activities. The case studies took place over two terms and, with one exception, involved at least two visits to each school. A common programme of research activities, appropriate to the circumstances of each particular school, was undertaken. This covered:

- ◆ observation and recording of the school council meetings (15);
- ◆ group interviews (8) with selected school councillors about their participation, perceptions of the council and its achievements, implications of their involvement for their learning, and awareness of the attitudes of teachers and other students to the council's activities; and
- ◆ where possible, interviews with non-councillors (in one primary and one secondary school) and with other members of staff about their expectations and perceptions of the school council and their evaluation of its impact on student learning and school change.

Appendix 1 gives further methodological details on the sampling and school selection, telephone interview and case study methods, key characteristics of the case study schools and their school councils (Table 1) and research activities in the case study schools (Table 2). Further information on the interview and observation schedules may be available on request. The school background and school councils of the seven case study schools (primary A–C; secondary D–G) are described in Appendix 2.

## 1.5 Structure of the Report

In this report, the quantitative findings from the telephone interview survey are used as a framework in which to contextualise the qualitative data from the case studies. We usually present the broader numerical picture of school councils from the teacher interviews first. Then the rich data from the school council observations and interviews with students are used to offer detailed illustrations of practices, perceptions and learning outcomes.

In **Chapter 2**, we consider the establishment of school councils, their aims and the roles of those who work with them. First, we provide some background information about different types of



school councils and the roles of the teacher leaders. Then we report on issues in setting up a school council, and distinguish four main aims which schools claimed in establishing a council.

**Chapter 3** reviews the issues of organisation, representation and participation in maintaining a school council. It considers practical matters such as: frequency, timing and duration of meetings and whether the council should have its own budget; representation on the council and the (s)election of representatives and preparation for their role; generating ideas and agenda setting, topics discussed, note taking and feedback.

Data from our observations of school councils, as well as student perceptions, are used in **Chapter 4** to describe and reflect on issues which arise in the actual process of the council meeting and its institutionalisation in the practices of the school itself. These range over: practical issues concerning the conduct of the meetings; the role of the chairperson, comparing and contrasting headteacher and student examples; participation and non-participation of councillors in meetings; the representation of others' views or the expression of a personal view; and evolution of the school council as a strategy for institutionalised change.

**Chapter 5** focuses on perceptions of the school council. First, we set out teachers' and councillors' perceptions of the council and its status, as well as their experiences as councillors. Secondly, we examine the views of non-councillors about key aspects of the school council, including councillor roles, election, feedback and consultation, having a say and getting their views known. Thirdly, we present some evidence of views of non-participating teachers, other staff and governors about the school council.

Impacts on schools and outcomes for students are the subjects of **Chapter 6**. First we consider the impact of the school council on the school as a whole: teachers' and students' views of the benefits and the disadvantages of having a school council. Secondly, we hear the claims of teachers and councillors about the positive outcomes and practical changes brought about by the activities of the school council. Thirdly, teachers state their views on the learning outcomes for non-councillors and councillors of having a school council. The final sub-section importantly considers councillors'

own views of their learning as a result of participating in the school council. Evidence is cited of learning a range of personal, social and problem-solving skills and of developing awareness or understanding of democratic processes and practices. Several examples of personal development are given.

**Chapter 7** offers a summary of the findings and issues for primary schools and secondary schools. Guidelines are offered for schools wishing to set up a school council or to review their practices. Finally, we evaluate the school council as a strategy for citizenship and personal and social education, and the implications for student learning and school change.

## 2. ESTABLISHING A SCHOOL COUNCIL: AIMS AND ROLES

We begin by focusing on the establishment of school councils, drawing mainly on the telephone interview data from 50 schools. We describe the types of school councils found; the roles of the teachers leading the school council; their perceptions of setting up the council; and, most importantly, the school's aims for undertaking this strategy.

### 2.1 Types of School Councils

Typically, a school council consists of a group of student representatives from each year group. However, the structure of student representation was different in some secondary schools in the sample. Two of the 'councils' were in fact year councils as opposed to whole-school councils, i.e. each class in each year group had student representatives who met as a year council to discuss issues. In over half of the 25 secondary schools, there was a year council as well as a whole-school council (in which representatives from each year attended whole-school council meetings). Five schools also had sixth-form councils, two had a council for Year 9–11 only and another had a Year 11 council which discussed whole-school issues.

Variation on the typical concept of a school council was more rare in the primary school sample. One small school had a council only for Year 6, which *all* Year 6 students attended and from which captains were elected. In another school, the student councillors were part of the governing body and attended a governors' meeting once a year.

### 2.2 The Teacher Leaders of the School Council

In the autumn term 2000, 50 telephone interviews were carried out with teachers in 25 primary and 25 secondary schools. The posts held by the interviewees, normally the member of staff responsible for school council, were as follows:

- ◆ 37 members of the senior management team (SMT);
- ◆ seven teachers with pastoral roles (e.g. head of year);
- ◆ five curriculum managers;
- ◆ one subject teacher.

Those in charge of the council tended to be at a senior level within the school; in 29 out of the 50 schools, the headteacher or deputy took on the role. In secondary schools, however, responsibility for the school council was more likely to be more widely dispersed. Leadership of the council could be indicative of its status; two secondary headteachers specifically mentioned that they took on the role themselves in order to give the council a high profile within their school. But headteacher leadership could also be a matter of keeping control of the topics of discussion and outcomes. Some of the teachers interviewed reported that the headteacher made an effort to attend meetings, noting that *'it is easier if you have the head's backing'*. Another warned that it was essential to obtain backing from the SMT to enable changes to be made, adding that *'if you can't make changes you will lose students' interest'*. The extent to which a member of the school's SMT is practically involved with a council may therefore be a key factor in determining its success, especially at primary level.

A few interviewees reported that they had requested a council be set up and/or had volunteered to run it. Some gave reasons, such as: the idea of a school council fitted in with his/her personal philosophy; a belief that *'children should be able to channel their feelings'*; a desire to change the school's culture; or a wish to see changes within the school. On the whole, however, interviewees held their post on the council because this was seen as relevant to their other teaching roles, for example, as a Personal and Social Education (PSE) or citizenship coordinator.

Interviewees' roles on the council were usually those of facilitator, coordinator, organiser, secretary (only in primary schools) or chairperson. A few emphasised they adopted a 'minimal' role, usually confined to facilitating or monitoring, rather than actively directing the meetings. For example, one teacher reported that he only intervened if it was necessary, such as if he was asked any specific questions. However, observation of school council meetings, both at primary and secondary levels, revealed that there was usually a good deal of teacher intervention. As with other

teaching and learning strategies, teachers may not always be fully aware of their involvement and influence.

Two interviewees mentioned that they were jointly responsible for the council together with another member of staff, although one of these reported that this was problematic (see 2.3.1).

## 2.3 Setting up School Councils

The average length of time a council had been in place was six years, although there were major differences between primary and secondary schools in this respect. In primary schools, most councils had been in place for between three and five years, with an average of four years. By contrast, in the secondary phase, the length of time of the establishment of a school council was more likely to vary, with an average time of eight years. Furthermore, the oldest primary school council had been in place for 11 years; the oldest in secondary schools had been in existence for 26 years. School councils in general were therefore clearly much more established in the secondary context. Even so, they were just as likely to be starting up in individual secondary schools as they were in individual primary schools (there were three school councils in their first year in both primary and secondary schools). It may be concluded that although councils were traditionally more common in secondary schools – possibly because of age-related views about student development and participation – councils are now appealing more to both phases of education.

Judging from the responses given by those interviewees who were eligible to answer this question, it appears that setting up the school council was a relatively unproblematic process for the schools in the sample. Less than half of the teachers reported encountering any challenges at this stage. However, secondary schools were more likely to have had difficulties than primary schools (13 out of 25, compared with eight out of 25 respectively).

### 2.3.1 Difficulties in setting up school councils

*Staff Reluctance.* This was by far the biggest problem in setting up school councils in secondary schools. Eight secondary interviewees mentioned this, compared with only two primary teachers (perhaps because primary schools are generally smaller, more close-knit and have a stronger internal support structure). Some interviewees reported that there had been a lack of support from the SMT, and

mentioned that *'teachers didn't want to hand over the ropes'*, because they were afraid of student empowerment. *'[The school council is] difficult to initiate if staff feel threatened by children expressing opinions... the opinions might be about them'*. Furthermore, a primary school interviewee reported that *'some teachers were sceptical. I had to sell it to them during staff meetings.'* Teachers in one school were apparently deterred due to unsuccessful attempts at a setting up a school council in the past, as well as time pressures.

*Finding a Suitable Time for Meetings.* This appears to be the biggest challenge that had been faced by primary schools (five schools); this was not such a problem in secondary schools (two schools) at the initial stage. It was reported that holding council meetings in either lesson time or lunch time caused problems. In both of the secondary schools where timing was an issue, the meetings were originally held during lunch, which was more convenient, but were later moved to lesson time in an attempt to heighten the council's status.

Other problems included:

- ◆ *Student Apathy.* This was largely to do with a lack of ideas, rather than students not showing an interest; one interviewee was planning to be more proactive to encourage students to raise issues pertinent to them in an attempt to change their perceptions of the meeting as *'boring'*.
- ◆ *The Very Nature of a Typical School.* As one teacher commented: *'schools don't lend themselves to democracy...students were just talked at'*.

---

One headteacher was conscious of the lack of democratic ethos in her school. She herself wrote a constitution and introduced a school council. However, she admitted that the traditional approach of the school made this process difficult.

---

In contrast, however, another headteacher talked about how *'the philosophy was already there – it was just a matter of putting it all into place'*.

---

These examples imply that the established ethos of a school is likely to be a considerable influence on how easy it is likely to be to create a school council. In some schools the culture may need to be changed considerably to accommodate a council. In others, setting up a council is a natural progression given the culture already

in place. In yet others, the existence of a school council may in fact change the culture of the school.

- ◆ *Joint Leadership of the Council.* This problem of joint leadership of a secondary school council was eased after one teacher left; the remaining teacher said: *'It's easier to achieve what you want to achieve if you are the only one organising it.'*
- ◆ *Adjusting Expectations.* Occasionally students or teachers could initially have unrealistic expectations (*'These were dealt with as they became apparent and as time went on.'*). The idea and processes of the council needed to be absorbed into school life.
- ◆ *Lack of Training for Councillors.* This was an issue in one primary school (see 3.5).

A few interviewees also reported that the council had to be 'restarted' after unsuccessful attempts at running it in the past. For example, the council in one school had previously been regarded as a *'fundraising forum'*, and although successful in raising money, it was being reformed with the broader aim of promoting democracy. In addition, after trialling a council which had *'a simple approach and did not have a clear vision of its purpose'*, one interviewee had *'come to realise that the children need to see that they are making a worthwhile input and having some influence in order for the council to work'*. This was leading to reform of the council. The challenges to setting up a school council bear some resemblance to the disadvantages, or overall problems with having a school council that some interviewees reported (see 6.1.2).

## 2.4 Aims of School Councils

The aims of the councils, as reported by the schools in our survey, can be categorised under four main headings: giving students a voice; enhancing students' personal and social skills; making provision for citizenship education as part of the National Curriculum; developing the school as a community.

### 2.4.1 Giving students a voice

Giving students a voice was the most frequently reported aim. Whilst this was claimed as an aim of establishing a council in virtually all primary schools, only two-thirds of secondary school

interviewees mentioned it. Teachers felt that it was important *'to give them [students] the opportunity to offer their thoughts and views on developments in their school'* and to allow them *'to have a say about issues which affect them'*. Some teachers claimed that having a school council enabled staff to see things from the students' points of view, and others maintained that they were keen to hear about students' views, perceptions and suggestions for improving school life.

In addition, several interviewees stressed that they aimed to *'involve the children in a forum for decision making'*, *'help them to feel part of the structure'* and *'help them to understand the decisions that are made in school'*. The council was generally regarded as *'part of the decision-making structure'*, but a teacher in one school emphasised that her council was not part of the decision-making process; rather children highlighted things that they wanted to change and then decisions were made by staff. In order to avoid misunderstandings about its purpose and capacity, it is important that the role, functioning and remit of the council be made transparent to the school as a whole from the start.

Furthermore, some teachers pointed to the centrality of a two-way process in the functioning of the school council. They explained how staff were able to make specific requests to children, obtain their views and suggestions on a particular idea, and then encouraging students to monitor staff decisions. There was considerable evidence of this in practice from the case-study schools. For example: in School A the councillors were asked to obtain the views of their classmates about the possibility of introducing a school uniform; in School C there was a survey of dinner provision.

#### **2.4.2 Developing students' personal and social skills**

Several primary school interviewees reported that the aim of the council was to develop students' personal and social skills. By getting them involved in the processes and procedures of the school council, they aimed to give them a sense of responsibility, ownership of ideas and activities, help them feel valued, allow them to compare their values and beliefs, and improve their confidence and communication. Teaching students how to debate, discuss and resolve issues, as well as dealing with their personal problems were also mentioned. Although improving students' personal and social skills was, in general terms, one of the main aims in secondary



schools, it was given less emphasis. By comparison, secondary school councils appeared to link social and personal development with enhancing students' sense of contribution to the school as an institution rather than the individual development of students themselves (e.g. giving students responsibility for social aspects of the school or for events (five schools) and instilling a sense of authority/ownership (two schools)). Only one interviewee explicitly said that one of the aims was to develop students' abilities to debate and make requests.

### **2.4.3 Developing citizenship education as part of the National Curriculum**

As might be expected, given current requirements, this aim was much more likely to be stated by interviewees in secondary schools. Several of these teachers aimed to connect the school council to citizenship education, in particular the aim of developing an understanding of democratic ideas and practices. The council was described as '*a vehicle for citizenship*'. One teacher said that, although the council had not been set up with this link in mind, they were planning to '*exploit it to the full*'. Another interviewee reported that the new regulations for citizenship education were borne in mind when the council was reformed. In other secondary schools, the council aimed to allow students to experience democracy and show them how it works. In primary schools, however, a relatively small number of teachers mentioned democracy or citizenship. One school aimed to give students the opportunity '*to begin to appreciate democratic issues*'. In another primary school, the council was seen as making a contribution to the speaking and listening policy. However, although the development of citizenship education did not feature largely in primary teachers' original aims for the school council, there was evidence to suggest that more recently some teachers were becoming more aware of the potential of this association.

### **2.4.4 Developing the school as a community**

Other stated aims can be broadly grouped as improving the school as a community. In four schools, this meant '*tackling real issues*', such as bullying and fundraising, and another three schools hoped to improve relationships between staff and students. Other teachers aimed to improve the school's environment, for example by encouraging '*communal care and responsibility and helping to foster community spirit*' by enhancing a sense of ownership in

students. Whole-school issues such as *'raising awareness of school life and management'* and rewriting school rules were also mentioned. A small number of interviewees had more far-reaching aims of making the school as a whole more democratic.

### 2.4.5 Changing aims

According to our interviewees, the aims of the council were far more likely to have been changed over time in primary than secondary schools. This may be related to the fact that current citizenship education guidelines did not play an important role in the initial formation of primary school councils' aims. But, interestingly, one such council was being *'seen more in terms of citizenship provision'*, and a headteacher said she was pleased to realise that what they were doing was in line with citizenship guidelines. Three primary interviewees noted that, although the aims of the council had not changed, there was an evolving process, with the council gradually being absorbed into the routine of school life. By comparison, only one secondary interviewee specifically reported that the council had become more democratic.

However, the picture that was obtained of the adjustment of aims may not be entirely accurate. It was more common for teacher interviewees in secondary schools to have taken over leadership of the council after it had been set up and the aims had been set, and consequently they were less likely to know whether or not the aims had changed. It is possible, therefore, that the aims of more secondary school councils had undergone a change in line with citizenship education policy to a greater extent than explicitly indicated.

It is worth noting that the aims of sixth-form councils appear to differ from those of whole-school councils. Judging from the two schools which gave such details, they concentrate largely on issues which affect the sixth form, such as the common room and study periods. Items such as fundraising may also be raised. The whole philosophy of a sixth-form council appears to be more advanced; in one school *'part of the idea is to understand the limits of what can be done in the educational process'*, as well as in the political process. Helping students to appreciate their rights and responsibilities in connection with freedom of speech and developing skills, which could be mentioned on their UCAS forms, were also mentioned as aims.

Where successful, the evolving aims and processes of the whole-school council appeared to be closely linked to school ethos. One interviewee commented that the council had gradually become more pastoral rather than business-like. Moreover, another headteacher felt that the council had considerably changed the culture of the school:

*The school council has moved from a vehicle for complaints to a more positive forum where people are congratulated, ideas are developed and through which the school environment is improved. It has moved the school on from where there were difficulties to where children are given more freedom and responsibility and an expectation to behave responsibly.*

## 2.5 Key Findings and Issues

- The majority of teacher leaders of the school council were members of the SMT in the school.
- The teacher leaders perceived their roles differently, some as facilitator, others as secretary or chairperson.
- Secondary schools were more likely to have had a school council in place for longer, on average twice as long as in primary schools.
- Secondary schools were more likely than primary schools to report difficulties in setting up school councils; these included staff reluctance, timing of meetings, and the very nature of school itself.
- The main aims of the school councils were: giving students a voice; enhancing personal and social skills; developing citizenship as part of the National Curriculum; and development of the school as a community.

### **3. MAINTAINING A SCHOOL COUNCIL: ORGANISATION, REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION**

Having established a school council, what does it take to maintain it in operation? Chapter 3 considers organisational issues: the frequency, duration and timing of meetings and whether there should be a dedicated budget. We then explore democratic issues of representation – of students and adults – on the council, how the former are elected or selected, and preparation for their role as councillors. Finally, we review procedural matters: idea generation, agenda setting, topics discussed, note taking and feedback. Here we cite findings from the telephone survey with additional illustrations from the case study schools.

#### **3.1 The Frequency, Timing and Duration of School Council Meetings**

In most schools, council meetings were held once every half term. However, the frequency of council meetings varied between schools, from once a week to once a term. There were no major differences between primary and secondary schools in this respect. Once a month or once a fortnight were also popular timing options. A teacher in one school believed that the council should not meet more frequently than once a month because such a period of time is needed for classroom feedback and discussion. Another interviewee mentioned that he tried to limit the number of meetings in order to keep them meaningful. Both the telephone and the case study interviews indicated that adequate time for feedback and idea (re)generation should be important considerations in deciding the frequency of meetings. In fact, it should be noted that, in at least five of the sample schools, the frequency of meetings reported was merely an ideal: *'We do not meet as regularly as I would like.'* This appeared to be due to time pressures or, less commonly, student apathy. Indeed, in three of the seven case study schools (one primary, two secondary) the last scheduled school council meeting towards the end of the summer term was cancelled, suggesting that such meetings lack status, at least in the face of other demands at such a point in the school year.

In primary schools, the most popular time at which to hold meetings was during lessons (15 schools), while in secondary schools, it was lunchtime (ten schools). Furthermore, whereas councils in primary schools largely met either during lunch or lesson time, there was more variation in secondary schools, with a wider range of popular times (i.e. lunchtime, after school, lesson time and (less frequently) tutorial time). In half of the secondary schools, the council meeting took place in the PSE lesson. In one primary school, council meetings spanned both lesson and lunchtime '*so children do have to give up some of their free time*', and in another, the school council met during assembly.

There appear to be both advantages and disadvantages to holding meetings during lesson time. In one school, the council was organised in lessons to '*create a reasonable business atmosphere and give it status*', but in two other schools the disruption to teaching time was deemed unacceptable. The latter view was supported by some councillors in case study School C who unanimously reported that they regretted missing lessons and were more than willing to give up their own free time for council meetings. On the other hand, some boys in School G, where the council met fortnightly at lunchtime, regretted giving up their lunch break and reported practical difficulties in obtaining their school lunch in sufficient time before attending the meeting. This could be a consideration in schools, such as this one, with a high proportion of free school meals. A small number of teachers were clearly unsatisfied with the timing of meetings in their school and were contemplating changes.

The best time to hold council meetings is a critical issue on which there appears to be no clear consensus in practice. If the council meets during lunch or after school, students are required to give up their free time and they may miss activities or clubs. Although some may therefore be less willing to become a councillor, those who actually do so are more likely to be genuinely committed. For safety reasons primary school students are generally not expected to stay after school, so this would not be an option for council meetings. At the secondary phase, the means and time of travel home from school might well be considerations against holding the school council meeting after the school day. The costs of student councillors missing out on a small proportion of National Curriculum time need to be weighed against the greater status the council is likely to have if it meets during curriculum time. An

approach might be to use a rotation method so the same subject in the timetable is not consistently missed.

According to the telephone survey, meetings in secondary schools generally last longer than those in primary schools: on average, one hour in secondary schools compared with half an hour in primaries. This is presumably because younger children are not expected to concentrate for such long periods of time. The duration of meetings ranged between 15 minutes (although in one school *'this is not always long enough'*) and one and a half hours. There was no set time limit in two secondary schools – the duration varied according to how much there was to discuss.

### 3.2 A Budget for the School Council?

Only one-quarter of schools (eight secondary and three primary schools) in the survey had a budget specifically for the school council. Budgets ranged from £50 to £3,000, with an approximate average of £250 p.a. Some teachers reported that the budget was for administration costs only (e.g. photocopying minutes), but in a few schools such costs were subsidised by other aspects of the school budget. School A's budget was supported by fundraising activities organised by the council representatives. The headteacher reported that this process further enhanced children's personal and social development and motivation. The headteacher of School D asked the council if they would like to have a budget of around £2,000 p.a. which could be used to improve school facilities or start new activities. One or two school councils obtained additional funding from particular sources as required, for example from the Parents' Association. Several interviewees where the school council lacked a dedicated budget mentioned that they obtained money if needed, through the central funds of the school budget, organised activities such as fêtes, or in one school, through sponsorship.

In a few schools at least, however, it appeared that the budget was not used to its full advantage. For instance, in two schools, the previous year's budget had not been touched and in another school *'it doesn't work very well because they [the children] don't really know what they want to do with it'*. On the other hand, the fact that the council had a budget could be a recognition of its standing as a school institution; one interviewee was considering creating a budget because it would *'help to give the school council status'*.

In terms of opportunities for financial literacy, many of the improvements to facilities which students and the school council may wish to make have, often considerable, financial implications. Exploration and explanation of these can be an 'eye opener' for students and aid the development of financial and political realism.

### **3.3 Representation on the Council**

School councils are mainly for students, but at least one adult usually attends. We were interested in knowing if there were different patterns of representation of students on the council and also how many adults other than the teacher leader were likely to be involved.

#### **3.3.1 Student representation**

In over half (29) of all the councils in the telephone sample, there were two representatives from each class, or in smaller schools, from each year group represented. This was the typical pattern for both primary and secondary schools. But in a small number of schools, there was only one representative for each class. And other schools reported that there were four or five from each year group. Judging from those schools that gave such information, the total number of representatives on a school council varied from eight to 26. Indeed, in school E, where any member of the school could attend the meeting, but not speak, numbers approached 50. Some secondary schools had year councils as well as whole-school councils. The total number of representatives on a year council varied from ten to 20, normally with two students elected from each tutor group, some of whom were then elected to the whole school council.

A few school councils had substitute representatives, in case of illness or other activities. In School E two representatives, a boy and a girl, were elected from each class, partly for gender equality but also to cover absence:

*So there is a boy and a girl, so also if one person can't come then the other person comes, that's the main reason why we choose two. And the other one, is that instead of having fights and that, we choose a boy and a girl.*

From observation of the case-study school councils, these substitute councillors do get called on to play a role in the council. This

raises additional questions of preparation, participation and continuity.

Primary schools were far more likely to exclude certain year groups from the council than secondary schools. In the primary phase all year groups were represented in less than one-third of schools. In the majority (11 schools) the youngest age-group(s) were excluded; sometimes this was the reception class only but in other schools it was all of key stage 1. According to the councillors in School B, in the younger years the teachers had '*picked*' them, suggesting some within-school differences based on age. In four primary schools, only Years 5 and/or 6 were involved in the council, although the reasons for this approach were not apparent.

However, the vast majority of secondary schools councils (23) officially involved all year groups (although in one school it normally '*dies a death by Year 11 because of the GCSEs*'). Years 7 and/or 8 were excluded in two schools because the school council was thought to be '*more appropriate*' for older students. In School F the council was being extended to include girls from Years 7 and 8, together with Years 9 and 10, and the interviewees from Year 10 were wary of this:

Student     *... now there is going to be a link with all of them. I think maybe they should have two separate meetings with the Year 7s and 8s and 9s and 10s.*

Student     *Well your opinions are going to differ, aren't they, between the Years 7s and 8s to 9s and 10.*

Student     *Yes, I think it is going to be quite hard to try and keep track with all those people there.*

Student     *The Year 7s are going to be a bit scared to speak because of all of us bigger people there.*

Evidently, younger students, whether in primary or secondary schools, are more at risk from being excluded from their school's council. Judging from the evidence that a large proportion of primary schools in the sample successfully ran a council, Year 7 and 8 students would be capable of being effective representatives and would benefit from such a role. Primary schools, on the other hand, need to consider whether very young students would understand what being a councillor entails, and whether including them would be of benefit to all parties concerned.



### 3.3.2 Adult representation

As discussed in 2.2, teachers at a senior level were likely to play a large role in the running of the school council in primary schools. In the majority of cases (18), primary headteachers usually attended meetings, while in the remainder of schools, the deputy head took this role. In secondary schools, however, this was less likely to be the case. Heads or deputies attended most of the meetings in 14 out of 25 schools, and in five schools a senior teacher attended. In the remainder of schools (six), a member of the SMT did not normally attend meetings.

In six secondary schools and 14 primaries, other teachers were also involved (sometimes by rotation), varying from other members of the SMT to teaching assistants. In just over one-quarter of all schools, staff members were invited as appropriate, if an issue directly concerned them. Non-teaching staff (usually school meal supervisors or caretakers) were either permanently represented or invited as appropriate in a small number of schools. This could be useful in terms of improving relationships with students and making changes. For example, in School C (primary), the cook attended the school council meeting to discuss responses from a food survey undertaken by students. By comparison, in School D (secondary) the involvement was outside the school council meeting:

*We have a lot of ideas about catering, i.e. a breakfast service and more vendors so the catering people are very much involved. They don't come to the meetings but we are involved with them because there is a lot of changes we wanted to make.*

It seemed that, overall, parents had very little representation. They were represented in one primary school, although it was not clear whether they attended every council meeting. And in one secondary school, they were occasionally invited to discuss a specific matter.

In four schools (three secondary schools), governors attended as appropriate. A small number of teacher leaders of the school council in primary schools expressed an interest in involving governors with the council; but most also indicated that this would be difficult because meetings are held during the school day when governors would be working. In School C, councillors reported that a governor had attended a meeting of the school council. In four other schools, visitors, such as the police or youth workers, were occasionally invited to attend a council meeting; for example, to discuss setting up a local Youth Conference.

### 3.4 (S)election of Councillors

In the vast majority of schools (four-fifths), classroom elections were held to select representatives. In most schools, elections are regarded as formal, sometimes involving mini-election campaigns, hustings and secret ballots. In one school all representatives had to sign contracts – *‘for the pupils it’s like being a Member of Parliament’*. Three teacher interviewees in primary schools, however, mentioned that the younger children *‘seem a bit lost’* during the election process – *‘they don’t really understand’*. In secondary schools where teachers linked the process to citizenship education, elections were held during PSHE.

Alternative methods for the selection of representatives were used in one-fifth of schools. In two primary schools, for example, the class teacher chose the representatives. In one school, teachers chose the youngest representatives only, and, in the other, the headteacher *‘hoped to give children a greater say in who is selected’*, even though this ‘teacher selection’ method *‘worked well from the beginning’*. According to councillors in School C, different methods were practised in different classrooms. In some, teacher selection occurred – *‘She said I might have a lot to say’* – in others, there was an election. This may have been related to the age of the students, as the reception class was represented, and as it was reported by teachers and councillors that there was much competition to be a councillor: *‘The girls in my class ask me can they swap, can they be on the school council.’* A rotation method was used in two other primary schools so that *‘everyone gets a chance’*. In one school, children volunteered to become a councillor. And in another school, every child (in the year group on the council) became a councillor. If a school had a year council, representatives from this were then elected to the whole school council (either by the whole year group or just the year council members). In the remainder of schools, representatives were ‘chosen’ or nominated; it is not clear whether or not this was a democratic process.

Primary school students, younger students in secondary schools and sixth-formers appeared to be the most enthusiastic about the elections, judging from the responses given by the teacher interviewees. Sixth-form councils were described as formal and democratic, sometimes involving an elected ‘president’. Several teacher interviewees, particularly those in primary schools, were keen to emphasise the enthusiasm displayed by children about the

elections – *‘being on the school council is much sought after and is held in high regard; children will fight for this’*. In School A, there was an established election system and much competition for election in which the candidates made a poster and an election letter, as some Year 6 councillors described:

Student *What we done was [voted for] who we really liked and who we want to do the school council. We vote for whoever because she or he is the best for a school councillor.*

Student *They were choosing people and being sensible. My friend said ‘You’re the school councillor; you are a sensible person.’*

Researcher *Did you all have that feeling that they voted for you because you are sensible?*

Students *Yes.*

Other Year 6 students, who had either been councillors in previous years or failed to be elected, independently corroborated this judgement in another interview:

Researcher *Do you think the way in which people get elected is a good way? Tell us about what happens.*

Student *It’s really good because you actually get to vote and when you’re alone you have a good idea of who you could put. You could put yourself, but if you really wanted this other person to do it and you think they deserve it, you could choose them.*

Student *I think voting is the best idea.*

In School F, a girl in Year 10 described the nomination procedure:

*Well what usually happened was that we asked somebody who was one of our friends to nominate us and they would fill in a form and we’d both have to sign it. That is to say that we agree and other people had to sign it to say that this person should be on the school council. Then the form would be issued with the names of people that had been nominated. Each person got two votes.*

The girls thought it would be something of a *‘popularity contest’*, but also that it was important to elect someone who *‘would speak first’*, because *‘if you don’t speak out there is not really a lot of*

*point in being there'. As with the primary students, friends were significant voters, but peers also recognised merit: 'So your friends voted for you, people who sort of know who you are. People who don't really know you that well if they thought you would be good on it.'*

Researcher *Were there other personal qualities do you think that people would have looked for?*

Student *Well, I think you have to be fairly reliable and put forward other people's views instead of just your own.*

Student *Yes, you have to ask people if there is anything they want to come up at the school council meeting.*

Student *I think you have got to be quite approachable, quite open and make people feel they can come up to you and say can you bring this up?*

Student *I picked one person because I thought she was a good speaker and could put her opinions forward in a way that would make people listen to her.*

This suggests that these councillors, at least, understood, to some extent, the democratic concepts of 'representation', 'consultation', 'accessibility' and 'openness'. They also thought that volunteering to be on the council was important: *'It is about who wants to do it not who has to do it. I think that perhaps if somebody had to do it, it would take away the appeal.'*

However, elsewhere, standing for election and voting, were not always taken so seriously; sometimes popular students who were not perceived as responsible by peers could get elected. Candidates would sometimes be voted in by their friends:

*I think basically it's how they view you, 'cos some people in the school would elect you for certain things 'cos you're their mate. Basically I know this person so I'll elect them 'cos he's my friend. That's not how it should be. (Chairperson of school council, School G)*

In School D, two or three of the Year 9–11 councillors interviewed claimed that they had been (s)elected by default and lack of competition from peers:

Student *In my form, there was me and three boys and each boy got two votes and I got the rest. So it was the boys just wanted to say 'Well, I'm a boy; I want to do it.'*

- Student *In our form no one wanted to do it at all so the teacher said 'Just vote for anybody' and everyone chose to vote for X because he didn't want to do it.*
- Student *My class is very much 'Does anyone want to be the class rep this year? No. So will Y do it again?' So I really don't have a choice. I don't mind doing it. I like doing it, but nobody else in my class will do it, so it is shoved on to me each year and I just happen to be re-elected.*
- Researcher *Do you think that is because people are not generally very interested or because they think you are especially good at it?*
- Student *I think they are interested but they are not interested for themselves. They wouldn't want to give up their lunchtime to vote and I don't mind.*

Sometimes elections could produce curious results. In School D, both non-councillors and councillors remarked on the election of one boy:

*Because he was like the one who always got told off, but actually he got picked.*

*Apparently he always has good ideas to put forward and is really sensible and mature about it.*

*He's a real rebel and you wouldn't expect him to turn up to any meetings but he does. He comes every time and gives really valuable ideas, so until you get there you don't know what they are going to be like. Surpasses all expectations.*

Seizing an opportunity to be a member of the school council could also be a matter of personal motivation. In School E, a Year 8 boy, who claimed *'In Year 7, I was naughty, very naughty'* and *'Got loads of detentions for not doing homework'* said that he had not been elected but,

*...what happened was my friend he didn't want to be in the school council anymore and no one wanted to be in it so I came to prove that I'm not as bad as I'm said to be. Everyone knew me as a bad child so I thought that if I could be on the school council and help people and not be naughty and show everyone I'm not bad.*

We did not discover any school where the votes for candidates had been reported, as in a public election. Where this issue was

discussed with councillors, they were aware of pros and cons in making the number of votes cast public.

In the majority of schools, membership of the school council changed annually. Variations were: once every half term (one school), termly (two schools) and twice a year (two schools). Representatives in five schools remained on the council for the duration of their school career, unless they chose to step down; *'If a team works well, why change it?'* said the teacher in charge. Similarly, several other teachers mentioned that representatives were able to stay on the council for more than one year. It seems that a balance needs to be found between allowing students sufficient time to learn and exercise the skills involved in being a councillor, and giving enough students this opportunity. One teacher commented that even when membership changed annually, it *'was not enough time for them to fully benefit from the experience'*, although another mentioned that he was considering decreasing the duration of membership in order to allow more children to gain from the experience.

---

One secondary school adopted a flexible approach: in principle the council representatives could stand down any time they wished (with a minimum period of one term), but *'as long as each class is represented [at the meetings], it doesn't matter how'*. This relaxed approach apparently took the pressure off the representatives to attend meetings when they had other commitments. The interviewee from this school also mentioned that the Year 11 representatives rotated the responsibility so that it did not affect their GCSE work.

---

In a few schools, there were procedures for removing representatives who failed to regularly attend meetings or who abused their role (see School A, Appendix 2) but there was generally flexibility about attendance. Occasionally students wished to stand down, as in School D where the lunchtime meetings conflicted with music club on which one girl wished to concentrate.

Election of chairperson, where this was a student, was an important process. In School E, hustings were held and the chairperson, a Year 12 girl, was elected from the senior prefects after making a speech:

*I think I was a lot familiar with the school before as well. I used to do quite a bit of jobs, like helping at parents evening. I was reliable and responsible I think I said I was and willing to do*

*things and I haven't got a bad punctuality. Things like that do matter and you know you have to be well known throughout the whole school as well. Let them know that you will be there, that you will do things for them, so that's another thing.*

### 3.5 Preparation of Students for their Role on the Council

In the majority of schools, students were given some sort of preparation for their role on the council. This usually took the form of a meeting (sometimes the first council meeting of the academic year) in which the new councillors' roles, responsibilities and expectations were discussed. As one teacher in charge reported: *'I set some ground rules and let them know that their role is both positive and serious.'* In some schools, the teacher in charge also explained how to obtain the views of everyone in their class, the importance of confidentiality and the functions of the council. One headteacher regarded this as an essential aspect of having a school council and took it a step further by teaching them how to take minutes and how to give feedback to their classes; *'it is very important to give them the skills they need to be effective reps'*.

Preparation for being a representative was regarded by many teachers in charge as an *'informal chat'*, whereas in others, it was more of an *'induction process'*, with documentation and information being given out to students, and occasionally with other teachers helping with training. One headteacher was extremely keen for the councillors to undergo externally provided training, but decided that it was geographically inaccessible. 'Preparation' in some schools took the form of talking to all students about the council, either in class-time, assemblies or both (sometimes even before voting took place).

A different approach to preparation was adopted in a small number of schools: experienced or ex-councillors talked to the new councillors (or in one case the prospective councillors) about their experience, so that they would have an idea of what to expect. In one school, teachers adopted the role of chairperson and secretary for the first meeting to demonstrate how it should be done.

Preparation and/or training did not take place in ten schools; most of the teacher interviewees in these schools believed that students

learn *'as they go on'* and receive *'training on the job'* and that it is therefore unnecessary. A few teacher interviewees emphasised that their council was *'informal'*. Two reported that students *'are already familiar with it before they become a councillor'*, and in one school, *'they are welcome to come and sit in on the meetings and see what it is like'*. Elsewhere training was idiosyncratic, *'according to how enthusiastic they are about it'*. Another three schools, all secondary, were planning to begin training or improve the existing *'informal preparation'*.

### 3.6 Idea Generation and Agenda Setting

In just over two-thirds of schools, councillors obtained ideas and views about issues for the council from their classmates. However, the level of formality of this process varied considerably. In some schools, especially primaries, consultation of peers was carried out under supervision in PSE or pastoral care lessons. In other schools, more commonly secondary schools, councillors simply asked their peers. In six schools, it was said that *'issues are raised by pupils'*, although it is not clear whether this was done in class, or generally through word of mouth.

Several other methods were used to decide which topics should be discussed at the meetings. A notebook was passed around in classrooms in a couple of schools *'so that all children, even those who are shy of voicing their opinions, can put down anything they want discussed'*. Five schools had a suggestion box, and one had a *'worry and help'* box as well so students' personal problems could be discussed anonymously in council meetings. In one primary school, councillors held a ten-minute *'surgery'* every week to receive ideas and comments from peers. Other sources of topics included:

- ◆ matters from previous meetings (14 schools);
- ◆ staff (normally members of the SMT, ten schools);
- ◆ representatives themselves (eight schools);
- ◆ year council meetings (five schools);
- ◆ the person in charge of the council (three schools);
- ◆ open council meetings (three schools); and
- ◆ governors' suggestions (one school).



Some schools adopted only one of these methods (e.g. *'ideas come straight from year council'*); other school councils used a variety of sources of ideas and concerns. One interviewee described the process as *'self-perpetuating'*.

In primary School A, Circle Time was used to generate agenda items from some classes:

Researcher *And before you have the next meeting, and that will be next term now, will you discuss what goes on the agenda? You know what an agenda is, don't you?*

Student *What goes on in the meeting.*

Researcher *Yes, you have a list of things for discussion.*

Student *Maybe they've discussed how they're gonna get the stuff, equipment – how they're gonna order it and, like, everyone has to agree with the same thing.*

Researcher *So, are you able to make suggestions for the agenda in the class?*

Students *Yeah.*

Researcher *Does the teacher ask you, or does the representative ask you?*

Student *Both of them.*

Student *We say what we want to get them to do.*

Researcher *And do you trust them to do that properly?*

Student *Yeah.*

Student *They're really responsible. They're actually like grown-ups sitting down asking us 'What do you want...?'*

Judging from those schools which reported the way in which the actual agenda for meetings was set, it seemed that the most popular method was for the council members (or in some secondary schools, the chairperson and secretary) to decide. In the remainder, the teacher attending the meeting decided (in three cases along with the students). In one school, a randomised system was used, with discussion of one issue from each year in turn.

In secondary School E, the student chairperson and the senior teacher who attended the meeting arranged the agenda together:

*Yeah, me and [the senior teacher] get together and we actually... decide what we actually want to talk about, and then we talk to people like Mrs X, who is head of catering.... I do let everybody know. That was one thing I wanted to know from them all today: is there anything that they would like me to put on the agenda, or do they feel that I need to put something on? They should let me know, so feedback is very important.*

In fact she had been proactive and included in the agenda of the meeting observed (see 4.2.2) the issue of the role of the school councillor: *'because there are some things that some of them were not fulfilling so they weren't doing a lot of things'*. She felt that it was part of her role to get the councillors to consider how they were carrying out their role (as did the head who chaired School A's council (see 4.2.1)). Also, she clearly felt able to veto further discussion of mobile phones, which had been repeatedly raised, as she knew there was no chance of students being allowed to have them in school: *'So that's why I said at this meeting no we're not having it so there's no point in talking about it.'*

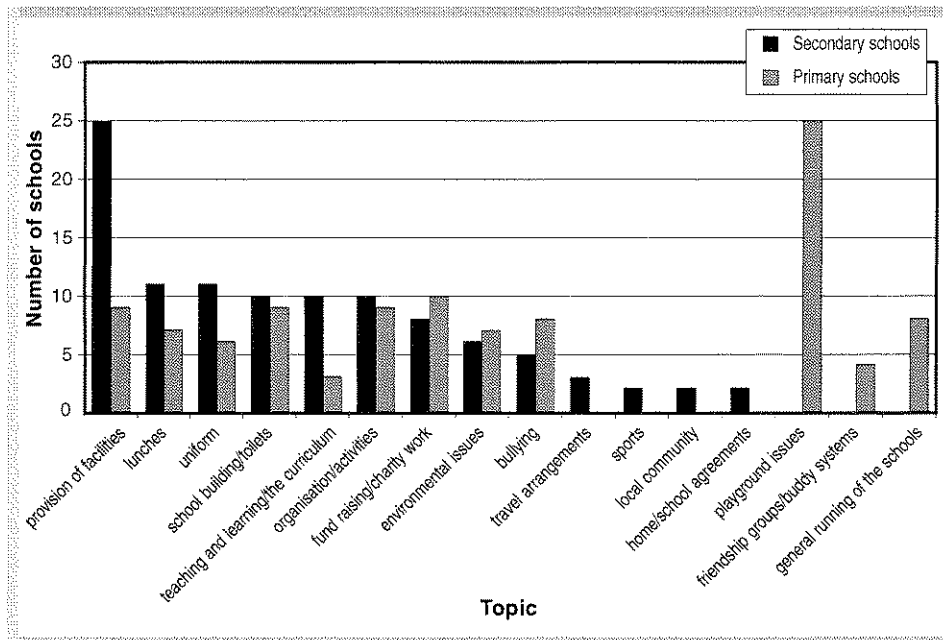
The matter of idea generation for the school council is the mirror image of that of feedback from the council (see 3.8.2). Both of these processes require more explicit and formal attention in terms of setting up an established system of structures and dedicated time, which class or form tutors needed to respect and value.

### 3.7 Topics of Discussion

Figure 1 (overleaf) indicates the topics discussed by primary and secondary school councils. The main topics dealt with by school councils, as reported by teachers in charge, were:

- *Provision of Facilities.* This had been discussed in every one of the secondary schools in the sample, and in nine of the primary schools. Students had asked for lockers (six schools), water fountains (six schools), additional sports facilities and benches in the playground (three schools each). Other requests included: payphones, notice-boards, a chess club, a tuck shop, vending machines, a smoking room, a video and games room, a memorial garden, more signs around school and a Learning Resource Centre;

Figure 1: Topics discussed in primary and secondary school councils



- *Playground Issues.* These had been discussed by all 25 primary schools, for example, markings, equipment, organisation/rotas, shelter from the sun, and where and when football could be played and by whom;
- *School Buildings.* Improvements to the fabric of the school building, normally toilets and/or cloakrooms were frequently discussed. In some cases, the issue was about tidiness, but in others, students felt that refurbishment or attention to hygiene was needed (19 schools);
- *Organisation.* Discussion of organisation of lunchtimes, activities, clubs or courses during lunch, break or after school and assemblies often occurred (19 schools);
- *Fundraising.* Charity events (mainly school discos), and fundraising generally and to which charities money should go, were topics of discussion (18 schools);
- *Catering.* The lunch menu, canteen food, catering issues (18 schools, 11 secondary);
- *School Uniform.* (17 schools, 11 secondary). Two mentioned the issue was about girls wearing trousers;

- *Bullying*. In some cases policies on bullying were being developed (13 schools, eight primary) and student counselling was being developed in School D;
- *Environmental* issues and litter (12 schools);
- *Teaching and Learning/the Curriculum* (13 schools, ten secondary). Three schools had discussed homework, three had discussed staff and the remainder had discussed aspects of the curriculum – the content or organisation (e.g. mixed-ability teaching) of PSHE, citizenship, ICT and theatre studies;
- *Running of the School*, especially rules, e.g. the code of conduct, rules for walking down corridors (eight secondary schools);
- *Friendship Groups* and buddy systems (four primary schools);
- *Travel Arrangements* to and from school – buses (three secondary schools);
- *Sports* (two secondary schools);
- *Community Links*, mainly to primary schools (two secondary schools, one of which was helping students to set up a school council);
- *Home/school Agreement* (two secondary schools);
- *Other Topics*, mentioned by one school each, included: the prefect system, school trips, redeveloping the school prospectus, a community award scheme, changing the school's name, the behaviour of students, gender inequality and students' personal problems.

It is clear that a vast range of topics was discussed, with increasing diversity in secondary schools. Playground issues, which preoccupied many primary school councils, were, not surprisingly, generally no longer a cause for concern in secondary schools. Instead, it appears that as students get older, they become more aware of things that might improve their school life, and therefore focus more on the provision of facilities.

---

*A typical primary council meeting* in School A for 50 minutes at lunchtime discussed: matters arising from the previous meeting (mainly how to keep toilets clean and whether councillors wanted to take on the role of toilet monitors); the school charter for children's behaviour and anti-bullying, which was being finalised and would be displayed in each classroom; how each class voted to spend £500 on playground facilities; and an item from governors

who wanted students' opinions on 'Making the school better and saving money' (which the headteacher used as an opportunity to explain how much money the school spent annually on utilities). In a subsequent meeting, energy-saving ideas from several classes were discussed, councillors suggested how they could help put these in place and it was planned to make posters in art to support these activities.

---

*A typical secondary council meeting in School D for 35 minutes covered: matters arising – tree planting commemoration involving council representatives, progress on a time capsule for the millennium, opening of a five-a-side team by the local MP; catering provision arrangements; activities day 2001, 'ideas which both sexes can do'; the sixth-form car park and the bike sheds; charities to benefit from fundraising, ideas about local charities; the school colours and other categories of merits – with some students arguing that effort as well as talent should be rewarded; using a school notice-board to display information about the council; modifications to the school uniform.*

---

As might be expected, secondary students were far more inclined than were primary students to voice their opinions about the quality of teaching they received. In fact, one head reported that he valued students' views about teaching and learning and encouraged students to voice their opinions. It is interesting to note some examples of school council discussions of teaching and learning and the curriculum:

- ◆ In one school, there was discussion about PSHE as some students thought they were being taught certain things at too young an age;
- ◆ In another school, '*raising levels of achievement*' was seen as an important topic, and the council had discussed '*barriers to learning*', such as unhelpful text books and a lack of library books;
- ◆ In one primary school, the interviewee reported that the children '*wanted more fun in the teaching and learning environment*';
- ◆ The number of lessons in the school day had also been considered by one council;
- ◆ In a secondary school, the school council had amended the drug education policy and rewritten a policy on peer-group counselling in relation to bullying.

In the school council in School F, there had been some discussion about curriculum organisation:

Student *'Why do we need five science lessons a week when RE and ICT have been cut off the Year 10 and 11 curriculum and they have stuck two extra science lessons in their place?' and he said 'That's because you need more time to do the course – there is so much content in the science double that you need five lessons a week to do it.'*

Student *There is sort of one issue though with the ICT because there is no GCSE ICT; quite a few people liked to do that.*

Student *I mean the GCSE RE was on the options list but it didn't run, but the GCSE ICT wasn't even on there, wasn't even an option.*

Researcher *So could you have raised these issues?*

Student *I think we did actually and he said there wasn't enough funding or whatever.*

Student *They were going to do it next year.*

Researcher *So you can raise these things to say that you have noticed?*

Student *Yes, they listen to what you are saying.*

A few schools mentioned that students were allowed to discuss anything – *'there are no taboo subjects'*. Generally it appeared that many students have some sense of boundaries not to be crossed. But in certain schools some topics were taboo.

- ◆ *Staff.* In three schools, students were not allowed to discuss individual members of staff. Other interviewees mentioned that it was awkward when students did raise concerns about teachers, but commented that *'it mustn't be ignored'*. *'In a broad sense they understand that you don't talk about individual teachers and children in the school council'* (Head, School B). Interestingly the councillors supported this: *'It feels like you are saying something offensive to someone and it's better not to say it for the fact that they might get hurt'*, claimed one student. In School F, girls understood they could *not* discuss that *'we want so and so sacked, not personal things'*.

- ◆ *Uniform or Conduct.* Another teacher said that he directed ‘*them away from certain subjects that are not possible to change, such as non-uniform*’. In School D, one councillor commented: ‘*We are allowed to discuss anything. But I think if we said anything like major breaking of the rules or changing the school conduct completely, then it wouldn’t be perhaps considered.*’ In School C, councillors suggested they would not be allowed to discuss having mobile phones in school, although they claimed some students did actually bring them to school

Though a few teachers in charge of school councils or other members of school staff may not have fully realised or accepted it, the existence of a school council in principle permits issues to be raised. Unless certain topics are explicitly acknowledged as, and stated to be, taboo, all kinds of provision, practices and procedures are open to discussion and change. However, there were some indications that some teachers were not entirely amenable to open discussion of school practices and procedures and, in consequence, vetoed debate, thereby limiting the role of the school council as an agent of change or as making the running of the school more accountable. A clear and consistent policy about the appropriateness, or otherwise, of commenting on staff and the suitability of topics for discussion needs to be developed, made known and adopted by the council.

### **3.8 Note-taking and Feedback to Others**

In order to ensure that the school council functions as a viable institution for the whole-school community and that all students feel involved and able to participate through their membership of the school community, attention must be paid to communication within the school. The processes of taking notes or minutes in order to inform non-councillors of the discussions and action points from the school council meeting, and more active methods of giving feedback and involving the student body as a whole in further deliberations, are critical to the vital functioning and well-being of a healthy school council which is a truly representative of all students.

### 3.8.1 Note-taking

According to the telephone interviews, the person (or people) in charge of recording details of the school council meeting varied according to whether the council was in a primary or secondary school. In the majority of secondary schools (17), a student secretary (usually voted in by the council along with the chairperson and sometimes a vice-chairperson) took minutes during meetings (as in Schools E and G). This method was only used, however, in seven primary schools, where the secretary was normally in Year 6 (as in School B). In most schools, this person remained the secretary for the year, but in a few schools, a different student acted as secretary each week, or all the representatives took notes (as in School A, C, F). One interviewee mentioned that minutes were written in *'pupil speak'*, and that they were anonymous.

In School G, one of the boys acted as a secretary: *'...he writes it all down, he types it out. He writes about what has happened during the meeting and he types that up and gives it to me and matters arising, the stuff we talked about at the last meeting he does it. ... and when I get that back I say "Ah right, this point was highlighted last week in the meeting so this is what we will bring forward today".'*

Initially, the minutes went to the chairperson and the teacher in charge, then with a letter about the date and time of the next meeting to the form groups. Feedback to the form appeared to occur on an *ad hoc* basis in registration, with questions and suggestions from other boys.

In School C, the head had provided councillors with badges, a notebook to record action and consultation points and an agenda on which to obtain class views in advance of the meeting and any notes. In fact these symbols of office were one of the reasons the councillors thought some of their peers also wanted to be councillors: *'I think its because we've got our school pens and folders.'* *'You get a folder and notebook and more work to do.'* The headteacher told students when to write things down in order to inform and consult their classes.

In primary schools, however, it was much more common for an adult to take the role of secretary – this was the case in 17 primary schools, but only eight secondary schools. In three schools, the teacher in charge took minutes; one said that a student used to, but *'it is important that detailed minutes are taken for feedback'*. In another three schools, the teacher in charge *'notes key points'* (as in School D). A school secretary or another member of staff took minutes in a couple of other schools.



### 3.8.2 Feedback to peers

Three main methods were used to feed back information from the school council meetings to other students:

- ◆ *Representative(s) Giving Feedback to their Peers*, sometimes with the help of minutes. In some schools, there was a scheduled classroom slot for feedback (mostly during PSE, or tutorial or registration periods); in other schools, giving feedback was a much more informal and *ad hoc* process which representatives themselves had to initiate. In fact, three teachers interviewed admitted that it '*might not always happen in practice*'. Encouragingly, however, a small number of schools provided discussion time in class (e.g. in Circle Time) after the students had received feedback from the meetings;
- ◆ *Distributing Copies of the Minutes* to each class, pinning them up on a notice-board or filing them for reference;
- ◆ *Reporting back through School Assemblies*, mostly by the head, sometimes by council representatives. This method was slightly more common in primary schools.

In a few schools, councillors gave feedback to their year councils, with the idea that the information '*cascades down to the other pupils*'. The student newspaper was also used to disseminate information about the council in a couple of schools.

In School A, the head, who chaired the council meeting, frequently stressed the need for councillors to 'nag' their teachers for time to consult their classes.

Researcher *I'm very interested to know about the things that [X], the headteacher, kept referring to – that you should go back and consult with the other children in your class. He kept emphasising that. So how does that happen?*

Student *In Circle Time. Everyone has a chance to talk and we go back to the class and tell them about it.*

Student *The teacher tells us first what we have to say about and she goes around the whole circle to see if there is any ideas.*

As observers of a specific Circle Time feedback session with a Year 3 class straight after a school council meeting, we were able

to witness that the most enthusiastic representative had a very clear picture of what was talked about at the meeting, what was decided and what she had to ask her class. Though we had some reservations about the degree of understanding and participation by some members of the class, those non-councillors we interviewed seemed satisfied with the procedures and practices and felt well enough informed and consulted:

Student *Yeah and Charlotte [a councillor] is my friend so she tells me I think some things a bit earlier.*

Student *In Circle Time... sometimes when there's something important...on Friday we had a vote.*

Student *We had some spending money on the playground. I think we had £500 and we had to vote for what we wanted in the playground.*

In School E, where the meetings were held once a term, the form representatives played a key role in relaying issues from the meetings and getting feedback on a feedback sheet (see example below) which was then placed in a folder in the main office. Both the SMT representative and the student chairperson reminded councillors of this responsibility: *'the school's giving you the chance to put your needs forward'*. The feedback was also used as a source of agenda items for the following meeting. In between meetings it was the responsibility of the form representative to liaise with the prefects on the school council about urgent issues. They also saw as part of their role the need to explain to peers that they could not always get what they wanted and the reasons why.

SCHOOL COUNCIL: FORM FEEDBACK	
Date:	Name: Form:
Points from Council	Suggestions/Comments from Form

TO BE RETURNED ASAP TO SCHOOL COUNCIL FOLDER IN THE OFFICE

Feedback to peers was a key issue in the successful involvement of all in the school council and its vitality. Several examples from the case study schools highlight some challenges and perceptions.

In some schools, such as School D, the lack of formally structured feedback time meant that students had different experiences of participation, consultation and influence, depending on whether their form tutor allowed time for it or not.

*We meet in registration in our year base and talk about the meeting. Then they will go to their classes and talk to their classes. Then we'll meet again and they will give the year reps the ideas that they will back and then they write them down and bring them back to the council meeting... In our class the teacher always reminds the rep to talk to the class, make sure they do. It depends what teacher you have.*

*Our teacher doesn't normally remember so the year council person whenever they see the members will mention it to the class (Councillors, School D).*

There also seemed to be variable practices as to whether minutes of the school council were distributed to the year heads or to the form representatives. Two councillors had ideas about how the feedback process could be improved:

*Better feedback might help and may be a time. They could set a time when people could come to their form reps and the form reps could be somewhere at a certain time on a certain day so that if you had an idea you could go to them.*

*I think also set times for year council meetings rather than when it's just the year head's whim because that is really frustrating trying to get everyone there and then you have five minutes to discuss everything. Usually they tell us just the date or the morning that you have got to go now. So if you know a week in advance then you can make sure that you didn't have any homework to do at registration that day. Or even every year has a year base. Somewhere you can put your ideas on subjects and then the year reps can look through them or two chosen class reps can look through the ideas.*

The lack of structured opportunity to feed back issues from the school council meetings and to gain comments and new suggestions was a major disadvantage in School F. The councillors seemed to

operate on an informal basis. This was further complicated by a system of form leaders who were supposed to link between the form and school council. Some were both form leaders and school councillors, who had a wider role to represent the year group, and not every form had a direct representative.

Student *...we do social education once a week. If every class, like once a term, had a chance to put their ideas forward and the school council could take it further. That would be a good idea because we don't really get much feedback from people. Well, we do occasionally but not very often.*

Student *It is only occasionally I get people coming up to me and saying 'There is something wrong here' or 'Could you say this?'. So from that point of view I think that sometimes people don't quite understand exactly what we do. So they feel they can't come to us and say what they want, because perhaps they feel it would be a bit trivial for a school council meeting.*

Much seemed to depend on informal networking, also in terms of communicating decisions to the whole school:

Student *And even then it is only the big decisions that are known to them, like the one with the trousers which were put on the uniform list this term. It is only the big decisions they actually know about. Any smaller decisions they will find out about by word of mouth and nothing else and that is only if they are interested.*

Researcher *Do you think that matters or do you think that is just a reflection of real life democracy?*

Student *Well if they are interested they will ask, won't they, and if they are not then they'll probably find out some other way anyway whether they like it or not.*

Researcher *Do you think that relates in anyway to what is being discussed in this General Election that the parties are concerned about the voters not turning up to elections because of being apathetic? Do you see any relation between those two things?*

Student *Yes, because some people in school really don't care what the school council does, like some people are leaving soon and say 'It doesn't concern me so what do I care.'*

- Student *I don't think many people actually realise how much detail you actually go into.*
- Student *I don't think they even know how that works, do they?*
- Student *They don't really realise how much, like the trousers issue, how long that actually went on for; they just think it came up in one meeting then it sort of happened.*
- Student *I think quite a few people know what actually happens in the school council meeting but there are a few who have no idea at all.*
- Researcher *Do you think that is part of your role to get to them a bit?*
- Student *Well, we would but we don't really know how to, do we? We don't have a chance. We don't really know because there isn't a set time.*

Despite this, the girls were unanimous about recommending to other schools that they have a council: '*'cos it allows the pupils to have some sort of connection with the teachers*' or '*more with the head*'. On the trousers issue, the teachers had to say whether they actually agreed. This had highlighted the fact that there was no structure which allowed teachers to listen to the girls' points of view: '*The teachers don't really hear us as a group; they don't really hear our points of view.*' This school was in the process of extending its school council to include the lower forms.

Generally, the system and structure for feedback to all students needed more explicit and consistent attention in schools, with more formal checking and monitoring procedures in place.

### **3.8.3 Feedback to teachers and governors**

Several methods were used to provide feedback to staff members. The most common was to give them a copy of the minutes, although several teacher interviewees mentioned that only the SMT or headteacher received the notes. It seemed that more teachers were likely to receive minutes of meetings in primary schools. Several teachers reported that they heard about issues when they were discussed in class or assemblies, or were able to read the minutes on a notice-board (and were therefore not given copies themselves). A few schools held staff meetings if an important issue arose which needed teacher consultation. In a couple of schools, teachers did

not receive any feedback at all, and in an additional four schools, although topics were discussed with individual staff as appropriate, there was no formal feedback. One interviewee felt that *'there is a gap....it [feedback] could be made more prominent'*, and two emphasised that feedback was very informal.

The issue of teacher feedback was generally underdeveloped and we did not have the resources or opportunities to pursue it adequately. In School E, a senior teacher was present alongside the chairperson at the council meeting. He saw it as his role to refer any issues he could not deal with back to the senior management team and this was also the perception which councillors held:

*[The senior teacher] goes back to senior management on Mondays when they have their meeting and he explains what has happened at the council meeting and they discuss it. That's why he always knows and he goes to speak with the headteacher and deputy head.*

Governors of primary schools were much more likely than secondary school governors to be given feedback from the school council. But it appeared that the governors in only half the sample of schools received any feedback at all. Furthermore, interviewees in several schools said that governors *'are not officially given feedback, but if something comes up they might be told informally'*. The main ways in which governors were informed was through headteachers' annual reports, governors' meetings, receiving the school council minutes, or occasionally via the councillors (usually sixth-formers) if they were invited to governors' meetings. Conversely, governors did not generally seem to use the school council as a mechanism to consult students; the most frequent example concerned school uniform.

The matter of feedback to students, teachers and governors appears to be a weak link in the practice of having a school council. Opportunities for information-giving, developing awareness of democratic procedures and building coherent consultative practices do not seem to be consistently followed. There often seemed to be a gap between the focus on elected councillors and the school council meeting and the body politic. But the value of instituting a structure to facilitate the full and meaningful participation of all students should not be underestimated if the school council is to have standing, purpose and relevance.

### 3.9 Key Findings and Issues

- Overall most schools in the sample held their council meetings once every half term. Secondary school councils tended to meet during lunchtime for an hour, while in primary schools, the council was more likely to meet during lesson time for half an hour.
- Only a quarter of schools had a budget for the council; some raised money, when needed, from a range of sources.
- Just over half the councils included two representatives from each year group; younger age groups in both phases were more likely to be excluded from the school council.
- In up to one-quarter of schools, other teachers were invited or involved as appropriate; there was little other adult involvement.
- Elections for councillors were held in four-fifths of schools.
- In the majority of schools, councillors had some preparation for their role.
- In most schools, councillors obtained ideas from classmates for the school council agenda, but the process was sometimes very informal and not institutionalised.
- Topics for discussion were wide ranging, but often focused on facilities, playground, school buildings, organisation of the school day; fundraising and catering.
- The taking of notes from meetings of the school council was a variable practice and, not surprisingly, was more likely to be undertaken by a student secretary in secondary schools.
- Feedback to peers, teachers, other staff and governors was a weak link in the information-giving and consultative processes.

## 4. SCHOOL COUNCILS IN PRACTICE

In the course of the case study research, we observed some 15 school council meetings, seven in the three primary schools and eight in the four secondary schools (as detailed in Table 2, Appendix 1). With one exception (School E), in each school, at least two school council meetings were observed, and in two schools (C and D), three council meetings were viewed. We employed a structured observation schedule that also allowed for a sequential description of the school council meeting (see Appendix 1). Our observations provided some rich material, which complemented and raised questions about the claims and perceptions of teachers and students, councillors and non-councillors. Chapter 4 addresses a number of issues which arose as a result of reflecting on the school council meeting observations: practical issues; the role of the chairperson, as undertaken by the teacher leader or a student councillor; participation and non-participation in meetings; the representation of views or the expression of personal opinions; the school council as a strategy for institutional change.

### 4.1 Practical Issues

Observing some meetings raised some practical issues concerning the conduct of meetings:

- ◆ *Place.* Finding a relatively quiet self-contained meeting place was important.

---

In School C, meetings took place in the hall, which was an open thoroughway incorporating the library and access to classrooms as well as the offices. A procession of passers by could overhear discussion and their movement could distract the councillors. Unfortunately, in this school there appeared to be no other more appropriate meeting place.

---

It may also be important to have a consistent and known meeting place for the council in order to give it status and standing. However, at least three of the case study councils met in different places over time.



- ◆ *Space.* Layout could be significant for the functioning of the meeting as it was important for all councillors to be able see and be seen by the chairperson to get attention.

---

In School F, girls contrasted one crowded meeting in the library with Year 7s being recruited to the school council and the usual location in the hall. Eye contact was thought to be really important as *'it was pretty much impossible to figure out who was speaking and where'*. *'It's got to be somewhere quiet where you won't be disturbed, but it also helps if you can see everybody.'*

---

- ◆ *Time.* When to hold a meeting was a problem that had different implications however it was solved. If a meeting was held at lunchtime, it could conflict with councillors' other extracurricular interests, so that they had to choose. Or it could even put off some potential councillors from standing for election. The wide catchment of most secondary schools did not permit them to hold meetings after school (School E was an exception). And holding a meeting in curriculum time would mean that councillors were penalised and had work to catch up, as well as incurring the displeasure of some teachers – who might in any case not be in favour of the council – at the loss of teaching time. Length of the meeting was also an issue in some cases; it appeared that infrequent meetings of half an hour were inadequate and left unfinished business. Some councillors wanted more frequent meetings.
- ◆ *Duration and Appropriateness of Topics.* In some councils, the same topic could run and run: *'You say your ideas and they just get mentioned at every meeting, how bit by bit it's working.'* This could prevent a range of issues or other significant issues being discussed, as in School F: *'Some issues run for a long time and there isn't time to discuss things of lesser importance. Like the trousers, we discussed for weeks.'* In some school councils, the appropriateness of topics for discussion could be an issue, as in School A, where students wanted to report matters more suitable for the caretaker (see also School E, 3.6). Both teacher and student chairpersons had some sense of discretion about these. AOB items could stimulate councillors' suggestions as they were reminded by others' comments or had an opportunity to demonstrate the ideas collected from their forms. One enthusiastic girl in School C outshone her peers with such items: *'I've got still more!'*

- ◆ *Status of the Meeting.* During our fieldwork and the practical arrangements which this entailed making with the schools, it appeared that in most cases, especially in secondary schools, the school council meetings were not timetabled at a regular date known well in advance, but appeared to take place on an *ad hoc* basis. This could have an impact on planning and consultation. In addition, especially towards the end of the summer term, school council meetings were prone to change or cancellation. This suggested that they were rated as of lesser importance, especially when other ‘one-off’ or annual events competed for priority in an over-subscribed time-scale.

## 4.2 The Role of the Chairperson

In four of the seven case study schools, the school council was chaired by the headteacher. But this role was undertaken by a student in two secondary schools (School E (Year 13 Asian girl) and School G (Year 10 Afro-Caribbean boy)) and one primary school (School B (Year 5 Asian girl)). It was most interesting to observe the different styles of the respective chairpersons, both to compare and contrast the approaches of the (head)teachers leading the meeting, and as distinct from the leadership styles of the student councillor chairpersons.

### 4.2.1 The (head)teacher as chairperson

Headteachers could have a very influential and sometimes seemingly dominant role. It would have been interesting to calculate the proportion of teacher to student talk in some of the teacher-chaired meetings; our impression was that often teacher talk seemed to predominate. We were interested to try to find out how the students themselves perceived the role of the head as chairperson.

In School A, where most of the students were from culturally diverse backgrounds, the headteacher took on the role of facilitator. He spent quite a lot of time in each meeting facilitating the process: introducing the agenda items; explaining clearly and slowly; checking that the councillors understand; asking them if they wish to speak (*‘Do you agree with that?’ ‘Do you think anything is missing?’*); encouraging and appreciating their ideas, but also checking they were not just an individual student’s view; summarising issues; asking them to write decisions or matters for discussion in their notebooks; and stressing consultation with their

form groups. He reminded them of the importance of what they did between council meetings; *'If you don't talk to your class, you let other people make the decisions.'* When asked if halfway through the year it might have been possible to switch to a student as chairperson, the councillors were clear that they needed the senior input and benevolent support of the head:

Student *We needed [the headteacher] because he knew...like when to stop the discussion and he understands what we say. Sometimes, the older year was a bit bossy, but only sometimes.*

Researcher *Do you think any teacher could do it, or is it important for [the headteacher] to do it?*

Student *[the headteacher] or [the deputy].*

Student *... Say for example [the headteacher] ain't here and [the deputy] is here, sometimes it ain't actually sorted. So I think that [the head] should do it all the time 'cos he's got the main ideas plus he know what we need and what we don't need and he agrees with what we don't want and what we do want.*

Similarly, in School D, the headteacher was perceived by both councillors and non-councillors as *'a very nice man'*, *'we all think he is a really good headteacher'*, and he *'tries to bring in people and opinions'*. The councillors thought that his presence as chairperson was important to the smooth running of the meeting, where he had an informed input to the agenda and discussion. He conducted a lively paced and good humoured informal meeting, reporting back after consulting teachers, confirming understandings, checking opinions, offering guidance, indicating possibilities from a range of options and noting when there was a need for consultation. As with the head of School A, the head of School D's evident benevolence and interest in the students were appreciated. In turn, their respect reinvested his authority as a first among equals.

Student *If we didn't have someone there to dominate it then we wouldn't get anything done because we would all be sitting about with our friends. We would all be arguing about different points whereas he can bring control to the situation.*

Researcher *Do you think it has to be chaired by the head or even a teacher, or do you think it could be chaired by one of you?*

- Student *It should be done by the head because he does have the most influence in the school. He has mainly the final say.*
- Student *I think that older people like Year 11 and sixth-formers would talk a lot more than ninth years if they were in charge. They would dominate it.*

In School F, a senior teacher was giving way to a junior teacher chairperson. Girls interviewed thought that in their school, where the head appeared distant and somewhat autocratic to them, it was necessary to have a teacher chairperson:

*Well it would probably be easier for some of the younger people to discuss what they wanted to say, but I don't really think it will work. I think it is easier for a member of staff to talk to [the headteacher].*

The current chairperson's role was very much to act as a 'go-between', from girls to headteacher and vice versa:

*Well if he thought [the head] would definitely say 'No way' then he'd tell us and we'd either forget about it or completely revise our idea.*

#### **4.2.2 Student chairperson**

We were able to explore the role of the student chairperson in School G, who had been elected chairperson by fellow councillors at the first meeting of the year. In describing his duties as chairperson of the council, he alluded to the balance to be struck between what needed to be done to keep the council operating smoothly, with meetings every fortnight, and his academic responsibilities:

*I go around sending letters to teachers or to the head, talking about what we're going to talk about next at the council meeting and how we're going to go about it. It's kind of a hard job, you could say, because when you have your coursework and other stuff to get in when you're in Year 10, it's kind of hard to keep a balance, so I try to do things when I have the chance, not trying to waste some time, because when you're in Year 10 you can't do that.*

He appeared to act with authority during council meetings, for example keeping boys who were not elected representatives out of the meeting room, suggesting that the councillors should act as

monitors at lunchtime and commenting maturely on some issues. Items were included on the agenda from members of staff and different form groups, some of which were much more proactive than others. As the meeting was quite large – about 21 boys – the chairperson found it helpful to stand up in order to see everyone, but even so he acknowledged it was easy to overlook someone who had raised a hand to make a point. The teacher acted in a strong support capacity and signalled if she wished to speak, for instance to remind them about consulting form groups, or when she had information to give, for example about awards, or to explain about problems. The student chairperson also recapped and summarised and explained issues in a way that students could identify with and understand and exhorted them to get feedback from their forms. It was obvious in the meeting and from the interview group discussion that there was quite an informal network of activity, negotiation, opinion forming and jockeying for position behind the scenes, just as in local council meetings. The chairperson took a proactive role between meetings in liaising with appropriate staff about certain items. As it turned out (see 6.4.3), he was something of a reformed character and appeared to gain his standing from the authority of the role, his personality and his behaviour. But he experienced tensions between his role as perceived by teachers and his loyalty to his friends (see 5.2).

In School E's council meeting, the student chairperson and senior prefects on the council seemed to have something of a 'go-between' role, negotiating boundaries between the interests of younger students and the likely predicted responses of teachers and administrators. In this, they engaged in quite delicate social perspective-taking:

Chairperson *It's never that you can't talk about it; it's the fact that nothing is done about it. You can't do nothing about it and you keep raising it over and over again, so there is no point ... It's like the issue raised today about the hot drinks machine downstairs. I mean the little kids running around, they are always running around really hyperactive, so it's health and safety reasons, because we'd be very careful here and we're not allowed to drink it anywhere else, just in this room [the sixth-form common room], but they want it downstairs in the canteen.*

Researcher *So do you see that as part of your role – to explain things like that? Because I noticed you did that several*

*times. And I thought maybe that was actually sometimes difficult for you in a senior role because you could be seen by other students as taking the part of the staff in the school.*

Student *We understand where they are coming from because a couple of years ago we were in the same situation, we were Year 11, we wanted to go out at lunchtimes so we do understand where they are coming from. But then also, like you said, because we are prefects we interact with the teachers quite often – we can understand their point of view as well. But the younger years do feel comfortable talking to us rather than the teachers.*

This Year 13 chairperson was observed managing a meeting of about 50 students; sometimes as many as 80 students were present, as the meeting was open to all to attend, though not to speak. She acknowledged that a large number was sometimes difficult to control and the SMT representative sometimes intervened to help her discipline the ongoing murmurs throughout the meeting. She thought it important in order to have a broad spread of views and opinions and to *'make a very good relationship with the younger years'*. In this large public forum, young people also had to be prepared to advance, defend and stick to a point of view (see 6.4.1) and there was evident sympathy and support for younger speakers. The student chairperson was expecting to induct her successor and suggest some strategies for chairing such a meeting. She appeared to be organised, well prepared, confident, calm and at ease with her role. She had to be sufficiently dominating to control meetings, keep them on track and earn respect, empathising to see things from teachers' points of view, relaying these to students and getting them to see issues from different perspectives, but also being their friend and on their side. Her peers testified to the range of personal qualities and skills needed:

*I think she is really good because she's not got a big mouth but she can still control them all and still gets her points across as well.*

*There's a lot of work that is hidden and no one gets to see what she does, we don't know. Like all this week she has been preparing the agenda and lots of things, posters, making sure that the head of catering knows what's going on. So she has actually coped very well.*

*She's responsible as well, so when she says 'I'll look into that' she won't pass it by, I know that she will look into that issue and she won't forget about it.*

*I think the chairperson is the strongest person in the school council because of the way they control and handle it. There's a lot of work that we don't see.*

*Committed. You can't be forced into it; you have to be committed.*

*Like today, she's goes up to you and says 'It's school council meeting today. Are you coming today? School council meeting today.' She remembers everyone.*

Most notable of all, however, was the Year 5 student chairperson in School B. At one meeting she seemed to take the presence of four visiting adults entirely in her stride and in interview she claimed to be *'used to it, we had a lot of visitors. Sometimes we have had other schools come in with the children asking us about how we do things to see if they can improve their school council. ... They started the school council meeting, kind of new for them, and they came to us with some questions to answer.'* The headteacher was present at the council meeting but left the conduct of the meeting up to the student chair from the beginning and only spoke if the chair asked her a question (usually on a point of information) or if she had put up her hand, like the councillors, to request to speak, usually to add some relevant information (e.g. *re* the school grounds) or to ask them a question (e.g. whether they thought more children would attend the breakfast club if it were free). The chairperson was not clearly distinguished from others in the circle, but seemed to have the moral authority to be in charge of and speak for the whole group and conducted a calm and quiet but fast-moving and structured meeting, even though it appeared to have no agenda. However, before asking other representatives for their comments, she could not resist giving her personal response to issues first (even though the head had apparently asked her not to), especially if they seemed to her to require an expression of sympathy (on health and safety matters) or, as if she was the teacher, to exhort her peers to take care of school property or to uphold school rules: *'We don't want swearing.'* On the other hand, she demonstrated her knowledge about and concern for the school and appeared mature and to operate with common sense in seeking solutions. The councillors paid attention to one another and had many ideas and suggestions, though these did not necessarily build on others' ideas to lead to a clear way forward. At the end of the meeting, the headteacher resumed

her role, commended them for their ideas and reminded them to take the issues back to their classes.

### 4.3 Participation and Non-participation

A significant issue in several, if not most, council meetings was the extent to which all or most students actively participated in terms of voicing a contribution. There was often a sizeable minority of students who made no contribution. In School F, for instance, where there was an attempt to widen participation to include Years 7 and 8 girls, this meant changing established hierarchies in the school according to age. As the following dialogue shows, the Year 10 girls were aware of the initial difficulties younger students were likely to experience and also thoughtful about how they might be encouraged and included.

Student *Well I think that as the younger students come to the meetings more, they will get more confident when they see we don't bite.*

Student *When we first went it was like a little bit of shock.*

Student *Yer, like, 'Sit back and shut up, Year 11s are talking!'*

Student *'cos the Year 11s were talking all the time but once you got used to being there, like in the second meeting...*

Student *You have to get used to the pace, don't you?...*

Researcher *Is that quite hard to learn how to do that?*

Student *Well not really hard to learn; you just slip into it. It is just getting used to the pace and knowing when to put your hand up: 'I'm here. I want to get a word in.'*

Student *I do think it would be hard for the Year 7s, though...*

Researcher *So is there anything you could do to help prepare these new people coming on to the school council?*

Student *I think we need to try that, when we are talking we need to try and involve them ... get their feelings.*

Student *Like maybe ask them what they think.*

Researcher *Is that possible within the structure of the meeting?*

Student *I think we have to ask them what they think because some of them might think 'No, I don't agree with that', but they are too scared to say 'I don't agree.' I think some of them might need a bit of a prod.*



School C included reception children in its council, though they were very quiet and hardly said a word even when asked by the chairperson. But the headteacher thought they were paying attention and learning by observation. Occasionally they made a contribution which showed they had been following the discussion. Others who were also quiet sometimes spontaneously wrote down notes for their forms when the more vociferous had to be reminded. There were also examples of older students helping younger ones in the meeting and of councillors thinking about the implications for year groups other than their own.

Size of the school council meeting and whether the chairperson's style was actively consultative were other factors in opportunities for councillors to take an active role in meetings. In School E, where about 50 councillors and other students attended a meeting, the student chairperson managed to adopt an inclusive manner. During the course of the meeting, according to the topic under discussion, she addressed relevant groups of councillors (e.g. year groups, or groups differentiated by gender) for their opinions on an issue and supported new members in expressing their views. She also reminded councillors of the need to signal if they wanted to contribute to the discussion and the member of the SMT who attended pointed out if a councillor was trying to get her attention.

#### **4.4 Representation or Expression of Personal View?**

Representation is a key concept in an elective democracy, but may be one which is particularly difficult to grasp, especially at school age. Are councillors elected to represent the views of their peers or to speak on their behalf using their own voice? Are they self-conscious about this position? Do they have any preparation for this role? How do they handle being lobbied by peers? As one way of exploring the question of representation of peers' views, some students were asked in interview whether they would be prepared to put forward anything suggested by other students, even if it was something with which they disagreed.

Often there seemed to be informal lobbying by students, as well as the structural mechanism within the class context. One councillor in School D mentioned:

*Some of the boys come up to me and say 'Can you ask at the school council if we should have this or if we can have that, get another vendor?' I would mention it and it would go from there and people will discuss.*

In School B, one girl claimed:

*Well, normally I just say 'I will discuss it with the school council and see what they say, then I will tell you.' I've had some message that they want the school council chess club.*

She also said she would bring an idea to the school council even if she did not think it was a good one *'because it would be a problem to that person'*.

In School F, one girl described what she would do in such a situation:

*Well, it has never happened to me, but I think that if I truly disagree with something somebody was asking me to say I would ask them, probably, 'Why do you want me to say that?' or 'Why do you feel that is necessary?' And then if I thought their reasons were justified then I would put it forward.*

An interesting example occurred in School C when councillors were reporting back on a survey of food options from their forms for discussion in the council meeting with the cook. One child reported the form's choice of broccoli, whilst also pulling a face. The headteacher chairperson remarked: *'You don't like the options, but you're reporting back from your class so you have to tell us.'*

An awareness that the process of representation needed more attention may have been at the root of the emphasis laid by some teacher chairpersons on the necessity of consultation and liaison with the form or year group in order to represent their view. This was a form of 'on the job learning'. School E even had a discussion on 'The role of a school council representative' as part of a council meeting. One new Year 8 councillor was clear about his duties: *'getting information from my class and sometimes friends and trying to help them get what they want'*. Further student reflections on 'learning how to be a representative' are given in 6.4.2.2.

## 4.5 The School Council as a Strategy for Institutional Change

During the two terms over which we visited the schools, some of the school council meetings evolved noticeably.

In School B, for example, the students mentioned how over the three years of the school council's existence, they had gradually come to have more influence and took over the roles of chairperson and secretary. During our fieldwork, the council itself was beginning to change its practices. It started to have an agenda and, at the head's suggestion, each class had a book in which the typed council minutes of the items and actions to be taken were inserted. This went to the class council on alternate Fridays for feedback and discussion. The councillors then took notes about the class discussion and about '*the issues that need to be sorted*', and this, in turn, was taken back to the school council meeting.

In School F, there was an ongoing issue about students eating in the classrooms and leaving a mess with rubbish over the floor, even though there was insufficient room for them all to eat in the dining hall. As one girl said:

*I think the mess is partly a statement, though, because people know they are not allowed to eat in the classroom so they are making a statement to show that they do eat in the classroom and they should be allowed to.*

As a result, a teacher attended one school council meeting suggesting that a working party be formed to discuss the issue. Several girls offered to join this but no one was selected. The working party was another structure cutting across the school council and potentially undermining its democratic basis. However, it was seen by the girls as

*... a form of progress that they have actually noticed and want to come to some sort of compromise because most teachers would just say 'Well sorry, hard cheese, you are not eating in there', but obviously it is being discussed and they are willing to come to some sort of compromise.*

School D had had year councils for many years but had only recently also instituted a whole-school council. Councillors and non-councillors considered that changes had occurred and that the

improvements were now applying to the school generally:

Student *I know from before because my sister was on the council when she was in the school and she said that quite often they would have an idea and Mr X would come into the meeting and say 'No, it's not going to happen' and then walk out. They were mostly uniform changes. But now we get them like the sixth form.*

Student *Much more of a democracy.*

Student *The sixth form didn't used to be able to wear shorts or things like that and they tried to change that so they tried to change the sixth form's uniform rules and jewellery rules. Gradually they have changed a bit but a lot of things were turned down.*

Researcher *The head actually introduced the idea today about changing the uniform ...*

Student *He is responding better than he used about what people are saying.*

Student *He values what we think.*

Researcher *So when you said, just now, it is more democratic, can I press you a bit on that? What makes you actually come out and say that? What did you have in mind that makes you think it is democratic?*

Student *Just the fact that we can say what we like and our ideas are thought about, mulled over, whereas if we were just there for formality and our ideas weren't considered at all then it would just be us there to look good whereas we actually do make changes.*

At the penultimate council meeting of the year, the headteacher chairperson in School D raised the issue of the review of the structure and processes of the school council, considering its achievements over two years. In order to increase involvement of non-councillors, the head was asked to discuss with staff the provision of a specific day and time for liaison between year and council representatives for two-way feedback and for tutor group discussions, and for each year council to have a chairperson to organise these meetings. Ways of making the council more effective were a topic of the final meeting of the school year.

These three examples – changes to the conduct of the school council meeting and consultation processes, establishment of working

parties and of whole-school councils integrated with year councils – are all instances of valuing greater student participation in the running of the school. In turn, if the ethos of the school is supportive and nurturing, such practices can enhance the democratisation of school procedures.

## 4.6 Key Findings and Issues

- **Observation of school council meetings indicated several practical issues about the conduct of meetings, including: provision of a suitable place, space and time; the length of time topics were discussed; and the status of the meeting *vis à vis* other school activities.**
- **Whether the school council had a headteacher or student chairperson gave rise to a very different style of meeting; the benevolence of the headteacher chairpersons in these case study schools was usually appreciated by councillors; student chairpersons were conscious of their roles and were diligent and impressive in the exercise of their responsibilities.**
- **Participation in the meeting was an issue in some meetings where a considerable minority of councillors might make no active contribution. The size of the meeting itself could be relevant, as was the degree to which the style of the chairperson was proactively consultative or inclusive.**
- **Representation is a key democratic concept. Some councillors understood the importance of acting on behalf of their peers. But headteacher chairpersons, especially in primary schools, were aware of the need to emphasise the importance of consultation and representation.**
- **The council itself could be an example of evolving, flexible and increasingly democratic practices.**

## 5. PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL COUNCILS: THE VIEWS OF TEACHER LEADERS, STUDENT COUNCILLORS AND OTHERS

Chapter 5 addresses perceptions of the school council and its functioning. Firstly, we consider teacher leaders' perceptions of councillors' attitudes to the school council, and then the councillors' own perceptions of their experience. We take account of teachers' perceptions of the attitudes of non-councillors to their school council and we explore the attitudes of two groups of non-councillors, one primary, and one secondary, from the case study schools. Finally, we look at the teacher leaders' views of the attitudes of their colleagues and others to the school council.

### 5.1 Teacher Leaders' Perceptions of Councillors' Attitudes

According to the teacher leaders interviewed, it would seem that the majority of councillors viewed their school council in a favourable light and were enthusiastic about their role. It was reported that councillors felt important, responsible, valued, trusted and proud, and enjoyed being representatives. Evidently, they were also pleased to have a voice, to be listened to and to be able to contribute to the school, particularly when *'issues are dealt with'*; *'they take their job seriously....they feel like they have real power to make some changes'*. In many schools, particularly primary schools, being a representative is seen as a privilege: *'there is status attached to being a representative'*, *'it is an honour for them to be chosen'* and they are therefore *'mostly very committed'*.

Many schools had taken steps to promote the status of the council and the councillors by giving them badges, displaying their photographs and publicising the council in assemblies. But having a badge of office could be problematic.

.....  
In School C, at each council meeting the headteacher made a point of asking councillors why they were not wearing their badges. She reminded councillors that they attended the meeting on behalf of their class; *'You wear your badge everyday so they know who you are – so they know who to go to.'*  
.....

Also in School E, where councillors had badges, one said:

*Most people do wear them; its just that in the sixth form we are wearing different clothes every day and we are just changing. It's a bit more difficult for the sixth form. But most of the lower school get a certain sense of pride of wearing the school council badge.*

Another way of increasing the status of the school council in secondary schools was to automatically make prefects or form captains representatives on the school council. Conversely, in School G, the councillors had informally adopted the role of class prefect, though this could have its disadvantages (see 5.2).

A few teachers also mentioned students' increased awareness of the skills required to be a representative and how much they were learning by having that role. For instance, in some secondary schools, the older students took the opportunity to record their experience as councillors in their record of achievement. Even in primary schools, increased awareness of responsibilities was sometimes reported, as in School A: *'They all realise that being responsible is quite demanding – some of them start flagging, but they all keep going.'*

However, not all of the comments were so positive, especially in secondary schools. A few teachers in charge reported that students' views about the council were mixed: *'Some [representatives] are happy to turn up and sit there and say nothing, but others are too enthusiastic.'* Some teachers mentioned that some see it as a convenient way of missing lessons. One school was suffering from student apathy: *'Getting names on paper is not a problem, but getting them to attend at meetings is a problem in practice.... We can't persuade them to take part.'* In contrast, however, other teachers mentioned that representatives became disheartened when it had not been possible to hold more frequent meetings.

Furthermore, some students became *'disheartened'* when things could not be changed, or if they took too long to change: *'They don't always understand the reasons why.'* One teacher leader

reported that when she explained the financial constraints to the children, they were shocked, as such issues had never occurred to them before. Others noted that councillors were grateful to receive an explanation if something was not possible. One teacher felt that children became disappointed because their ideas were sometimes too ambitious, but she also suggested that *'perhaps adults are too negative too often'*.

A few of the teachers in charge made remarks which suggested differences in attitudes between the age groups. In primary schools, it was noted that some of the younger children find the whole process of the school council quite difficult (*'they are a bit bemused by it all'*). In secondary schools, some of the younger students were reported to enjoy participating in the school council the most. Perhaps, therefore, the involvement of students in key stages 1 and 4 needs more monitoring and support.

Another issue is that a school council may *'attract certain children'*, described by one interviewee as *'goody-two-shoes'*. According to one teacher, those who stand for election to the school council *'are likely to be the ones who are more active in other areas of the school community'*. However, the attraction of belonging to the school council seems to depend on the image the council has within school: whether, for example, it is an *'élitist'* club with academic and well-behaved representatives who are popular with teachers (as one teacher put it, *'a club for cliquy students'*), or an accessible, dynamic organisation with a mixed cohort of students. In contrast, in two schools, the council's influence was used to advantage: in one school, the council *'had a very positive effect'* on students *'renowned for having a [bad] reputation'* who had been elected (see 6.4.3); and in another school, a teacher had encouraged pupils to vote for a boy with very low self-esteem.

## 5.2 Student Councillors' Perceptions of their Experience

Many of the councillors interviewed reported that their peers generally held a positive view of the school council and there was often strong competition to become a councillor. But this did vary from school to school: *'Some are really desperate to be on the school council in the first place – some really want to be on it.'* Where there was competition, the councillors had the idea of being privileged.



Their expectations of the council were variously formed: *'because my brother was on the school council'*; *'My friend told us about it.'* Occasionally, however, there was a misperception: *'To be serious, most people thought it was missing work'* (Year 6 student, School A). The desire to be a councillor was often apparently altruistic: *'So you can give ideas about the school and how you should respect the school and other children.'* One student in School B wanted to be a councillor because it *'feels like good to know what is going on in the school and it feels nice that you are helping the school to make it a better place'*. In School C, for example, the primary students thought the school council and being a councillor were good and that they were *'helping [the headteacher] run the school'*. They liked *'debate on what you really want and what you don't really want'* and *'to get new things for the school'*. They felt *'a bit different'* by being councillors and that the headteacher, whom they saw as improving the school, *'is giving us the opportunity to find out about things'*. Even older students could share such motivations. Interestingly, some councillors seemed not only to feel the role of councillor as a responsibility but claimed to be motivated by the idea of responsibility itself, as in the case of one Year 7 boy in School G, who claimed he wanted to be on the council *'because I like to take responsibilities like this 'cos it may help me in the future because when you be working, it might help you'*.

However, being a councillor was not all plain sailing, as the following examples show. In School D, some of the councillors interviewed felt a degree of frustration about the lack of involvement of some of their peers in generating ideas:

Student *I know the people in my class. If I stood up there and asked them to give me an idea, nobody could because they don't care: just the fact that I am the only one in the whole class that could even try to be on the year council is enough evidence. Sometimes I give ideas to the class but sometimes I just know no one will give an idea because they don't care what happens.*

Student *They want the ideas brought to them to whether they agree or disagree with them but they are not so keen on just saying things. They don't want to get up and say anything themselves.*

Researcher *Are they shy?*

Student *I don't think they are shy; its laziness. I think it is partly something they might have an idea but they*

*might not want to say it in front of everyone else in the class and they might think it will make them look stupid.*

In School E, the councillors were aware that they were trying to meet diverse interests, which could not all be met:

*They can have a say but then they get upset if they don't get what they want.*

*Every choice affects somebody in some way and what we have to try and think about is not the benefits that will help us but will help them too.*

The group of councillors interviewed in School G discussed the additional responsibilities being a councillor and a prefect could bring in the class situation, specifically the tension between loyalty to friends and being seen as responsible in relation to the norms of the school.

Student *Well, if I misbehave I am conscious of being told 'Oh, you're a council rep and you should have more responsibility.'*

Researcher *Teachers tell you that?*

Student *Yes.*

Researcher *How do you feel about that?*

Student *Sometimes because you have got all the responsibility of the class and it's unfair on the one person or the two people taking it...It's kind of like, it's not just being responsible as being honest. Some of the teachers ... when they see someone ... they want to know who did it. [They ask] specifically at that councillor and say 'Just remember you are a councillor, you have to be honest. Who was it?' It's kind of hard, because you hesitate a bit, because you either lie or snitch on your friends, and to have that responsibility and your friend actually getting told off or upset and in trouble, it's kind of hard as well.*

Student *Because you normally end up telling the teacher.*

Student *Normally I do tend to snitch on my friend. I don't really want to but then again I want to improve on behaviour and how people view [the school] and at*

*the end of day if I didn't and they found out, then I am the one who's going to be ashamed... If it is something that the whole class has seen they would say and that. If I did tell the tutors they [other students] would go to me 'Why, man, come who's your friend?' and I say to them 'Hey listen, I'm on the council, I am the chairman, I have got responsibility to uphold; I can't be going around lying and doing this stuff.'*

Moreover, by key stage 4 there could be conflicts of interest between full participation as a councillor and coursework and exam commitment:

*It is very difficult when you reach Year 10 and 11 because you have got other commitments like coursework and revision for exams. We have got exams coming up so the school council isn't always your top priority which really it should be but you've got other things to think about (Councillor, School D).*

### 5.3 Teacher Leaders' Perceptions of Non-councillors' Attitudes

According to the teacher leaders interviewed, it appears that, overall, other students in the school were somewhat less positive about the council than the councillors themselves. However, over half of the teacher responses to this question referred to students' awareness of the council itself or of the potential of their influence over it: *'They are aware that they can express their opinion and it will be considered.'* On the other hand, a few teachers said that the students were unaware of the council. Some staff were hoping to increase awareness by publicising it, for example in assembly.

Several teacher interviewees reported that students' opinions of the council very much depended on its results; they were more positive about it when they witnessed positive changes and consequently *'it is more difficult when things can't be done'*. This was borne out in School A (see 5.2).

Other teachers reported that students held mixed views and that *'some see it as a real and dynamic way of expressing their views whilst others do not show an interest'*. One interviewee pointed out that students' opinions depended on their personalities, how much they cooperated during feedback sessions (a few interviewees

said that some students provided very useful ideas and comments), and whether or not their form tutor was supportive.

Overall, only a small number of teachers reported that the students who were not councillors held distinctly positive views; for example, the students were said to appreciate being able to go to a peer rather than someone in authority. But, equally, only a small number of teachers relayed negative views. In one school, the '*muted response*' from other students encountered by councillors was described as '*a hurdle*', and, in another school, the students were said not to be interested. Such reluctance was relatively common – '*we can't always get them to use it*' – although not always so extreme.

Despite this lack of wider interest, there did not appear to be a problem in recruiting councillors, at least in most of the primary schools in the sample: '*There are always plenty of candidates willing to stand for election.*' Although membership of the council was seen as a '*rite of passage*', in one school (where there were councillors in Year 6 only), many teachers acknowledged that '*some [students] wouldn't want to be on it*'.

It might be considered significant that a small minority of interviewees felt unable to say what students in general thought about the council. One reported that this '*is not monitored*'. More encouragingly, one or two teachers commented that they had not thought to find out students' views in general and that they would make a point of getting to know.

## 5.4 Non-councillors' Perceptions of School Councils

In two of the schools, one primary (School A) and one secondary (School D), we were able to explore in detail the perceptions of a group of non-councillors about certain aspects of the processes and practices of their school councils. Both groups of students tended to focus on the role of councillors, elections, and, increasingly in the case of the secondary students, issues of idea generation, feedback and consultation. These students' observations are offered as mini-case studies of non-councillors' views. As it happened, their experiences and attitudes were largely positive.

#### 5.4.1 School A: observations of four Year 6 non-councillors on their school council

The four Year 6 non-councillors in School A perceived the role of councillor as responsible:

Student *... what I know about the school council is that it's a very big responsibility and it's really hard going to other places and giving speeches...*

Student *I think the school council is a very good idea and they can tell their headteacher the ideas we got about the things we can do in school as in playground equipment, inside school, games... And, as X said, they have to have a big responsibility. They have to listen to us, we have to listen to them, and...*

Student *It's hard to think about things to have in school – to be a school councillor.*

Researcher *Why do you think it's hard?*

Student *Because they have to think about all these things – special things for the school.*

Student *It's very good. They help sort out bad things in the school ...*

These non-councillors also seemed attracted by the idea of responsibility and cited this as among their reasons for having wanted to stand for election.

Student *One of my brothers, he was actually a councillor last year and he told me about the school council. I thought it was really good so I said 'I'm going to try it'. So I gave it a try, but...*

Researcher *What was it that he told you about it that made you really want to stand?*

Student *I wanted to have a little bit of responsibility so I could do that next year maybe in secondary – the same thing. I'll get more responsibility and I'll get the idea of how school councils are.*

Researcher *So you're not frightened of the responsibility. And why did you [to another student] really want to stand?*

Student *The same thing – being responsible. Giving them ideas and them giving me ideas. I like listening to people and I like people listening to me so...*

Researcher *But you [another student] didn't want to stand?*

Student *Yeah I did. I was on it last year. It's really fun...to have responsibility and to listen to them and then you have to make decisions on what they say.*

Concerning elections, the non-councillors in School A seemed to think that the right people were elected. They were also aware that the councillors sometimes had a wider role beyond that of the immediate school community in trying to resolve some inter-school issues:

Researcher *And on the whole do you think that sensible people get elected?*

Student *Yeah, because they say what they're good at. They have to be good at listening, giving speeches in front of thousands of children because they go to different schools and give speeches at secondary schools. Last year they went to [a nearby secondary school].*

Researcher *Why did they go to the secondary school?*

Student *It was about bullying – not to bully and the school councillors gave a speech.*

Researcher *What was the idea of the councillors going to the secondary school?*

Student *How we wanted to sort it out, and how we wanted the older children to help us sort it out without going to the teachers.*

#### **5.4.2 School D: observations of six Year 9–11 non-councillors on their school council**

In School D, an upper school, where non-councillors from Years 9, 10 and 11 were interviewed, they appeared to have a keen understanding of the established processes of class elections, year councils and representation on the recently formed whole-school council.

*We have people who want to be the class representative. And everyone in the class votes on who we think will best represent them, and then all the class representatives and the entire year votes who they think should go on to the school council.*

*Well, in our class nobody really wanted to be the representative apart from one person, 'cos it is at lunchtimes usually. And so that name just went in for our class...*

*They are really putting in their free time to do this. So they've really got to really want to do it.*

They also felt involved in idea generation, feedback and consultation.

*I think it's because most people don't particularly like school so they want to make as many changes as they can to make it as good as it can be for them.*

*Most people have something to say about what's going on even if they don't actually want to go to the meeting. It's important to be able to say something.*

*We have a representative to each class, so if you have an idea you can just speak to them and they might mention it at a meeting.*

*It's either the morning before or the morning of the thing [council meeting], that the representative asks the class if there's anything they want to have mentioned, and then write it down.*

*What they do [in the school council] is come up with a list of ideas, and they say, 'Do you want this one or this one? You choose which is the most popular.'*

*It's good because everyone gets to say what they think, and gets to vote.*

Both councillors and non-councillors recognised, however, that the degree and nature of consultation and involvement varied from form to form, as there was not necessarily a set time for feedback and consultation.

*I'd say really when an issue actually comes up, there's not really a set time, it's just when something actually happens that you want to have your say about.*

Non-councillors trusted their peers as representatives:

*We do have evidence that ideas do get put forward...*

*We know they're our age so they know what we want as well.*

*And they meet with the teachers so they can't just say anything, they can't say what they want, they say what everyone wants.*

*Because the teacher knows what was said in the class.*

They also felt part of the democratic process and that they could have their say:

*Since I have been here I don't think there has been any decision made which lots of people disagree with. I think most stuff done has been voted for.*

*Yes because we get to make the decision that we want to happen, as opposed to what teachers think.*

*I think it's good, 'cos its getting everyone involved. It's not just them deciding. It's more democratic.*

*...we all get our say and it's not just the people, representatives, who just go off and don't tell us anything. We are all involved in the school, which makes us want to be here...*

These students knew about current issues being discussed and also linked some aspects of the council's work and their contributions in the form with their PSE and citizenship curriculum, public speaking debates as part of English, and learning how to construct an agenda in ICT.

Interestingly, these students in School D saw the year and school councils as being among several channels of communication and ways of getting their views known:

*Our year heads are quite into communicating as well. We can go and talk to them as well. I am quite good friends with our representative so I can talk to her about anything. She will note it down, then perhaps ask all the class.*

*There is somebody in Year 11, just the other day ... he talked to [the headteacher] about the canteen, about like the club queues designed to let the people in the clubs go first, but it ends up they still have to wait.*

These non-councillors perceived the headteacher both as the key person in the school council, as its chairperson, and also as central to the informal network of student communication:

Student *He's got like the fund setting, but as shareholders we can input our ideas.*

Student *He just wants the school to be what we want, he's not really like our headteacher because we can talk to him about anything. He's a really nice man, more our friend than our teacher.*



- Researcher *How do you get that impression of him?*
- Student *Because you see him in the corridor and he will stop you and say something, not school related, like, 'I see you've got "A"', or something like that.*
- Student *He knows everybody.*
- Student *He gets involved in everything ...*
- Student *People are not scared to put forward ideas. Also on the school council the younger kids, he makes sure they get their say, I think.*
- Student *Younger ones, sitting at the back and the sixth-formers at the front. Asks them what they want.*
- Student *But if an idea is really rubbish then obviously he won't stand for it, because he won't let us have what we want all the time.*
- Researcher *What do you think about that?*
- Student *I think that's correct, because if it is a really bad idea but a lot of people want it ...*
- Student *He won't just say 'Oh no'. He will take it into consideration first and explain why and try and change it. He won't just say 'No'. He will explain why.*
- Student *Have a different option to it which when you think about it is a lot better...*
- Student *... he will just give a different suggestion as a good example, like constructive criticism.*

In School D, these non-councillors and the councillors alike seemed to have a sense that having a school council made a difference to how they experienced the school:

*Because when you look round the school you can think, well I voted for that and it happened.'*

*It is so much different because I went to [another school] and it's different there because basically decisions are made there without very little input from the students. Here is so much different.*

## 5.5 Teacher Leaders' Perceptions of the Views of Other Teachers, Staff and Governors

It would seem that the views of teachers' leaders of a school council very much depended on whether they were in a primary or secondary school. In the sample, the vast majority of primary interviewees reported that staff generally thought that the council was a good idea, informative or worthwhile. By contrast, only one-third of teachers in secondary schools said their colleagues were likely to have positive views of the council. There are at least three likely explanations for this phase difference. Firstly, secondary schools are usually larger, and therefore staff may be less aware of the council's activities, concerns or its potential benefits, especially if good feedback mechanisms are not in place. Secondly, there may be more curriculum and examination pressures in secondary schools, so teachers are less likely to dedicate time and energy to 'non-essentials'. Thirdly, as mentioned by a couple of interviewees, some teachers may be afraid of students having too much influence through the school council.

On the other hand, it appears that senior staff (or in one case, pastoral staff), particularly in secondary schools, were more in favour of the council than their junior colleagues. As one headteacher said: *'Myself and the deputy see it as being more important than the rest of the teachers do, mainly because it has an impact on policy making and spending.'* Teachers in six primary schools claimed that other teachers *'see it as an opportunity and make use of it'*, for example, by linking speech-writing for election campaigns to literacy, and valuing the students' help in running the school.

In several schools (mainly secondary), however, apathy about the school council appeared to be a problem for many teachers, largely due to time and/or curriculum pressures: *'like a lot of things, it's just seen as an addition rather than nitty gritty'*; *'it is not on their list of priorities'*. It appears that this attitude extended into the classroom as some teachers found it difficult to allocate time in registration, tutor period or PSE to school council feedback.

Other teachers in charge reported that staff were indifferent towards the school council, did not *'fully understand it'*, or took *'a polite interest'*, mainly because they felt it did not affect them personally. Encouragingly, however, three interviewees mentioned that some teachers had recently become more supportive.

On the other hand, a minority of teacher leaders interviewed reported teacher opposition to the school council, rather than merely reluctance towards it. Some teachers thought *'it was a waste of time'*, *'pupils shouldn't have a voice...they don't want them to have power'*, or that *'students get too big for their boots'*.

Non-teaching staff were only mentioned by two interviewees; one said that they were supportive and the other said that they were not involved.

On the whole, those governors who were said to be aware of the school council were claimed to be in favour of it. Their degree of enthusiasm varied, however, from *'supportive'* to being actively involved, either by inviting representatives to attend their governors' meetings or by attending the council meetings themselves. In School C, a parent governor had attended a school council meeting. Several teacher interviewees, however, reported that the governors were merely aware of the council, and did not express an opinion about it. Six teachers were unable to comment on governors' views, as they were unaware of their opinions. A lack of governor involvement was emphasised in some schools, where they had *'never expressed an interest'* (although one teacher admitted that *'they had never been told either'*) and where *'it is a job to involve the governors in anything'*. However, one headteacher reported that she *'would like them to learn more about it'*.

Interestingly, where students, even non-councillors, had a positive view of their council's achievements, they were likely to think that their teachers would be similarly *'impressed'* *'because you're doing a big job for the school'*. But, not surprisingly, councillors' perceptions of their teachers' views about the council were varied, as in School D:

*I don't think my class teacher cares particularly. He just says 'Oh you should do it really', but he doesn't really care what the outcome is because it doesn't really affect him.*

*A lot of the teachers think it is valuable to get their point across because it is not always the pupils, it is the teachers who tell [the headteacher] ideas and he asks us to ask the student body.*

## 5.6 Key Findings and Issues

- **Teacher leaders perceived the majority of councillors to be positive about the school council and their roles and responsibilities. Many schools had taken practical steps to give their councillors status. But there were some challenging issues, including student apathy, students disheartened at the pace of change, and age-related differences.**
- **Councillors' attitudes to their experience of being councillors were also very positive; they were motivated, enjoyed helping run the school and the responsibility. But it was not straightforward: there were some challenges in generating ideas, meeting diverse needs, and personal tensions, socially and as a student.**
- **Where they claimed to know, teacher leaders' perceptions of non-councillor views were mixed and less positive, but this did depend on the achievements of the council.**
- **The perceptions of non-councillors in two schools, which were largely positive, focused on the role of councillors, elections, idea generation, feedback and consultation.**
- **Regarding perceptions of other teachers, the teacher leaders in primary schools thought their teacher colleagues considered the council was worthwhile. But, by contrast, only one-third of secondary teachers thought their colleagues felt positively about the school council, because of other pressures, apathy or indifference. The attitudes of other staff and governors were not well known.**

## 6. THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL COUNCILS ON SCHOOLS AND OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

This chapter looks at the impact of school councils on the life of the school as a whole and the learning outcomes for students, both councillors and non-councillors, from their experience of school councils. It draws on data from both the telephone interviews with teachers and the case study interviews. Firstly, we consider the benefits and disadvantages of having a school council, as perceived by the teacher leaders and students. Then we review the positive outcomes and practical changes attributed to the activities of the school council. Finally, and most importantly, we record the student learning outcomes from experience of having a school council. This section reports on teacher claims about the learning of both non-councillors and councillors. Most significantly, we draw directly on the students' own testimonies of their learning, particularly the kinds of personal, social and problem-solving skills and their awareness and understanding of democratic processes and practices developed as a result of their experiences as councillors.

### 6.1 Impact of the School Council on the School as a Whole

In this section, we consider, from the perspectives of teacher leaders, councillors and non-councillors, both the perceived benefits and disadvantages of having a school council for the life of the school as a whole.

#### 6.1.1 Benefits of having a school council

The teachers who led their school council thought that the main benefits of having a council for the school as a whole were:

- ◆ *Having an Established Forum in which Children are Able to Discuss their Views and Concerns* (24 schools). Several teachers emphasised the importance of listening to everyone's views, *giving the children a voice* and encouraging this 'two-

*way process*. *'It enables children to appreciate that they are an instrumental part of the school and can influence the general tone.'* One interviewee mentioned that it helps the staff as the students *'deal with the niggly things'*;

- ◆ *Improving the School Ethos* (21 schools): *'It creates the environment'*; *'It makes everyone feel part of the school'*; *'It bridges the gap so there is not so much height between the adults and pupils'*; *'Creating a more liberal environment'*;
- ◆ *Allowing Students to Contribute to the Running of their School*, giving them ownership and *'a say in how it moves forward'* (13 schools). Two teachers specified that the council helped children to understand the actions of staff: they realised *'that we are all human'*. It was also claimed that as a result of this sense of ownership children *'look after things more'*; for example, in two schools there was said to be less vandalism and fewer break-ins;
- ◆ *Promoting Mutually Informative Communication*. The school council enabled teachers to be aware of any problems and to hear students' ideas (12 schools). In some schools, the information flow was two-way and teachers told students their ideas also. Some comments were:
  - They come up with ideas we wouldn't have thought of;*
  - We do what we think the children want us to do, but what they actually want is different to what we think they want;*
  - Year 7s view things differently from Year 11s;*
  - Issues that are small to us can be very big to them.*
- ◆ *Facilitating Practical Changes* that had been made to the school (eight schools);
- ◆ *Fulfilling Policy Commitments to Citizenship and/or PSE* (seven schools). One deputy headteacher claimed that since establishing the school council he *'subsequently saw the connection with citizenship'*, although the school council had not been *'formed or revamped to fit with that'* ;
- ◆ *Improving Students' Personal and Academic Skills* (three primary schools);
- ◆ *Enabling Year Groups to Mix* and *'bringing the whole school together'* (two secondary schools);

- ◆ *Benefiting the School in Other Ways* (each mentioned by one secondary school): ‘treating them like young adults’; enabling the school to operate a democratic system; and contributing to the local community by organising social events.

There are numerous student testimonies throughout this report to the benefits of having a school council in the school and, for the most part, to their experience of the activities of the council. Specifically, the young students in School B were quite clear about the benefits of having a school council: ‘*It’s a good thing, you have more nice things at school and less bullying.*’

Councillors in School G were also clear of the benefits to the school as a whole and would have been prepared to recommend to another school that it have a council for the sake of the students:

*Good thing for other people to have a conversation. More opportunity. It’s really good to have a school council because it’s what the students would like, not just what the adults think. I think that’s one of the main reasons that we have a school council to get the points of views of the youngsters.*

And in School E, the school council was seen by some councillors as bridging the gap between school managers and the students:

*And I think the important thing is the bridge between the students who don’t normally get to speak to management ... people like the headteacher and senior management, and bridging the gap ... knowing that what they are saying now is going to be discussed with the headteachers probably makes them reassured that they are being listened to.*

### **6.1.2 Disadvantages of having a school council**

Despite all the perceived benefits of having a school council, most teachers in charge of school councils reported some disadvantages and difficulties with having a school council. Only a quarter of all the schools in the sample had not encountered any problems or disadvantages with having a school council.

Out of those that had experienced challenges, *pressure of time* appeared to be the biggest drawback, with approximately half of the teacher interviewees specifying it as a problem. Time pressures were related to: finding a suitable time for meetings, increased

workload or paperwork (for example, preparing agendas), general organisation of the council, '*being organised enough to follow things through*' or reduced contact time. A few teachers in charge were concerned about students missing lessons or after-school activities. And some councillors in School C, for example, said they would have preferred to be in their lessons rather than at the school council meeting, even though they were positive about their experience. In several cases however, positive attitudes were displayed, either in terms of suggesting solutions or by realising that sacrifices had to be made: '*... but it is worth it – it's not a disadvantage*' .

The other most common problem in connection with a school council that schools had encountered was *student disillusionment* at a lack of positive changes or the rate at which they expected the changes to be made. Teachers in ten schools said of pupils '*They all want results quickly.*' Some teachers warned about raising students' expectations: '*We want to [make changes], but it is frustrating if you don't have the means to do things...sometimes it feels like I'm fighting a losing battle.*' Another teacher warned that '*it [student expectation] needs to be handled with sensitivity*'. This appeared to be a much bigger problem in secondary schools than in primary schools, perhaps because older students' desires for change are more ambitious, and they are more aware of ways in which their school life could be improved. In an incident in School E's council meeting, a non-representative, who was allowed to attend but not to speak, spoke out, accusing the council of '*not getting anything done*', but councillors supported the student chairperson who contested that they were '*here to see things done*', and others suggested that '*the school council is trying and we should respect it*', that '*it puts forward pupils' views and if it weren't here everyone would be complaining*', and that '*it helps our form to know what's going on in school*' .

Even where there were very positive views of the council and its achievements, some non-councillors and councillors criticised the *pace of change*:

*In the playground we had this climbing frame. It was quite wobbly. But they took it away last year and they took it to Foundation 1 so the little children can play with it. And since then we didn't have anything else to play with so I think they need to move a bit more faster in getting something... [to replace it].* (Non-councillor, Year 6, School A)



And, in consequence of the slow pace of change, they also wanted a more *diverse agenda*:

Researcher *And have you got any ideas of how it [the council] could be better?*

Student *I think if you could bring different suggestions up in the Friday meetings. Because if we're on one subject, say we've got some spending money, it's like we have to stay on that subject for the whole meeting. So if you could just stay on that subject for five or ten minutes and then bring up some other subjects.*

Student *This year they're getting slow at changing things because of the classes, they're not voting...we don't have much time... speed it up.*

Researcher [To another student] *Do you think speed it up?*

Student *I think yeah, a bit, because when they come to talk to us they say things that are really boring... like they started two years ago and we're still doing it.*

In School G, even though council meetings were held fortnightly, some councillors thought the council could be improved. One boy suggested: *'Have more meetings. Make them longer. Keep to a set place. It's quite rushed. Have a meeting twice a week and make it longer.'*

Teacher leaders in a small number of schools reported cases in which the *role of councillor* had been abused: *'sometimes they may think they have more influence and power than they actually have'*. Some teachers commented: *'you have to be careful with the high status going to their heads'* and *'they must not feel that they have the power to radically change the school, but that they do have some voice'*. One interviewee described a case in which one boy with *'very right wing opinions'* kept *'dominating the meetings with his own opinions'* and was subsequently *'sacked'* following a council vote. In another school, a boy was reported to have started bullying other children, with the excuse, *'I'm a representative, I'm allowed'*. In School E, there was a perception that some form representatives were not seriously involved with the development of the school community, but being a representative was more for their own good: *'I think people are only with it because you get a badge and it does look good when you are going on to jobs or whatever and they just come to sit there.'* And in School C, one small vocal girl clearly

thought she had a policing role: *'I like being on the school council because you can tell [the headteacher] what has been going on because some of the children misbehave in the class.'*

Another problem faced by three schools was continuity or *'keeping the momentum going'*. One school said that this depended on the collaboration between the group of councillors that were on the council at any one time: *'some want to work hard at it and some don't – they want to be doing other things. It's an up and down process.'* Furthermore, if councillors did not attend meetings regularly, *'they find it difficult to get into the swing of it'*. Councillors could perceive attendance as an issue, even where there was in fact a large group present at meetings (see School E).

*Other challenges*, identified by one or two interviewees, included:

- ◆ the support of the SMT;
- ◆ the view of the council held by non-representatives. In one school, the council was regarded as *'a bit elitist'*, and in another the students did not always see the need for it – the teacher in charge reported that it was sometimes a struggle to keep the profile high when *'others are already satisfied'*;
- ◆ a student chairperson attempting to chair a large group of councillors;
- ◆ incompetent representatives – *'if they are unsuitable for the job there will be problems'*;
- ◆ the establishment of distinct roles: the *'house captains'* believed that they should be the council representatives;
- ◆ staff resentment if they attempted to set up year councils in their year, but failed;
- ◆ representatives benefiting much more (by learning and consolidating skills) than other students.

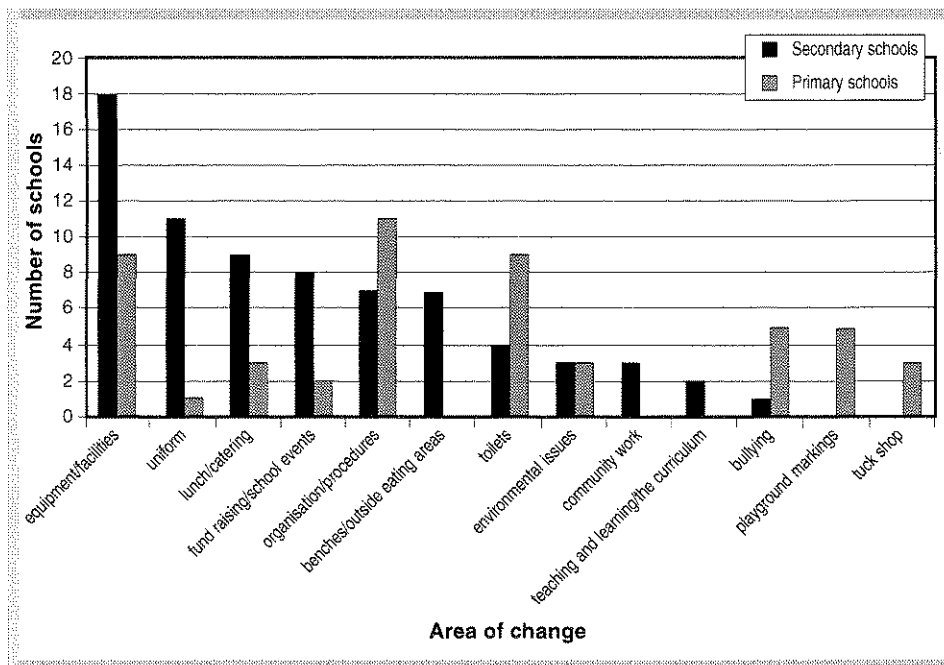
## 6.2 Positive Outcomes – Practical Changes

In this section, we provide evidence from the claims of the teacher leaders of the school councils and from students themselves as to the positive outcomes and practical changes which had come about as a result of the school councils' activities.

### 6.2.1 Teachers' views

Teacher leaders in most schools were able to report at least one practical change as a result of the operation of the school council. But a few struggled to do this, and others admitted that to date the council had not been successful in implementing changes. The changes that had been made in schools appeared broadly to correspond with the issues that were reported to have been discussed, with one important exception. Thirteen schools had discussed some aspect of teaching and learning or the curriculum (see Figure 1, p.44) but related changes had only occurred in two secondary schools (see Figure 2). This implies that, although issues about pedagogy or subject content might arise as items for discussion by the council (see 3.7), in practice there were barriers to the implementation of change. Difficulties varied but included the statutory content of the National Curriculum and staff opposition to change.

Figure 2: Changes and improvements as a result of the school council



As shown in Figure 2, changes which were reported by the teachers in charge of the school council included:

- *New/more Equipment and/or Facilities*, e.g. sporting facilities, social areas, payphone, drinks machine, homework club, lockers, water fountains, bike sheds, car park for the sixth form,

- jungle gym, notice-boards, playground equipment (27 schools, twice as many secondary schools as primaries);
- *Improvements to the Organisation* of breaks, lunch and/or football, or to school *systems/procedures*, e.g. school rules, prefect system, privilege system, staff supervision, assembly arrangements and the corridor system (18 schools);
  - *Improvements to Toilets and/or Cloakrooms*, e.g. locks, more space (13 schools, twice as many primary as secondary schools);
  - *New/improved Uniform* – four interviewees mentioned that as a result of the school council intervention girls could wear trousers (12 schools, only one of them primary);
  - *Improvements to Catering/lunch menu*, e.g. a wider selection and healthier food (two mentioned the introduction of a salad bar), a change in catering contractors or the availability of mineral water (12 schools, two-thirds secondary);
  - *New Ideas for Fundraising Whole-school Events* (10, mostly secondary schools);
  - *More Benches/Outside Eating Areas* (seven secondary schools);
  - *A Change in Recycling procedures or Other Environmental Issues* (six schools, equally primary and secondary);
  - *Steps to Combat Bullying*, e.g. buddy system, bully box, heightened awareness, bullying statement (six schools, only one secondary);
  - *New Playground Markings* (five primary schools);
  - *Introduction of Tuck Shop/fruit stall* (three primary schools);
  - *Links with the Local Community*, e.g. work in local primary schools, setting up Youth Conferences and liaison with the local council about safe cycle routes (three secondary schools);
  - *Changes to the School's Image*, e.g. new prospectus, newsletter and school name (three schools);
  - *Other things*, each mentioned by one school, included: more school trips, peer counselling, changes to the content and structuring of PSE, the restoration of the school's garden and developments to the home – school agreement.

### 6.2.2 Students' views

During our research, councillors in the group interview were asked to give some examples of changes which had come about in their schools due to the involvement of the school council. In School A, as in many schools, the councillors had been involved with bringing about *improvements to the playground and its facilities*:

Researcher *Tell me about a time you got some things changed because of what was put through the council.*

Student *Last year we wanted more things for the playground and we did get them.*

Researcher *What sorts of things?*

Student *Basketball nets, tennis things, racquets and stuff and cricket and about school lunches, what we wanted, what we didn't want. We got what we wanted.*

Researcher *So how did that feel when you got what you wanted?*

Student *Very pleased, very happy.*

Researcher *Do you think that was because you brought the ideas to the school council or do you think you would have got them otherwise somehow?*

Student *Yes. Well, we have to tell them.*

Student *There was [the time when] people said that they want a chart up who goes into the football pitch. Monday is Year 6 boys, Tuesday is Year 6 girls and it carries on.*

Researcher *How did you work that out?*

Student *There is four classes and five weeks so on the last day there will be extra so it could be mixed, anyone who wants to go can.*

Researcher *Was that your suggestion which you brought to the council that you needed a rota?*

Student *It wasn't [the head's]. We need more staff in the football pitch. There were too much people.'*  
(School A, Year 6 councillors)

Councillors in School C were also pleased to have been able to make some changes, such as improvements to the toilets, and the school gate: *'And they raised the gates, because we asked for gates because someone could just walk into the school with their dog and the dog could bite someone.'*

Elsewhere, in School G, there was ongoing discussion about how to spend some money left by a benefactor to the school. It was the privilege of a student nominated for good punctuality, attendance or helpful behaviour, who received a 'special award', to choose how it would be spent:

*One boy, Wayne, he's normally a lunatic, but over the past few months he's been helpful 'cos one time rain came and it flooded the other site in the hall and he actually helped the caretaker and a few teachers mop that stuff up and that's what he's been elected for last month. Because of his helpful behaviour towards that.*

*Like the payphone, for instance, in the council meeting we had....people have many ideas for how they want to improve the school but don't have the money to do it and what we then do because of the [special] awards if any of us has been chosen for that they could decide 'Well I want the money spent on whatever, new text books for French, new keyboards for music....'*

As a result of school council intervention, councillors in this school reported successful changes, such as the introduction of non-uniform charity days and modifications to the award scheme for merits and certificates. But they also recalled requests and ideas, which had not been met or come about, such as installing a vending machine, including girls in the school, and arranging a dance with them.

In School E, the school council had managed to get a tea and coffee machine installed in the sixth-form common room, and another success story had been the improvements made to the toilets:

*I think another major change is the toilets. A real big change is the toilets because they were in a bit of a dodgy.... They weren't in a bad condition but they weren't in a good condition either. The school council raised that and then they were totally refurbished and they look a lot better now.*

As in other school councils, however, students recalled some issues with which they had not made progress, such as the plan for a millennium garden in the previous year, and other instances where changes had not occurred, as in the following example:

*I think one of the issues was, there is a mobile phone mast on top of the school and recently there were some health concerns*

*over radiation and stuff like that. We raised that with the school council, I think this is probably last year, and the school explained why they couldn't do anything about it and we accepted that but I think people might have really wanted it changed.*

These latter examples raise the issue of decision-making, which is often central to the real influence of the council but not often in practice transparent or clearly embedded in its procedures and practices. In our observations, the school council was not usually the place where votes were cast or decisions actually made by students; rather it was a forum for discussion and recommendation or request by the students to the headteacher, senior managers or governors, from whom a response was later received. If these recommendations or requests fitted with legal requirements and school managers' perceptions of appropriate changes to the culture of school life, then they were successful; otherwise explanations needed to be given. It appeared that teacher leaders in the primary councils were more prepared to go into explanations. The boundaries and the necessary limits of such a forum as the school council probably needed clearer and explicit discussion with students, both councillors and others, as part of their learning about institutional procedures. This was done occasionally, as in School F when a member of SMT attended a council meeting to explain the process involved in changing the school uniform. On the other hand, there was scope for incorporating the school council's business more overtly in these procedures.

### **6.3 Learning Outcomes for Students**

If properly constituted and structured into the life of the school, the practices and processes of a school council should aim to fulfil many learning objectives for a range of personal, social, citizenship, communication and other learning objectives, as national guidance suggests (see 1.2.2). This section importantly explores, from the perspectives of a national sample of teachers leading their school councils and from the reflections and testimonies of the students in the case study schools, the extent to which the kinds of aims which schools expressed in setting up their school councils (see 2.4) were realised in learning outcomes.

### 6.3.1 Teachers' views on learning outcomes for non-councillors

Not surprisingly, according to the teacher leaders of the school council, students who do not become members of the council do not benefit as much as the councillors themselves:

*If they are not a member themselves then it does play down the participation element...it is more beneficial to the representatives. Once you ask for delegates then the number of those benefiting decreases.*

Indeed, four teacher interviewees saw the fact that 'some [students] benefit more than others' as a real problem. This was clearly explained by one teacher:

*It would be good to get more children involved or elected but we also have to give each elected group a reasonable length of time to operate on the council.*

There is a significant issue here in terms of providing equal access to learning opportunities *and* abiding by established democratic procedures and practices. Getting a balance between making the experience of participation and representation available as an opportunity for as many students as may wish to be councillors and allowing representatives sufficient time to act together as a council is an issue relating to provision for learning through schools councils. Schools need to consider this explicitly and carefully in their own context.

Several teacher leaders of the school council were 'unsure' about what non-councillors gained from the school having a council, and others responded in vague terms, such as, '*hopefully it has a knock-on effect*'. Several teachers responded that students knew that they were able to report their views and that they would be considered. A couple of teacher leaders felt form tutors bore some of the responsibility to involve non-councillors, but they were not sure how much time was dedicated to follow-up discussions in class. Encouragingly, one teacher in charge was planning to become actively involved with feedback sessions. Feedback, as we have seen (in 3.8.2), is an area of operation of school councils where students consider some improvements could be made if they are to feel seriously involved. Indeed, learning objectives, the processes



of engagement and skill outcomes for the whole student body as a result of having a school council seem to have been neglected and need more explicit consideration.

Nevertheless, several teacher interviewees were able to identify ways in which non-councillors were said to benefit from the existence of a council. Only a minority mentioned that non-councillors gained from the changes made in school as a result of the council, although these presumably are benefits for some, most or all students. Other responses were more in terms of the skills that had been learnt. Fifteen interviewees felt that students '*gained an insight into the democratic process*' through participation in elections. Furthermore, half of these respondents thought that students learned to '*choose those who would best represent their views, not just the most popular ones*'. Teachers in primary schools thought that older children benefited more in this way.

Seven teacher leaders interviewed thought that non-councillors benefited by learning '*the same kinds of skills*' (such as speaking and listening) as those developed by councillors during class discussions in between council meetings. Furthermore, developing skills, such as making reasonable requests ('*learning to put requests into verbal form is a skill in itself*', '*they are encouraged to think about the quality of their questions*', and having realistic expectations ('*they realise that everything they want is not always possible*') were also mentioned. In addition, two interviewees believed that students had '*more knowledge of what's going on in school*' as a result of the council.

### **6.3.2 Teachers' views on learning outcomes for councillors**

Benefits for councillors were more readily identifiable and legion. The main benefits for representatives identified by teachers in charge were:

- ◆ *Speaking, Discussion, Articulation and/or Debating Skills* (32 schools): '*They participate in challenging debates and have learnt to think their way through disagreement to making a decision.*' Five additional schools specifically mentioned learning to express opinions: '*They learn quickly if they are the sort who shout without thinking*';

- ◆ *Experience of Meetings*, minutes, agendas and being a chairperson (24 schools). Only seven of the respondents mentioning these forms of experience were primary teachers, for, as one primary teacher said, *'It is an unusual opportunity for children'*;
- ◆ *Political Grounding*, an increased understanding of the democratic system or *political literacy* in general (18 schools). Two primary teacher interviewees said that although children were aware of this, it was not important to them, and one reported that they learn it on an *'age-related developmental basis'*;
- ◆ *Gaining Responsibility and/or Maturity* (16 schools, ten of which were primary schools): *'The school council matures children amazingly.'*;
- ◆ *Listening Skills* (13 schools);
- ◆ *Increased Self-confidence* (12 schools): *'They appreciate what they can do if they put their mind to it.'*;
- ◆ *Speaking and Listening Skills* (ten schools; in addition to those who mentioned these skills separately);
- ◆ *Representing (and Respecting) Others' Views* other than their own, and empathising with them (ten schools). However, by contrast, a couple of teachers mentioned that *'they are not too good [at this]. They are more influenced by the rest of the council group during the council meetings.'*;
- ◆ *Key Skills or Citizenship Skills* in general (four schools);
- ◆ *Problem-solving/ Decision-making Skills* (four schools);
- ◆ *Organisational Skills* (four schools);
- ◆ *Independence* (three schools);
- ◆ *Being Discerning* (one school): *'Sometimes pupils come up with silly ideas and the representatives have to be able to tell the difference. They have to listen to what is being said and have their own views on things.'*;
- ◆ *Other Skills* were mentioned, including: teamwork, research skills, data logging, social skills, communicating with people of all ages, accepting that some things can't change (*'It is not just a case of "I want".'*), gaining a sense of ownership, financial literacy and participating in the community.

A few teacher leaders mentioned that younger or quieter children still benefited from being part of the council, although sometimes they had to be encouraged to participate. One headteacher was evidently fully aware of these benefits as he was planning to decrease the length of membership in order to give more children the opportunity to gain the benefits. According to one headteacher, *'they don't realise they are actually learning'*. However, in our research we discovered that councillors could identify their learning from their school council experiences when given time and asked to reflect on them.

Indeed, it is clear, from the learning outcomes claimed by teachers above and the demonstrations of learning from the testimonies of student councillors which follow, that where they are inclusive of and value students' contributions to the life of the school, school councils can be an effective contribution to citizenship and personal and social learning. The school council can also contribute to moral, social and cultural development; key skills (especially communication, working with others, and problem solving); and promoting other aspects of the curriculum (especially thinking skills, entrepreneurial skills and education for sustainable development). Generally by learning through the experience of being councillors (and to a lesser extent for non-councillors through efficient and structured processes of consultation and communication in school), students can develop the knowledge, skills and understanding required of citizenship education, namely: becoming informed citizens; developing skills of enquiry and communication; developing skills of participation and responsible action (QCA,1999). For example, by key stage 4, or in some cases earlier, through experience with school councils students could learn to *'express, justify and defend orally ... a personal opinion about issues, problems or events' in their school context; 'contribute to group and exploratory class discussions and take part in formal debates'; 'use their imagination to consider other people's experiences and be able to think about, express, explain and critically evaluate views that are not their own'; 'negotiate, decide and take part responsibly in school and community-based activities'; and 'reflect on the process of participating'* (QCA, 1999, pp.15–16). The evidence from student councillors which follows exemplifies many of these skills.

## 6.4 Councillors' Views of Their Learning from School Council Participation

As part of the focus group interviews with the councillors in each school, they were asked to consider two lists of possible learning outcomes. The first list comprised personal, social and problem-solving skills, which might be learned through the processes and experience of being on the school council. The second list comprised democratic concepts and practices of which councillors might have awareness or understanding as a result of their experiences (see Appendix 1). These lists were constructed on the basis of claims commonly made in the literature about the benefits for students of participating in school councils (see 1.3). The groups of councillors were encouraged to discuss the lists of items amongst themselves as part of the 'interview' experience. Indeed, it was interesting to observe how the various student groups approached this task and the degree of teamwork exhibited. Particular care was taken to ensure that the primary school councillors could read and 'understand' the items, though, not surprisingly, they were more likely to have extra difficulty with the ideas relating to democratic concepts and practices.

### 6.4.1 Personal, social and problem-solving skills

Students as a group were shown the following list of skills and asked to identify the three most important skills they had learnt by being a school councillor:

1. How to discuss things
2. How to take responsibility
3. Being part of a team
4. Making decisions
5. Listening
6. Working out what to do
7. Finding things out
8. Negotiation

In School A, the four Year 6 councillors who attended for interview demonstrated how they *worked as a team* in considering the list of possible skills learnt:

- Researcher *What do you think are the three most important things you have learnt by being on the school council? You agree between yourselves.*
- Student *Being a team. Taking responsibility. [The headteacher] said that 'now you're school council you take responsibility' and you have to come with that idea as quickly as you can. Responsibility, team discussions.*
- Researcher *What do you think? Do you two agree?*
- Student *Yes. Having to take responsibility.*
- Researcher *You all think that is one of the things you have learned?*
- Student *Yes. And the team member of a team. Discussing things. That's what we always do.*
- Researcher *Do you think that is about right? How to take responsibility, discuss and work as a team. Can you think of an example of when you took responsibility?*
- Student *When we had to take things from [the headteacher] what he said to the class and remember it and take to the class at Circle Time.*

'Being responsible' was also cited by older students as a learning outcome of being a councillor. One boy in School G, for example, said that he often had to take responsibility for the other representative from his class who did not want to attend. In School D, a girl who had been a councillor in her previous middle school claimed: *'It feels like I must be there, you're responsible, because you've taken all your friends' ideas into account.'* Others in this group also noted an apparent change in one boy who became more responsible after having become a councillor: *'...it was weird when [X] was picked because he was like the one who was always got told off. But when he actually got picked apparently he always had good ideas to put forward and is really sensible and mature about it.'*

In the interview in School G where the councillors had all individually stated what they had learnt, a quick group discussion was all that seemed necessary to negotiate and identify their learning skills from the list:

- Student *What do you think? You said negotiation. Most important one is this one, teamwork. It has to be two, three and five [responsibility, teamwork, listening]. Which one do you think?*

Student *Well definitely this one, 'How to take responsibility', that's one of the things we have all been doing. 'Negotiating' we've always been doing that, haven't we?*

All *Yeah.*

*Listening* was another skill frequently identified by councillors as part of their learning experience.

*Being a councillor makes you know how to work with each other and to listen. They expect you to have to listen and you have to consult people that makes you listen.*

*To respect each others' beliefs and views of what they think and to listen as well as respect. (Two boys, School G)*

In secondary School E, the councillors interviewed identified 'how to take responsibility', 'listening' and 'negotiation' as the main skills learnt. They particularly stressed listening:

Student *That one's important, isn't it? Listening to other people.*

Researcher *Why do you think listening is so important?*

Student *Especially in a school like ours which is pretty diverse in terms of race and background, things like that, I think its important that we tolerate other people's views. And I think the council is such a forum where people can express their views and they are not expected to be prejudiced on any grounds. I think that's very important.*

Student *We all get together to discuss things and we have learnt to listen to everyone's views in the community.*

Student *Even Years 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, between 12- and 18-year-olds there is a massive difference.*

Student *We are listening to what they say; they are listening to what we say.*

Researcher *So when you said we learnt to do that, how do you think the learning happens?*

Student *I think we know how to listen but it's improved.*

Student *It's communication really because we have got a strong communication within this school and it's good. The years have gone closer together, they discuss things and respect that.*

Student *We are just considerate and we listen to them considerately.*

These are surely important testimonies to the learning outcomes from involvement in a school council in this mixed multiracial school. In addition, it was evident from the fact that the Year 12 and 13 students included a Year 8 boy in the focus group and their treatment of him during the conversation that they practised considerate listening. Furthermore they mentioned that doing plays in assembly and participation in public-speaking competitions had also helped develop their communication skills.

In School B, the primary students decided how to take responsibility, making decisions and *working out what to do* were the main skills learnt. In particular these skills had been learnt when they had planned how to improve the facilities in the playground, a task which had been incorporated into their curriculum.

School C's councillors identified how to be part of a team, how to take responsibilities and *how to discuss things* as the skills they had learnt most by being on the council, and much more than being in their classes. In fact they thought it was important that representatives from the reception class were included in council meetings: *'If they don't do it they won't learn'; 'It's a good idea because they learn how to discuss with older children.'*

Problem-solving, working out what to do, and learning to compromise were skills learnt by the councillors in School F, often in response to the headteacher's reactions:

- Student *Then if she said 'No' or if she said 'Yes' to that idea, then we would discuss it and say how we would do it.*
- Student *Or if she said 'No' we might discuss how we could evaluate the idea and sort of redesign it – perhaps do a compromise.*
- Student *Yes, because there was a thing with the sanitary machines wasn't there, we had to say because there were two different costs and one was more expensive to buy, but the sanitary products were cheaper, I suppose, and we had to decide which one they wanted.*
- Researcher *So how did you do that?*
- Student *Well each one had pros and cons, like one was more expensive. But the one that was more expensive, it would have been refilled by the manufacturer, whereas*

*another one was cheaper but the school would have had to refill it with its own funds. Each one had its pros and cons.*

Student *When we actually discussed that issue you had to go back to your class and discuss it with your year as well.*

Later in the interview, the girls recalled how they had learnt 'how to make decisions, how to work out what to do, how to negotiate':

Student *Yes we've had to learn to negotiate with [the headteacher]: often she wants one thing and we want another, and we had to learn to come to some sort of halfway house.*

Researcher *How do you do that?*

Student *Well, we just play with different ideas until we find something that works for everybody. 'Cos some ideas we think are perfect, but she thinks are awful, and the other way round.*

Student *With the trouser issue we just wanted trousers, we didn't really mind. But [the head] wanted a certain kind of trousers. So we had to decide on what kind of trousers. She doesn't want everyone looking different...*

Student *We have to figure out what is relevant and what's not and what will work and what won't. Making decisions like whether the sanitary machines, we had to figure out which one would be better and more practical for the school.*

Student *Teamwork because we had to work as a team...*

Student *And listening as well 'cos you have to listen to other people's [ideas, views], yes and when they have finished other people waiting to come in.*

Researcher *So you think there needs to be recognised process and procedure. So you have to learn those skills, do you?*

Student *Well, you have got to have learning skills, but it is developing what you have already got.*



### 6.4.2 Awareness and understanding of democratic processes and practices

Students as a group were shown the following list of democratic processes and practices and asked if they had become aware of or understood about them by being a school councillor:

1. How to ask other people's views
2. How to make proposals
3. How to be a representative (put forward other people's views)
4. How to argue a point of view
5. How to take many things into account to make a decision
6. That not everyone gets what they want
7. That some things get priority over others

Not surprisingly, it was generally harder for councillors at the primary level to identify the democratic concepts of which they had gained an understanding through the school council processes. This is a complex cognitive operation. Our experience with the councillors fits with the findings on the civic knowledge test of the IEA Citizenship Education Study which showed that 14-year-olds, *'although they live in a democratic country, they do not appear to understand fully what the term "democracy" means'* (Kerr *et al.*, forthcoming, p. 48). The following example shows how it was difficult to introduce the idea of democratic skills and citizenship to primary students and ask about their learning:

Researcher *Can I show you another list now. It's a bit more difficult. This is about what have you learnt. There is an idea about school councils that suggests that they should help you to learn about democracy. That's a difficult word, isn't it? About being a good citizen – have you any idea what that might involve? Has anyone talked to you about citizenship in school?*

Student *Not bullying.*

Researcher *Well that could be, yes – good start. [To another student] Have you got any ideas?*

Student *You have to take control of things.*

Student *You have to take control of your own actions.*

Researcher *What do you think happens when you have an election outside of school, like the other week there was the General Election? Did any of your parents go to vote?*

Student *Yes.*

Even some secondary students lacked an awareness of democracy. As one asked us: *'What is democracy? Because I have always heard that word, but I never really know what it means.'* This also chimes with another of the IEA study's findings that 14-year-olds in England were much less likely than their teacher or headteacher to think that they had learnt about democracy (Kerr *et al.*, forthcoming). Nevertheless the councillors in our study were able to provide examples of their learning from participating in their school councils which illustrate a range of key democratic skills and practices, as suggested by the above list. This suggests that schools need to do more to explicitly explain the key components of democracy and its procedures and practices so that students are more conscious of them as such.

#### **6.4.2.1 Learning how to ask other people's views**

In School B, for instance, the councillors were good at asking other students their views and collecting ideas. They were helped by time being set aside regularly in the class groups to do so. (The school council and class discussion/feedback were held on alternate Friday afternoons.) There was also a reported consensus that *'everyone asks the same thing'*. They felt that their classmates were very involved: *'They are half like a school council'; 'They have responsibility as well'; 'If they want to say anything, they can say anything'*.

In School F, the girls recalled the importance of getting to know what everyone wanted in order for it to be practical:

Student *You have to think about what everybody wants, it can't just be something you want.*

Student *Do you remember when somebody said they wanted hot chocolate in the canteen in the winter. It was so cold outside. And it flopped, because whilst at the time people said it was a good idea, when it actually happened hardly anybody wanted it and there were often a lot of leftovers, so it stopped.*

#### 6.4.2.2 Learning how to be a representative

One of the key concepts in undertaking the role of school councillor, as in any democratic institution, is that of representation. It may, however, be a difficult concept to convey to students and the skill of impartially representing a point of view, or others' points of view, needs to be developed. In practice, young people may find it particularly difficult if their own view does not coincide with that of the majority whom they 'represent', or if peers hold a range of diverse views which need to be conveyed. Representation may have to be learnt on the job.

It was evident that councillors in School C were still learning how to be representatives:

- Student *We have to be representative, to put forward other people's views.*
- Researcher *Right, yes. Anybody else learnt that, how to be a representative? What do you think about being a representative then?*
- Student *I feel great actually.*
- Researcher *Is it difficult or not difficult?*
- Student *At first it was difficult, but it is getting easier.*
- Researcher *Can you say why it is getting easier?*
- Student *Because I put more action into it and put more effort.*
- Researcher *Why is that?*
- Student *Not at first you haven't got to be skilled for doing it. It is just ...all your effort.*
- Researcher *So how do you know you are being a representative?*
- Student *Just by putting my point of view or the teacher's point of view.*
- Researcher *And you collect the ideas from the others, do you? Now what do you do if the others suggested something that you really didn't think was a very good idea or that you didn't agree with?*
- Student *I'd just leave it to for them to decide whether it is right or if it isn't.*
- Researcher *Who is the 'them'?*
- Student *The rest of the school council.*

Researcher *So you would still propose it? You'd still mention the idea?*

Student *Yes.*

Researcher *Would you say if you didn't agree with it?*

Student *I'd just leave it.*

Yet many of the councillors did have a basic understanding of representation, as in School A:

Researcher *Do you know what it is to be a representative? What does that mean?*

Student *We're representing the school, our class.*

Researcher *What do you think that involves?*

Student *Ask them what they want.*

Student *And what they want us to do as a school.*

They were clear about the significance of all students voting for what they wanted and that was what they should try to get.

*We look in each class and see the thing most people want to vote for and we do it then. If someone wants something and someone says they want another thing [the headteacher] might try and get both of them. (School A)*

By secondary age, students were clearer that they should not just put forward their own view:

*In a council group perhaps most of ideas we get are from a class; you can't just say something you would like and not your class. (School G)*

Indeed, there was an element of commitment and persistence for some representatives in trying to assert the views or wishes of their class or year group:

Researcher *Sometimes is it difficult arguing? Say you put the idea up and [X], as the chairperson on the council, said, 'We can't really do that because of so and so' would you then stick up for what your class wants to?*

Student *Well, I would have to do it once. I could just stop, tell him 'Could you please try?' If he said 'No you can't do that' I could just talk to him while we are going home or something and just tell him 'Please try even if it doesn't work'.*

Student *Yes, this thing is part of being responsible because you listen to the class, what that one likes and what the other likes. What we have to do is listen because if that one says something it might be useful. (School G)*

Indeed, one student from School G identified ‘how to be a representative’ as a learning outcome from being a councillor:

*How to be a representative – you never know whatever job you might take in the future you might have to be a representative over something especially if you have to argue a point too ... then he will know the basic skills that will be needed and what to expect if certain things arise.*

Knowing how to criticise the majority view, or how to deal with the majority view if the councillor personally did not agree with it, were more difficult skills to learn and practise. Students in School D, for example, had different views of how they would handle this:

Student *You learn to appreciate other people’s ideas.*

Student *You have to be quite sensitive that you put forward the right kind of idea, not be too forceful.*

Student *And you can’t just put forward things that you want. You have to put through everything. I don’t particularly think the school’s colours idea is that wonderful, but people who I have spoken to do so I have to put that. I just don’t put my opinion I have to put the majority opinion as well.*

Researcher *But you are obviously aware of the point about representing other people’s views, so this is particularly difficult sometimes when your own opinion is in a minority.*

Student *You conflict with everyone else’s ideas.*

Researcher *So what do you do then?*

Student *You just say what they think.*

Student *No, you also put forward your ideas because there might be some people who agree with you that you just haven’t spoken to. There is always other people.*

Student *You have just got to put both sides of the argument across.*

This episode in itself demonstrated some democratic skills of discussion, argument and negotiation. Students also need to learn

that democratic practices and procedures, as well as outcomes, are also essentially contested and to learn to be able to handle differences of view and unsuccessful outcomes of representation.

#### 6.4.2.3 Learning how to argue a point of view

In meetings, knowing how to present, argue for and stick to a point of view are necessary and valuable skills when operating in a democratic context. The normal learning environment does not foster development of these skills, but certain strategies, such as debate and role playing, may enhance learning how to argue a point of view. School councils could offer another opportunity for developing such skills. In School E's council meeting, a few students who felt strongly about their viewpoints continued to argue back when being laughed at or other students were arguing back.

In School F, learning the skills of how to interject in the discussion or to make a point and stick to it were also recognised as skills, which some councillors had developed. One long-standing issue, which had eventually had a successful outcome for the school council, was that of being able to wear trousers in school. A contributory factor was that about one-fifth of the girls in school were from Asian backgrounds and some had applied for permission and had been allowed to wear trousers on cultural grounds. But this dispensation had not automatically been extended to other girls on equal opportunities grounds. Three councillors had attended a governors' meeting to argue the case:

Student *Definitely learnt how to argue your point of view, because when we had to do presentations to the school governors about wearing trousers we had to select various points.*

Student *Yes we had a meeting and we all said why we wanted trousers.*

Student *And then we had to select the ones that we really thought...and make a speech about it to the school governors.*

Student *I went and two Year 11s went. I think we only got about ten minutes. What we had done was meet up together beforehand just to organise what the three of us would talk about, like 'You talk about this, you talk about this and I'll talk about this.' We managed to get it so it would all fit together, and we had only*

*selected the most important of issues, because of there not being a lot of time. ... We just had to pick the bits that were most important and we had to have good reasons to back it up, because if we had said 'We want trousers', they would have said 'Why?' and if we'd gone blank you wouldn't have got anywhere. You had to back it up what you want.*

Student *They had to take many things into account to make a decision.*

The councillors were proud of the fact that the council had been very instrumental in bringing about the change in uniform and asked if the council could be mentioned in assembly when the announcement was made.

#### **6.4.2.4 Learning that not everyone gets what they want**

In a democracy where the majority view prevails, by definition, not everyone gets what they want. This applies even when people have striven long and hard for what they believe in and think right and appropriate. Working through the democratic processes of the school council may be one of the few opportunities young people have to learn such a lesson.

Councillors in School E cited the ongoing issue of the mobile phones as an example of not getting what they wanted. Also they had failed to persuade the school to make chips available at break times, to extend the availability of email access, or to get the school to reconsider lunchtime arrangements which gave priority to sixth formers, though not all councillors understood the reasons why. Mobile phones were also an issue in School C, but apparently had not been openly explored in the school council. One councillor there identified 'that not everyone gets what they want' as an example of learning about democracy, citing in illustration the fact that the headteacher had said it was not financially possible for the school to buy more playground and PE equipment. This is quite a sophisticated concept in political literacy for councillors to reflect on as part of their experience and needs further exploration at school, year and class level with the student body as a whole.

#### **6.4.2.5 Learning how to be accountable to others**

Another difficult and related concept is that of being accountable to others. Councillors in primary School C identified this as part of their learning. They needed 'to tell people why they can't get what they want'. In fact, being on the council could involve a go-between

role, some degree of accountability and even, apparently, setting an example: *'I like to be on the school council just to show to other people in a common way how they should react to what things they can get and what they can't get'*, said one student.

In School A, the councillors interviewed identified the issue of being accountable to others – though they did not name it as such – when asked if there was any way in which their school council (which they otherwise thought was *'good as it is'*) could be improved:

Researcher *Do you think there are any ways in which you could make it [the school council] better, by what you do?*

Student *Yeah, when we're voting [electing councillors], people [the candidates] go a bit mad and say 'I'll get you this and that'. And then they [the students] look at it and say 'Would you really get me this?' and if you say 'Yeah' and they vote for you and in the end they don't really get anything, it's a bit disappointing. People shouldn't promise what they know they can't get.*

Researcher *Do you sometimes get put in that position?*

Student *Some people...say they'll do this and they'll do that and it hasn't happened.*

Researcher *That's what I was meaning earlier by asking you about being accountable, because if you say 'Vote for me, I'm going to do this' and then it can't happen for some reason, you've still got to explain to people why it hasn't happened, haven't you?*

Student *But they will understand.*

This, again, was an issue that could benefit from attention from class teachers or form tutors in preparation for elections and with the subsequent preparation of the councillors for their role.

#### **6.4.2.6 Linking several key democratic concepts and processes**

A few secondary student councillors had reflected sufficiently on their experiences so as to develop integrated perspectives on their experience and learning. In School E, the chairperson of the council saw several of the democratic concepts as linked in practice:

*That's important, isn't it, how to be a representative. I don't think you can represent everyone in your form's views; I think you've got to use a little bit of your own conscience in the situation. But I think that is important and how to ask other people's views, I think, is linked to making decisions and the*



*fact that not everyone gets what they want. I think a lot of people ... perhaps in the younger years ... I remember when we did it we slightly resented the sixth form and that they got their own common room and stuff like that. But I think as you get older and progressing you realise that the situation for the sixth form and lower school is totally different ... I mean, different facilities and stuff.*

As a result of reflecting on her experience, a councillor in School D had also developed a more sophisticated understanding of the democratic process:

*You see the process that it takes from an initial idea to actually being integrated into the school and it does show you the way to get things changed without being too offensive or forcing your ideas on other people to get things done.*

### 6.4.3 Character development

As well as particular learning outcomes, such as the development of skills and understanding, councillors could develop personally by means of their participation and involvement. Occasionally being a member of the school council could help a young person to have a better self-concept or self-esteem: *'I suppose it does give you a bit more confidence to say stuff in front of the whole year to get things done, but no special skills.'* In School D, a girl who had suggested a change to the colour of the PE shirt so that it was differentiated from the school uniform shirt was surprised that her idea had been accepted through the school council:

Student *It just happened to be an idea. No one has said, 'Well done, you've come up with a wonderful idea.' Not a lot of praise, but I'm not worried because it was just an idea and I didn't expect them to actually change it. I am happy that they did.*

Researcher *Why didn't you expect them to change it?*

Student *Because I thought it was a major part of the school, and I just didn't expect them to make such a drastic change from just a little idea from me.*

Researcher *Did you feel quite good about it?*

Student *I was happy that they had considered my idea valuable enough to make a change.*

Occasionally participation in the school council, perhaps by having a 'star role', could be the catalyst to transform a young person's behaviour and provide opportunities for character development. This appeared to have happened in the case of the student chairperson of School G's council.

Student ...it was only when I was in Year 9 that I realised that school was something that was going to help me. When I was in Year 7 and Year 8, I used to muck around a lot. I wasn't that responsible. My form tutor when I had him in Year 9 he told me that... He knows that I was good at working, but I was just like, you know, chatty, chatty, you know, so he told me to go and be on the school council. When I heard that I was losing my lunch ... I didn't want to do it, but as soon as I got there, I thought it was interesting and I started getting involved more in school council and helping people and teachers as well. And when I was being elected for school chairman, they did ask us to say, if we were chosen what would you do. We didn't have no speech prepared or anything we just... you know...

Researcher *On the spot?*

Student *Yeah.*

Researcher *What did you think it would be like to be on the council before you were on it?*

Student *Well when I was in Year 7 and Year 8, I used to think it's all long, really, it's not that good wasting your break for... – I had a real thing about that. But as soon as I got in there I realised that it's helpful for all of us because most of the school's decisions are actually made on the school council. So when I heard that I thought that maybe I could help as well and by doing this I could show... I could change in my life... I could show to my mum and dad and other people that know me that I can be a responsible person.*

This student's interest had been kindled by 'the decisions they used to make', and an engagement with the school council's attempt to change school uniform, which he personally hated – 'one thing I really wanted to do was change the school uniform'. Later, by becoming chairperson of the council, he demonstrated responsibility in many ways, including telephoning us with the date of the next

school council meeting and an invitation to attend. As he also claimed:

*One of the things I think we have all learnt as well whilst being on the school council is being humble and politeness. We are polite when one person's talking, we don't go like this or like that. We wait until that person is finished; as I said, it's being responsible, being polite, rather than as we used to go around and like barge people out of the way or if I see someone needed help I would just leave him while other people laugh at them. It helped me to improve the way I behave amongst people.*  
(Chairperson School G)

## 6.4 Key Findings and Issues

- **The main benefits of the school council for the school as a whole were perceived by the teacher leaders as being having an established forum in which students were able to discuss their views and concerns, improving school ethos, allowing students to contribute to the running of the school and having a mutually informative process in place for staff and students.**
- **Most teacher leaders had encountered some difficulties or disadvantages of having a school council. These included: pressure of time, student disillusionment about the pace of change and keeping the momentum going.**
- **Most teacher leaders of the school council reported at least one practical change as a result of having a school council. Changes implemented largely corresponded with issues most likely to have been discussed, i.e. improved facilities or equipment, organisation of breaks and procedure, refurbishment of toilets, uniform change or better catering. But although teaching and learning and the curriculum were discussed in some schools, changes were far less likely to have occurred. These findings were supported by councillors' illustrations of the changes they had helped to effect.**

- **Teacher leaders perceived a wide range of learning outcomes for councillors, the most important being skills of communication, especially speaking and discussion, experience of meetings, ‘political grounding’ and taking increasing responsibility.**
- **Teachers were far less clear about benefits for non-councillors, suggesting insights into the democratic process and communication skills. Much depended on the structures in place to support genuine participation by the student body. Getting a balance between following established democratic processes in electing student representatives and allowing them to act as a body and extending this opportunity for learning to more students emerged as an issue.**
- **Councillors described their learning in relation to two main identified areas: personal, social and problem-solving skills (working as a team, being responsible, negotiating, listening, working out what to do and how to discuss things); and developing awareness and understanding of democratic procedures and practices (especially, learning to ask other people’s views, being a representative, arguing a point of view, being accountable). A few young people testified to improved self-esteem and confidence and character development.**

## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 7.1 Summary and Issues

This final chapter comprises three distinct, but interrelated parts. Firstly, we offer a summary overview of the research findings, given separately for primary and secondary schools, highlighting points of contrast where appropriate. We also offer some practical guidelines for schools establishing and maintaining a school council based on our findings from the research. We end with an evaluative overview of the contribution of school councils to personal, social and citizenship education and school culture.

#### 7.1.1 Primary school councils

School councils in primary schools appear to be given a relatively high status; it is normally the headteacher or the deputy head who is responsible for the council. It does not appear to be too challenging to set up a school council, although it can be difficult to find time for it and keep up the momentum. The main aims for primary schools of having a school council are to '*give pupils a voice*' and to improve their personal and academic skills. The aims generally do not change during the course of a school council, although when they do, variations are subtle and may be in line with intended changes in school ethos.

In most schools, meetings are held once every half term during lunchtime for half an hour, although there is much diversity between schools. Sometimes the youngest year groups are excluded from the council, although in many schools all year groups are involved (normally with two representatives for each year). The headteacher and/or the deputy head usually attend the meetings. In some schools, other members of staff (teaching and non-teaching) attend. Parents and governors are occasionally involved.

On the whole, representatives are formally elected by their classmates and retain membership for the academic year. Before meeting as a council, they are normally given some form of preparation, although the extent and depth of this varies considerably.

Issues to be discussed are raised by all students in one way or another (e.g. class discussions, suggestion boxes), and in most schools, the actual agenda is decided by the representatives. The most common topics are playground-related issues, fundraising, the provision of facilities and improvements to the school building. Minutes are taken during the meetings, normally by the teacher member responsible. Feedback is given by representatives in class, distributing the minutes, through school assemblies or, in the case of staff, through meetings. If governors are given any feedback, it is generally by means of the headteacher's report.

The vast majority of schools do not have a council budget, although they obtain money through different methods if it is needed. The general school budget is one source. According to the teacher interviewees, councillors are very positive about the council and feel valued and honoured. However, when asked about the attitude of other students, their responses were rather more ambivalent – mainly in terms of awareness. The vast majority of staff members were said to be very much in favour of the council, although a small number of negative views were reported. The governors who are aware of the council are claimed to be in favour of it, although most are not involved.

The benefits of having a council were mostly described in terms of improvements to school ethos, having a forum through which students can express their views, and sharing of information between teachers and students. The main benefits for representatives were said to be: speaking and listening skills, greater responsibility and/or maturity, greater understanding of democratic issues and increased self-confidence. The benefits for non-representatives were somewhat less apparent; on the whole, they knew that their views would be considered.

Of those schools that had encountered challenges, time constraints were the biggest problem, although a relatively large number had not experienced any disadvantages at all. In fact school councils appear to be successful in initiating positive, tangible change within primary schools.

### **7.1.2 Secondary school councils**

Those in charge of the school council are most likely to have a senior position within the school, and are often a member of the SMT. Councils have, on the whole, been in place for longer periods

of time in secondary schools than in primary schools. Whilst the setting-up process is likely to run relatively smoothly, staff reluctance is more likely to be encountered in secondary schools. As with primary schools, the most common aim is to give students a voice, and it appears that this aim prevails.

In most secondary schools, meetings are usually held once every half term, during lunchtime for an hour, although there is some variation to this pattern. In the vast majority of schools, all year groups are represented, although in some schools year councils complement or replace a whole-school council. This can result in a broader spread of responsibility for a council through the hierarchies in a secondary school. It is less common for the headteacher or deputy to attend a secondary school council meeting; there may be only one member of staff present, although other staff may attend as appropriate.

In line with practice in primary schools, elections are normally held to select the representatives who stay on the council for at least one year. Councillors usually receive some preparation before they take up their role, and in some schools this is a fairly formal process (e.g. a meeting with documentation).

Secondary schools use a number of methods to obtain the views and suggestions of all the students; in a few schools, staff contribute as well. In line with primary school practice, the representatives tend to form an agenda at the beginning of each meeting. By contrast, however, topics for discussion in secondary schools – provision of facilities, school lunches, uniform and teaching and learning/the curriculum – differ from those that are most popular at primary level. Minutes are normally taken by a student, and feedback is given by representatives in class, by displaying the minutes, through school assemblies or via year councils. Teachers may be given a copy of the minutes, or may simply hear about it in class. When governors are aware of the council's business, the teacher in charge or councillors inform them.

Most schools do not have a school council budget, although those that do are generally given more money than are those in primary schools. As with primary schools, it appears that councillors are normally very positive about their role, but that the views held by the rest of the students largely depend on the outcomes of the

council. Staff reluctance and/or negativity seems to be more pertinent in secondary schools, although governors were marginally more likely to be reported to be supportive of the school council than in primary schools.

The main benefits of having a council were seen to be giving students a voice, improving the school ethos and the positive changes that have been made. It was reported that councillors' speaking skills, etiquette for meetings and knowledge of the political process increases. As might be expected, the major difference between primary and secondary schools is that by the secondary stage 'meeting etiquette', and 'responsibility and/or maturity' are not so much of an issue. Once again, it appears that non-councillors do not benefit nearly as much as councillors do from the experience of having a council in school.

In contrast to the primary schools, the majority of secondary schools faced some kind of problem in maintaining their school council, the most common being time pressures and student disillusionment. On the other hand, as a result of school council activities most secondary schools had benefited from several noticeable changes, particularly improvements to facilities, uniform and catering.

## 7.2 Guidelines for Practice

As a result of the survey and case study research, we offer some guidelines for schools wishing to establish a school council or to review their practices.

### 7.2.1 Concerning the status of the council

- ◆ Give the council a *prominent status* within the school by:
  - > displaying *photographs* of representatives;
  - > giving representatives *badges* (which they could design themselves);
  - > having a school council *budget* if possible;
  - > mentioning the council and reporting positive outcomes in *assemblies* and in the *weekly bulletin/newsletter*;
  - > *allocating class time* for feedback and class discussions;
  - > providing a *council notice-board*.



- ◆ *A member of the SMT in charge of running the council gives it status. As a teacher in a secondary school said, 'The council will only succeed if someone on the SMT is actively involved. If the person responsible is paid on a lower scale, they will have to fight through bureaucracy to get anything achieved, which leads to frustration.'*
- ◆ Hold staff meetings to discuss issues as necessary, and *ensure that all staff members (including non-teaching staff) are fully aware* of any important conclusions or decisions that are made during council meetings. Consider that the timing of a council meeting might influence the timing and extent of feedback in class. Listen to staff views and explain the purpose, running and benefits of having a council, particularly how it could help them, e.g. easing their burden by giving students more responsibility.
- ◆ *Encourage governors to become involved:*
  - make sure students understand who the governors are (e.g. by displaying photographs of them), and what their role is;
  - invite governors to attend council meetings and provide at least an annual opportunity for councillors to report to a governors' meeting, as well as a chance to make a presentation regarding a major and special issue for the council;
  - give governors regular feedback from meetings by sending them copies of the minutes so they can check on progress;
  - mention the school council and its current activities in the curriculum report.

### **7.2.2 Making the most of the council**

- ◆ *Set clear, achievable aims* for the council from the outset after explicit discussion with council members themselves and make these widely known. Encourage the staff involved to refer to the aims every so often, and to be aware of how objectives might change as the council progresses and of how the council might be affecting school culture.
- ◆ If elections are held, make the most of them to *encourage political literacy:*
  - explain the processes and how they mirror those in the wider world;

- encourage students, if they wish, to hold campaigns and hustings;
  - link activities to the curriculum as appropriate, e.g. PSE and citizenship (rights, democracy, voting), literacy/speaking and listening (speech-writing, public speaking; responding to points of view), IT (typing minutes and agendas) and art (posters, badges, campaign material);
  - explore the characteristics and qualities needed in a good councillor and encourage students to think hard about who would make a good representative before they vote. Draw on the existing councillors to describe and evaluate their experiences and offer their opinions.
- ◆ *Include school councils in joined-up PSE and citizenship education provision.* School councils are a potentially strong resource for personal, social and citizenship education, but they need to be explicitly and coherently tied into other provision and practices, so that the learning objectives are clear and the outcomes evaluated, recognised and valued.

### 7.2.3 Concerning meetings and organisation

- ◆ *Decide the optimum frequency, timing during the school day and length of meetings,* but expect these to be a process of ‘trial and error’ and keep them subject to ongoing review.
- ◆ *Invite non-teaching staff, parent and governor representatives* to attend meetings (where appropriate). Welcome and introduce them, explaining why they are present and invite them to offer comments when appropriate.
- ◆ *Find a balance* between giving as many children as possible the chance to reap the benefits of acting as councillors, but also making the length of membership long enough for them to gain sufficient experience of the council.
- ◆ *Be aware of potential financial resources,* such as the Parents’ Association and sponsorship. If the council has a budget, be prepared to include students in deciding on details of expenditure (for example, weighing up the financial as well as practical pros and cons) and regard it as an opportunity to improve their financial literacy. Encourage students to organise events, such as discos and fêtes, themselves to raise money for the school council.

- ◆ *Take practical steps to overcome time constraints:*
  - take brief minutes and note action points (primary schools) or teach the councillors how to take comprehensive minutes (secondary schools);
  - make effective use of administrative staff and older students (for example, typing up minutes could be used as an IT exercise);
  - do not let meetings run on for too long;
  - share the responsibility of the council with one or two other members of staff so there is a coherent and continuous support structure.

#### 7.2.4 Concerning councillors

- ◆ Be prepared to explain things carefully and give *special consideration to younger students*, particularly reception classes, if they are to be included in the council. Encourage them to speak up in meetings. A sensible approach, adopted by one school, was to have two key stage 1 students representing their own class as well as any younger students in the school.
- ◆ It seems to be helpful for ex-councillors to talk to prospective councillors. Additional *preparation* also appears to be necessary and valuable: some form of induction to explain the purposes and procedures of the council, the councillors' role, particularly that of 'representation', to explore expectations and institute good practices, such as note-taking.
- ◆ Try to cultivate a school ethos in which being a councillor is regarded as a *respected and sought-after role*. Invite potential representatives to observe meetings. Define the role of the representative clearly, and keep an eye on individual councillors who may abuse their position.

#### 7.2.5 Concerning non-councillors

- ◆ *Give all students the opportunity to make suggestions*; a suggestion box appears to be a good way to offer an equal opportunity to all, irrespective of age, to include shy children and facilitate comment on sensitive issues. Encourage all students to think analytically about the quality of their suggestions. Be open to suggestions from any source, for example governors, parents and other staff.

- ◆ Do not rely on students to provide *feedback to classmates* without initiation and support from a teacher. Require class teachers to provide a scheduled slot during class time for both idea generation and feedback. This could be tied in with Circle Time, Literacy Hour or PSE. Give out a sheet of paper with a prepared framework with space for comments from class feedback (see 3.8). Be aware of the skills that are being learnt by councillors and try to cultivate the same skills in other students during class discussions, for example by giving them the chance to prepare and present an argument for response and decision making by classmates.
- ◆ Ensure that each classroom has an *ongoing record* of council decisions, keeping a file with copies of past minutes of council meetings for reference, and hand out copies of the minutes to each form after meetings.
- ◆ When something is changed, *ensure the idea is attributed to the class where it originated* to make them aware that they can make a difference. However, be careful not to raise children's expectations too much initially; set the parameters in the first meeting. If an idea is not acted upon, *explain* the reasons fully.

### 7.3 School Councils as a Strategy for Citizenship and Personal and Social Education: Implications for Student Learning and School Change

Many claims have been made in the literature about the potential positive contributions of school councils to student learning, particularly about the practices of citizenship, and to institutional change. It is clear from this research that many of the practical issues associated with establishing and maintaining a school council, identified in research on school councils over the last decade, still exist in some schools. Moreover, there is evidence of mixed effects on student learning, especially as between councillors and non-councillors, and in terms of school outcomes. Setting up a school council is not necessarily a guarantee of student participation, positive attitudes or progressive practices in school. School councils are only one strategy for whole-school development, learning about becoming a citizen and creating or enhancing a learning environment of mutual responsibility and respect.

As the literature on school councils and our own research focusing on the processes, practices and perceptions of school councils also make clear, to flourish and succeed in achieving their own goals, school councils must be embedded in school-wide relationships, structures and actions which are disposed towards consultation, respect for the views of students and staff, participation in the school as a community, respect for reason, democracy and the possibility of change. It is not enough for the school council itself to be the only marker of such attitudes and behaviours. The school council needs to be one of many, albeit one of the most potentially fair and equal, opportunities for the exercise of students' rights and responsibilities within the experience of social and academic learning. The school council and the school community as a whole need periodically to review the council's aims and outcomes by engaging in self-evaluation.

The evidence of students and teachers involved in this study demonstrates that participation in school councils can promote key skills, personal and social skills and some awareness and understanding of democratic practices. Although we did not study in detail how schools' aims for their school councils linked with their wider school and curricular aims, schools were not explicit about the contribution a school council could make to delivering personal, social and citizenship education, to the development of particular learning outcomes for students, or in any focused way in relation to the realisation of a school's mission statement or the development of its ethos. There was a sense, rather, of schools discovering the potential of school councils, and the model or form which best suited their school culture.

Schools need to be more explicitly self-conscious about how the school council fits with wider decision-making approaches in the school (e.g. in relation to the SMT and governors' meetings), as well as with learning goals for students in various groups and as individuals. Could the school council have a role with respect to a school's OFSTED inspection? As a result of participation through the school council, how could individual students' learning be documented and recorded in their portfolio of achievements? Our evidence suggests that some 'unlikely candidates' had the potential to become good school councillors. There may be unplanned and incidental benefits for such students and opportunities to deal with issues of inclusion and equal opportunities. Schools need to

incorporate the processes, practices and endeavours of their school council into their joined-up thinking about students' experience at school and to realise its potential as a resource.

The school council is different from other school practices that recognise and support students in that it offers students a collective voice, or voices, and a sense of agency in contributing to an effective and enjoyable experience of school. Many schools saw a main aim of their school council as 'giving the students a voice'; but what exactly does this mean? And what are democratic skills in a school context? Through its processes, not just in its meetings but also in class-wide discussions, the school council can provide students with opportunities for reflection on experiences of school life and learning. The school council can offer the possibility, through democratic means, of influencing and facilitating change in a way which positively affects the school environment. This can produce a sense of student empowerment and ownership, which may, in turn, generate other powerful attitudinal outcomes. Having a school council may, however, also raise expectations beyond what is realistic within the framework of the school, and this may need explanation as part of the realism attached to the democratic process.

The existence of the school council introduces another layer in the structure of authority within the school. Its key concepts, such as consultation, representation and active participation towards change, are not those traditionally associated with the role of the student or of school life. Its practices demand inclusive structures, open lines of communication, transparency and accountability, not always notable in school procedures. Communication systems – a recognised and valued loop of idea generation, meeting discussion, feedback and comment – are essential tools of student involvement. These require the support of teachers and training of both teachers and students. They demand that students be seen as able to contribute to the decision-making processes of the school in relation to practical problems and situations, which may also have implications for principles and policies.

Participation may bring about change in students and teachers, as well as the ethos and environment of the school for which they have to take at least some responsibility. In terms of the citizenship education strand of political literacy, the actual experience of the school council, as a councillor, and to a lesser extent as a member

of the school community, importantly complements teaching in the formal curriculum about democratic concepts and practices. Students may develop skills of listening and speaking, discussion, negotiation, teamwork, asking for others' views and representing them, arguing a point of view and taking a range of information and attitudes into account in decision making. Where the council works well, students may develop a sense of collaborative learning, which also fosters mutual respect and a sense of community. Importantly, schools could do more to make explicit the links between the kind of learning which results from experience of the school council and other aspects of the formal citizenship education curriculum.

These experiences through the school council may embolden students to challenge the traditional authority structures and decision-making processes, outcomes and implementation in the school. The school itself may become more democratic. Thus the existence of an effective school council can play an important part in a change in the school culture, with implications for pedagogical practices and teacher and staff relationships with students. Instruction and authority may make room for discussion and negotiation, which recognise the rights and responsibilities of the students as learners and citizens in their own community. How the school and teachers cope with these changes says much about the school as a moral and social institution and teachers as moral and citizenship educators.

The Crick Report stopped short of recommending that school councils should be a statutory provision of citizenship education in schools. But it opined that this possibility should be kept under review, provided examples of school councils in practice, and indicated that school councils should be an object of comment by OFSTED and the LEA in terms of the performance of a school as a whole (pp.25–6). A school council can be an important catalyst for change but it is not a panacea. Where it is incorporated into the structure of the school and the relationships within it, through its focus on democratic processes and practices, it can facilitate the recognition and expression of children's rights, their involvement in, and some responsibility for school life and the development of positive attitudes to school and learning, as well as the enhancement of key skills. By beginning to experience democratic practices in

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

---

the school, young people may develop good habits of involvement in community and civic life which may also be transferred to voluntary civic activities outside school. Thus, as indicated in many of the examples in this report, the school, through the positive experiences it may provide of civic engagement within its own community by means of the formal structure of the school council, may contribute to the development of future citizens, willing and better able to exercise their political and social rights and responsibilities.



## 8. REFERENCES

ALDERSON, P. (2000). 'School students' views on school councils and daily life at school', *Child and Society*, **14**, 121–34.

ALLISON, D. (1991). 'Setting up a school council', *Pastoral Care in Education*, **9**, 4, 24–6.

ASHWORTH, L. (1995). *Children's Voices in School Matters*. London: Advisory Centre for Education.

BAGINSKY, M. and HANNAM, D. (1999). *School Councils. The Views of Students and Teachers*. London: NSPCC.

BAKER, K., SILLETT, J. with NEARY, S. (2000). *Citizenship: Challenges for Councils*. London: Local Government Information Unit.

BOTTERY, M. (1990). 'Children, the management of schools and political literacy', *Oxford Review of Education*, **16**, 2, 235–44.

CRICK REPORT. DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT. ADVISORY GROUP ON EDUCATION AND CITIZENSHIP AND THE TEACHING OF DEMOCRACY IN SCHOOLS (1998). *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools*. London: QCA.

DAVIES, L. (1998). *School Councils and Pupil Exclusions*. Research Project Report. London: School Councils UK.

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT (2000a). *Careers Education in the New Curriculum: Its Relationship to PSHE and Citizenship at Key Stages 3 and 4* (DfEE 0039/2000). Sheffield: DfEE.

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT (2000b). *Developing a Global Dimension in the School Curriculum* (DfEE 0039/2000). London: DfEE.

DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT. ADVISORY GROUP ON EDUCATION FOR CITIZENSHIP (2000). *Citizenship for 16-19 Year Olds in Education and Training. Report of the Advisory Group to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment*. Coventry: FEFC.

- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT. NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON CREATIVE AND CULTURAL EDUCATION. (1999). *All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education*. London: DfEE.
- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT. NATIONAL ADVISORY GROUP ON PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND HEALTH EDUCATION (1999). *Preparing Young People for Adult Life: a Report by the National Advisory Group on Personal, Social and Health Education*. London: DfEE.
- DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT. (2001). *Schools Building on Success*. London: DfEE.
- DEVON YOUTH COUNCIL (1996). *A Guide to Making Student Councils Effective*. Exeter: Devon Youth Council.
- ELTON, C. (1994). 'Power to the pupils', *Managing Schools Today*, 3, 9, 18–19.
- ELTON REPORT. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE. COMMITTEE OF ENQUIRY INTO DISCIPLINE IN SCHOOLS (1989). *Discipline in Schools*. London: HMSO.
- GREAT BRITAIN. STATUTES (1988). *Education Reform Act 1988. Chapter 40*. London: HMSO.
- HALSTEAD, J.M. and TAYLOR, M.J. (2000). *The Development of Values, Attitudes and Personal Qualities: a Review of Recent Research*. Slough: NFER.
- HAYDON, G. (2000). 'Discussion of values and the value of discussion.' In: LEICESTER, M., MODGIL, C. and MODGIL, S. (Eds) *Volume III: Classroom Issues. Practice, Pedagogy and Curriculum*. London: Falmer Press.
- HEPBURN, M. (1984). 'Democratic schooling: five perspectives from research in the United States', *International Journal of Political Education*, 6, 245–62.
- JOHN, P. D. and OSBORN, A. (1992). 'The influence of school ethos on pupils' citizenship attitudes', *Educational Review*, 44, 2, 153–65.
- JONES, P. (2000). 'Action learning for citizenship education', *Pastoral Care in Education*, 18, 4, 19–25.

- KERR, D., BLENKINSOP, S. and DARTNELL, L. (2000). Mapping Resources for Citizenship Education. (Unpublished report.) Slough: NFER.
- KERR, D. and GREENAWAY, E. (2000). Citizenship at Key Stage 3: a Pilot Project. Final Report to the Institute for Citizenship. (Unpublished report.) Slough: NFER.
- KERR, D., LINES, A., BLENKINSOP, S. and SCHAGEN, I. (2001). Citizenship and Education at Age 14. A Summary of the International Findings and Preliminary Results for England. Briefing Paper. Slough: NFER.
- KERR, D., LINES, A., BLENKINSOP, S. and SCHAGEN, I. (forthcoming). *What Citizenship and Education Mean to 14-year-olds. England's results from the IEA Citizenship Education Study: the views of students, teachers and schools.* Slough: NFER.
- KHALEEL, M. (1993). *Pupil Councils First Independent Monitoring Programme.* Liverpool: Priority Area Development.
- MOSHER, R., KENNY, R. A. and GARROD, A. (1994). *Preparing for Citizenship: Teaching Youth to Live Democratically.* Westport, CT: Praeger.
- MOSHER, R. L. (Ed) (1980). *Moral Development and Education: a First Generation of Research and Development.* New York, NY: Praeger.
- NADEAU, G.G. and BURNS, N.E. (1989). Democratic schooling: high school structure and democratic socialisation. Unpublished honors thesis, Harvard University. Cited in: MOSHER, R., KENNY, R.A. and GARROD, A. (1994). *Preparing for Citizenship: Teaching Youth to Live Democratically.* Westport, CT: Praeger.
- NATIONAL CURRICULUM COUNCIL (1990). *Education for Citizenship (Curriculum Guidance 8).* York: NCC.
- NATIONAL CURRICULUM COUNCIL (1993). *Spiritual and Moral Development – a Discussion Paper.* York: NCC.
- NATIONAL SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO CHILDREN (1995). *A Child's View of School. Consulting Pupils to Create a Listening and Responsive School.* London: NSPCC.

- OFFICE FOR STANDARDS IN EDUCATION (2001). *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools: Standards and Quality in Education 1999/2000*. London: The Stationery Office.
- POWER, F.C. (1992). 'An apprenticeship in democracy: the Just Community approach to civic education', *Curriculum*, 13, 3, Winter, 188–95.
- POWER, F.C. and HIGGINS, A. and KOHLBERG, L. (1989). *Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education*. New York, NY: Colombia Press.
- POWER, F.C. and POWER, A. (1992). 'An apprenticeship in democracy: the Just Community approach to civic education', *Curriculum*, 13, 3, 188–95.
- PUPIL EYE (1989). 'Power to the pupils', *School Governor*, September, 12–13.
- QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM AUTHORITY (1999). *Citizenship: the National Curriculum for England Key Stages 3-4*. London: DfEE and QCA.
- QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM AUTHORITY (2000a). *Personal, Social and Health Education and Citizenship at Key Stages 1 and 2: initial guidance for schools*. London: QCA.
- QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM AUTHORITY (2000b). *Citizenship at Key Stages 3 and 4*. London: QCA.
- QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM AUTHORITY (2000c). *Personal, Social and Health Education and Citizenship at Key Stages 3 and 4: initial guidance for schools*. London: QCA.
- QUALIFICATIONS AND CURRICULUM AUTHORITY (2001). *Citizenship. A Scheme of Work for Key Stage 3*. London: QCA.
- ROBINSON, N. and KOEHN, D. (1994). 'Student councils in primary schools: contributors to management decisions?' *Management in Education*, 8, 1, 25–6.
- ROWE, D. (1992). 'Hove Borough School Council', *Citizenship*, 2, 6–8.
- ROWE, D. (1996). *The Business of School Councils: an Investigation into Democracy in Schools*. Unpublished report.

RUDDOCK, J. and FLUTTER, J. (2000). 'Pupil participation and pupil perspective: carving a new order of experience', *Cambridge Journal of Education*, **30**, 1, 75–89.

SAUNDERS, L., HEWITT, D. and MacDONALD, A. (1995). *Education for Life: the Cross-curricular Themes in Primary and Secondary Schools*. Slough: NFER.

SCHOOL COUNCILS UK (2000). *Primary Pupil Council DIY Resource Pack*. 57 Etchingham Park Road, London N3 2EB: School Councils UK.

SCHOOL COUNCILS UK (2001). *Secondary Pupil Council DIY Resource Pack*. 57 Etchingham Park Road, London N3 2EB: School Councils UK.

SCHOOL CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT AUTHORITY (1995). *Spiritual and Moral Development* (SCAA Discussion Papers No 3). London: SCAA.

SCOTTISH CONSULTATIVE COUNCIL ON THE CURRICULUM (1995). *Sharing Responsibility. Ideas for Integrating a Key Aspect of the European Dimension into the Curriculum*. Dundee: SCCC.

SMITH, R. and STANDISH, P. (Eds) (1997). *Teaching Right and Wrong: Moral Education in the Balance*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham.

TAYLOR, M. J. (2000). 'Values education: issues and challenges in policy and school practice.' In: LEICESTER, M., MODGIL, C. and MODGIL, S. (Eds) *Education, Culture and Values. Volume II, Institutional Issues, Pupils, Schools and Teacher Education*. London: Falmer Press.

WYSE, D. (2001). 'Felt tip pens and school councils: children's participation rights in four English schools', *Children and Society*, **15**, 209–18.

---

## 9. APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In 1997, the project, Values Education in Primary and Secondary Schools (sponsored by NFER, SCAA and the Citizenship Foundation), provided some coincidental information on school councils from a quantitative survey (see Taylor, 2000). From a nationally representative sample at that time of 1,000 schools (600 primary and 400 secondary), 546 schools (337 primary and 209 secondary) responded to the questionnaire, providing a broad picture of provision, practices and perceptions about values education. Of these, respondents in 169 schools (30 per cent) said that they had experienced some form of staff development on school councils.

In July 2000, after checking the NFER national databases, there was some attrition in this number to 154, possibly due to school closures. Of these 154 schools, 46 (30 per cent) were primary and 107 (70 per cent) secondary, thus suggesting that school councils are more common at the secondary level. Four-fifths (80 per cent) were county schools, ten per cent were Church of England schools and seven per cent Roman Catholic schools. Regionally they were distributed as follows: North 25 per cent, Midlands 30 per cent, South 39 per cent, Wales 6.5 per cent.

#### 9.1 Sampling and School Selection

In order to undertake the telephone survey in this study, a representative sample of 25 primary schools and 25 secondary schools in England and Wales was selected, bearing in mind geographical location and type of school. From the initial primary sample, 17 interviews were achieved and eight schools were substituted, for various reasons, such as: it proved impossible after several attempts to contact the school; it was not possible to undertake an interview with the teacher in charge; or the school no longer had a school council, or had never, in fact, started one. From the initial secondary sample, 14 interviews were achieved and nine had to be substituted, for similar reasons.

### **9.1.1 Characteristics of the primary schools telephoned**

The average number of students in a school was just over 300; student numbers varied from 110 to 489 students. Nine out of the 25 schools were for students aged 3–11, six were for 4–11-year-olds, four were for 5–11-year-olds and another six were for 7–11-year-olds. The majority of schools (17) were in urban areas. Several interviewees described their school's catchment area as '*ethnically and socially mixed*'; many schools were located in relatively deprived areas. The remaining schools were either in rural or suburban areas. The types of schools varied; most were county schools, but six were denominational schools.

### **9.1.2 Characteristics of the secondary schools telephoned**

The smallest secondary school in the sample had 200 students, and the largest had 1,500 students; the average number of students was approximately 900. The majority of schools were for students aged 11–18, although a few did not have a sixth form, and there was one middle school (9–13) and one upper school (14–18) in the sample. Most were located in urban areas, but some were in rural or suburban areas. A few teachers interviewed specified that the school was situated in a socially deprived area, whereas others mentioned that their catchment area was mostly middle class. The vast majority of schools were mixed comprehensives, although there were two selective grammar schools, two Catholic schools and one technology college. Four schools were single sex (two girls' and two boys' schools).

## **9.2 Methods**

The two main methods of the research were telephone interviews with the teacher leaders of the school councils and case studies involving school council meeting observations and student focus group interviews.

### **9.2.1 Telephone interviews**

Telephone interviews, lasting at least 30 minutes but often 45 minutes or more, were conducted with the member of staff responsible for the school council in the 50 schools during the autumn term 2000. In the majority of cases, the interviewee was

the teacher who originally set up the council, took responsibility for it, oversaw its running and attended most of the meetings. In eight schools, however, the interviewee had taken on their role after the council had been set up, and so was unable to provide details concerning the establishment of the council.

The telephone interview schedule focused on school councils and covered: teacher background in relation to the school council; key school information; background to the school council (length of time in existence; challenges in establishing a council; council aims); functioning of the council (frequency, timing and duration of meetings; representation; (s)election; preparation of councillors; idea generation and agenda setting; topics discussed; note-taking and feedback); status and perceptions of the council (support; views of councillors, non-councillors, teachers, other staff and governors); and outcomes and impact of the council (benefits for councillors and non-councillors; disadvantages for the school; positive outcomes).

### **9.2.2 Case studies**

As a result of the telephone interviews, we selected 16 schools (eight each, primary and secondary) with apparently flourishing school councils where there seemed to be some chance of achieving permission to undertake case studies of the school council meetings. We chose schools where there seemed to be some genuine student participation in school life, and evidence of students having a voice and influence in their school community, and of effecting change through the processes of the school council. We also wanted to include schools that would illustrate a range of practices in the way in which their school councils were organised and functioned. In the event, it proved slightly more difficult than anticipated to achieve access to observe the council meetings and interview students. To an extent we were influenced in our selection by geographical accessibility, as we wanted to observe the pattern of school councils over two terms and, compared with the usual timetable, meetings are a relatively infrequent aspect of school life and only usually occupy a small part of the school day. In addition, as we subsequently discovered (in one primary and three secondary schools in the summer term), council meetings are subject to change or cancellation with little or short notice. These were all factors in our research endeavours.



Eventually, we were welcomed into seven schools, three primary schools and four secondary schools. Table 1 sets out key characteristics of the case study schools. Each school's background and its school council are described in more detail in Appendix 2.

**Table 1: Key characteristics of the case study schools**

School	School type	Location	No. of pupils	Pupil ages	Duration of School Council	Chairperson
A	County Primary	London Borough	392	5–11	3 years	Headteacher
B	County Primary	London Borough	260	3–11	3 years	Year 5 Pupil
C	County Primary	London Borough	487	3–11	7+ years	Headteacher
D	County Upper School	Eastern County LEA	900	13–18	1 year	Headteacher
E	Foundation Grammar School	Unitary Authority West of London	724	11–18	5+ years	Year 13 Student
F	Comprehensive Girls' School	Unitary Authority West of London	1098	11–18	10+ years	Senior Teacher/Teacher
G	County Secondary Boys' School	London Borough	568	11–16	3 years	Year 10 Student

The three county primary schools, located in two London Boroughs, were sizeable (260–487 students) and took children from 3 or 5–11 years old. Two schools had had a school council for three years and one for over seven years. Headteachers chaired two of the councils, but a Year 5 girl chaired the other. The secondary schools were diverse and ranged between 568 and 1,098 students: one was an upper school (13–18-year-old students), one a mixed grammar school, one a girls comprehensive (both 11–18) and one a boys' secondary school (11–16). Two were located in two unitary authorities west of London, one in a third London Borough, and a fourth in an eastern market town. The length of time for which the schools had had a school council varied from one to more than ten years. The newest council was chaired by the headteacher, in one council the role of chairperson was in a process of transition between a senior teacher and a teacher, and in the other two schools the councils were chaired by a Year 13 girl and a Year 10 boy respectively.

With the exception of one secondary school (School D), where study of the school council commenced in the autumn term 2000, the school councils were all observed over the spring and summer terms 2001. In working with the schools, we tried to undertake a core programme of research activities common to all schools, whilst also being sensitive to the particular situations and opportunities in each school environment. In the event, the research required more than usual flexibility. This seemed to be partly because the school council itself cuts across both academic and pastoral structures and usually includes students from all year groups; partly because of the pressures in all schools and the focus on curriculum delivery; and partly because of the relative status and standing of school councils. The key focus of our research was to ascertain the perceptions, understanding and attitudes of students, both councillors and non-councillors, in relation to the processes and achievements of the school councils.

The common core case study research in each case study school covered:

- ◆ collection of school documents;
- ◆ observation of school council meetings;
- ◆ group interviews with school councillors;
- ◆ (where possible) group interviews with non-councillors.

Table 2 (overleaf) sets out the research activities undertaken in each school.

In each school, the school prospectus, latest OFSTED report and any school council agendas and minutes were collected. These enabled some picture to be built up of the place and status of the school council in the life of the school, though we did not explicitly research how the school council fitted with, for example, the school's PSHE aims and provision or its mission statement. Sometimes during school visits there occurred informal contacts with teachers and staff which enabled further perceptions of the functions and effects of the school council to be obtained.

A total of 15 school council meetings were observed; with one exception this amounted to two or more meetings in each school. Half (seven) of the meetings were observed by two researchers, and the other half (eight) by one researcher. Notes were recorded and written up using an observation schedule and compared for

Table 2: Research activities in the case study schools

School	School Council observations	Interviews with councillors	Interviews with non-councillors	Interviews with headteacher/senior teacher /teacher in charge of School Council	Other contacts/ activities	Documentation
School A	2	4 x Year 6 councillors	4 x Year 6 non-councillors	HT	Observation of Circle Time School Council Feedback Year 3 School grounds' event	School prospectus OFSTED report 1997 Children's charter Playground golden rules
School B	2	6 x Year 3,4,5,6 councillors		HT	Meeting with LEA PSHE adviser	School prospectus OFSTED report 1998
School C	3	5 x Year 3,4,5,6 councillors and reserve 4 x Year 2,3,4,6 councillors		ST HT	Informal conversations with teachers and staff re School Council	School prospectus OFSTED report 1999
School D	3	6 x Year 9,10,11 councillors, non-councillors and reserve	6 x Year 9,10,11 non-councillors	ST HT x 2	Informal conversation with a year head	School prospectus OFSTED report 1998
School E	1	6 x Year 8,12 and 13 councillors		ST		School prospectus OFSTED report 2000
School F	2	3 x Year 10 councillors		ST x 2		OFSTED report 1998
School G	2	4 x Year 7,8,9,10 councillors		HT		School prospectus OFSTED report 1999
<b>TOTAL</b> 7 schools	15	8 councillor interviews 38 students Y2-Y13	2 non-councillor interviews 10 pupils Y6, 9-11	5 headteachers 4 senior teachers		

observations and issues. The observation schedule was both structured and allowed for a sequential description of events in the school council meeting. A record was made of: the number of students and their year groups; staff present and their involvement; the roles of the chairperson and secretary; location, layout and length of the meeting; the conduct of the meeting – rules, a constitution, decision-making practices; follow-up, agenda and items discussed; level of interaction between students and staff; level of involvement of students – domination, confidence in talking and raising opinions, listening to one another; ways forward – action to be taken, taking responsibility. We also tried to evaluate whether the school council appeared to be a healthy and efficiently functioning school and, if so, why.

Eight groups of school councillors, usually one group in each school, were interviewed. The interviews involved a total of 38 councillors from Year 2 to Year 13 in groups of from three to six students. The interview schedules for both primary and secondary students covered the same range of topics but an attempt was made to simplify the language for primary students. Information was collected on: the councillors, their year groups and length of service; how and why they got on the council and their expectations of it; topics discussed, how these are decided and if topics are not allowed to be discussed and why; the effectiveness of the council – getting something changed, not getting things changed; learning outcomes in terms of skills developed (discussion, taking responsibility, teamwork, decision making, listening, working out what to do, finding things out) and understanding democratic concepts and practices (asking others' views, making proposals, being a representative, arguing a point of view, taking many things into account, that not everyone gets what they want, prioritisation, being accountable); awareness of the perceptions and involvement of non-councillors, teachers and governors about the school council; their perceptions of positive and negative aspects of a school council and of possible improvements and changes; and whether having a school council is worthwhile and to be recommended. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

In the event non-councillors were interviewed in only two schools, one primary (School A) and one secondary (School D). These two groups comprised ten students from Years 6, 9, 10 and 11. The interview schedule included questions on: awareness of the council and its operations; elections and their perceptions of the process;

involvement in discussion of school council topics; feedback processes; awareness of recent issues; changes in school due to the council; positive and negative aspects of having a council; desired changes to the council's operation; learning opportunities as a result of having a council (e.g. consultation, participation influence); perceptions of the views of teachers and other students about the council; whether having a school council is worthwhile and to be recommended. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

In only one primary school did it prove possible to observe at first hand feedback from the school council to a class group, as this occurred immediately after the council meeting. Feedback and consultation on agenda items took place through different mechanisms in the case study schools (through year councils, class meetings, in registration, tutor time, PSE and so on). Whilst it would have been illuminating to have been able to observe these processes at 'grass roots' level as an indicator of wider participation, it seemed that they often took place on an *ad hoc* rather than a scheduled basis, and our research resources did not permit this degree of school involvement.

---

## APPENDIX 2: CASE STUDY SCHOOLS AND THEIR SCHOOL COUNCILS

### SCHOOL A

#### Background

This 5–11 primary school with 392 students is situated in a redeveloped area abutting the Thames. Over many decades the area has received many immigrant and refugee families and about two-thirds of the school population come from homes where English is not the first language. There is considerable poverty in the area, about three-quarters of the children are eligible for free school meals and there is a fairly high rate of student mobility. Around one-fifth of students have special educational needs. The school's aims include: *'to create a climate of mutual respect within which children and adults feel valued and supported'* and the OFSTED report noted that this aim is met. A noticeable feature of student–teacher relationships was that both students and teachers were on first-name terms. The OFSTED report commented that:

*Courtesy, support, responsibility and sound relationships are modelled by all the staff in the manner in which they relate to each other and in their relationships with their pupils. Pupils are encouraged to become actively involved in the school's community by discussing ways in which the school can be improved. Children in Year 5 have written to the Headteacher with their proposals for ways to develop the school. The recent involvement of some pupils in running their own election at the time of the general election made a positive contribution to their development of an understanding of citizenship.*

#### School Council

The school reinstated its school council about three years ago. The headteacher thought that to have a council the school needed a culture of valuing people and their opinions. There were no real problems in setting up the council. The aims for the council were: 1) *'for the children to have a say in decisions that affect their lives'*; and 2) *'to teach the children about citizenship, democracy, accountability ...things like that'*. The head claimed that although

the aims for the council have not changed, *'it does change each year – we move it on and climb a step each year, so it is more effective'*.

The council meets monthly during the school day immediately after lunch for about an hour. Years 3–6 are represented, one boy and one girl from each class with reserves. The councillors are elected for a one-year term by secret ballot after a two-week campaign during which candidates or their nominators make statements. This process was linked with the Literacy Hour. There is some preparation for their role by teachers, who pay particular attention to Year 3, together with Year 6, explaining the purpose of the council and using Circle Time to get them used to raising and discussing ideas. Councillors report back to the class from the last meeting and also *'drop hints about'* what they think should be discussed. Voting on issues is seen as important.

The head chairs the meetings. Sometimes other adults are invited, for example, the cook or midday supervisor for relevant items. The governors have expressed interest in attending meetings, but it is difficult for them to do so as meetings are held during the day. But they have suggested items for discussion at council meetings (e.g. energy saving) and councillors have sometimes attended governors' meetings. During the previous year, the council had discussed the following topics: day-to-day things important to the children; money for the playground; the state of the toilets; bullying; environmental issues; school meals. The head takes minutes, which are simplified into a list of action points and are given to the councillors and each teacher for discussion in class. Sometimes issues are discussed with groups of teachers, but the fact that the school is on a split site makes for difficulties, as certain issues may only be relevant to each site. The council does not have a specific budget, but the children raise money through events.

The head thought the councillors enjoy their role, although some of the younger ones are bemused. *'They realise that being responsible is quite demanding.... But they are keen to carry on.'* *'They have to learn to put their own initial point alongside the views of their classmates. This is one of the main targets-- that they don't just say their own ideas. This has delayed decision-making.'* *'The ability to report back, to talk about something, explain it and get the main points across. This is quite a difficult skill to*

*learn, but we all have to do it.’ ‘They also learn about democracy – the Year 6 nominees are wearing rosettes today because the elections are held today. They get experience of voting and meetings.’*

He claimed of the non-councillors that: *‘If their class had a certain idea, they are pleased if that idea is adopted.’ ‘They gain more knowledge of what’s going on in school – children listen to their “constituents”.’* And the staff *‘are positive about it – more enthusiastic as time goes on’*. The governors *‘are very impressed – they wanted to come and meet the reps and also invited them to attend the governors’ meeting.’* The perceived benefits of the school council for the whole school were that: *‘It gives out a very strong message that we value everyone, regardless of whether a decision is made or not. It gives us ideas that we wouldn’t have otherwise thought of - we just assume that adults know best - it is very important to listen to the children. It also makes them proud of their school.’*

The head identified only one problem: *‘Last year a very charismatic Year 6 boy was elected. He was very popular with his peers, but was a real pain in the neck. He always did the opposite of what was agreed. We stuck with it for a long time, but in the end I had a chat with him and he agreed to be taken off. But that’s been the only real problem.’*

Positive outcomes as a result of the council included: *‘better equipment in the playground; better school meals and dinner menus are in progress – the cook met with the children and asked them questions to get their views; the toilets weren’t redecorated, but the quality of the cleaning materials was improved. This has made a big difference – the previous cleaning products were not very good. We now have peer counsellors who receive training.’*



## SCHOOL B

### Background

In the same London borough as School A, but on the opposite bank of the Thames, School B is also located in a redeveloped urban area. The school has a socially mixed catchment of 260 students 3–11, 80 per cent of Bangladeshi origin, and other ethnic minority groups. Many students live in overcrowded public sector housing. Over three-quarters are eligible for free school meals. About 85 per cent of students have English as an additional language, and, of these, nearly one-fifth are beginners. About one-fifth of the students have special needs. The school is popular, places emphasis on language learning, involvement of arts and business, and many and varied extra-curricular activities. It enjoys the support of many parents. The school rules displayed in reception state: *'We want to learn; we try to be safe; we really care for each other.'* The school's OFSTED report in 1998 noted that *'the pupils' attainment is in line with national expectations by age 11'* and that *'The attitudes and behaviour of pupils are a strength of the school.'* The school was also commended for valuing its cultural diversity.

### School Council

The school prospectus mentions, under a section entitled 'How does the school encourage high standards of behaviour?', that *'Children in all classes elect representatives to the School Council where they can raise issues that are worrying them, or make suggestions to improve school life.'* The OFSTED report also states: *'Pupils have a voice in matters which concern them through the very effective school council. Representatives report that they have had an influence on a range of matters including the proposed playground developments, a girls' only day for the football pitch and improved drinking fountain facilities.'*

The school has had a school council for three years. The main aim in setting it up was to get greater student involvement in school matters. But the aims have changed since the council started and the development of the school council is now seen more in terms of citizenship provision.

The council meets every two weeks on Friday afternoon, and on alternate Fridays there is in-class discussion. The meetings last for half an hour. Years 1–6 are represented on the council, with two students from each year group. The headteacher is present and the senior midday supervisor attends some meetings. The representatives are elected in classes. The head claimed *'they are very pleased to be elected as all the children want to be councillors'* and this was borne out by those interviewed. Students are councillors for one year. In preparation they discuss in class the students' expectations and their role. Being a councillor, indicated by a badge, has status. There is also a system of substitutes.

To form an agenda, each class discusses issues and the representatives bring issues forward and put them on the agenda. Class discussion is essential so the students in the class are not excluded. Topics discussed have included: playground issues, school dinners, and toilets. The head claimed *'in a broad sense they understand that you don't talk about individual teachers and children in the school council'*. The children themselves suggested that they wanted more fun in the teaching and learning environment. (They also had an assembly on what students wanted which included: no SATs, no bullying (though the head said there was not much) and better school dinners.)

One student acts as the chairperson and one as the secretary. The minutes are typed up and sent to each class for review and further discussion of issues, which are then brought back to the council by representatives. If a matter is urgent or of special importance the head takes it to the staff meeting. At the time of the interview, the governors were planning to attend the following week's meeting of the school council as they wanted to consult children about the school. In terms of support for the council, some thought was being given to allocating a budget to the council as staff were said to be aware that it would help to give the council status.

The head reported that she knew the representatives' views of the school council since visitors from another school recently asked them: *'The children feel responsible for the playground and issues about fights and disagreements; they say that they listen to others more and take on board their concerns.'* The head did not know

the views of non-councillors. The teachers and the non-teaching staff are supportive and agree with giving up time out of the curriculum for the council.

Benefits for the school were said to be that the children involved have a feeling that their voice is being heard; they find out things and they feel that it is more fun and teachers have to explain what is going on. Thus there is a two-way dimension. Benefits for councillors were said to be that they learn skills of discussion, listening and taking responsibility. For example, the councillors are used to showing visitors around and this gives them status. The head claimed that the children grow in confidence, they take the council seriously because they see that it brings about change. For example, three years ago the playground was seen as 'boring'; students were consulted and were involved in plans and making drawings with the LEA school development officer as to how it could be improved. As it happened, the LEA officer found £60,000 funding towards development of the playground; so the students realised their involvement could make a difference.

In terms of possible disadvantages, the head mentioned that teachers have to be careful not to raise expectations about what can be done by the school. Some things are possible but others are limited by restrictions of various kinds. The head feels it is good that the children are involved, but she thinks they have to be honest about consultation and its limits. There have been many positive outcomes: changed policies about lining up to go in/out, as children did not like this; more school trips which children requested; also more varied experience for students, for example, they have been interviewed by people from other schools and the school council was included in a video made by another school.

## SCHOOL C

### Background

The school is in an urban location in a London borough to the east. It has 487 children aged 3–11. The school was built in the late '70s and in an area where there is a mix of owner-occupied and rented housing. The neighbourhood of the school is not generally well favoured in its social and economic circumstances. Approximately 70 per cent of the students are white, with 30 per cent representing a variety of other ethnic groups (West African, 8 per cent and Chinese, 5.5 per cent, being the two largest groups). Twenty per cent of the students are designated as having some degree of special educational needs. Forty-two per cent of the students are eligible for free school meals. Following an inspection in 1997, the school was made subject to special measures, but was successfully reinspected in 1999. By then it was said that although students enter the school with below-average baseline attainment, by the time they leave the school, good and effective progress has been made.

### School Council

The school's prospectus mentions as part of its curriculum statement that '... we encourage them to recognise the important contribution they have to make to the life of the school.' The school council is also specifically noted:

*Schools Council:*

*Democracy at work! Representatives from every year group participate in discussion of school issues and influence decisions. The sort of issues the children discuss range from footballs in the playground, clubs, different flavour yoghurts to bigger portions at dinnertime!*

The OFSTED report in 1999 stated:

*There is a school's council made up of representatives from all year groups. It is chaired by a member of staff, but the pupils set the agenda and report back to their classes following meetings. Social issues discussed have included behaviour in the playground, lunch-time menus and after-school clubs, and the council organised a Red Nose Day to raise money for charity. Through this council, the pupils have an opportunity to develop their skills of debating and persuasive argument, and they have a voice in the decision-making of the school.'*

A telephone interview was undertaken with the teacher who had oversight of the school council. But by the time we visited the school, the new headteacher was responsible for the council and chaired the meetings.

The school has had a council for more than seven years. The aims of the council are to: give children the opportunity of feeling they are part of the structure – what they say matters; let children learn about democracy (e.g. they have to choose their representatives for their year group); let children take on responsibility (e.g. note-taking, reporting back to class, coming to meetings with issues raised in class); '*Part of our speaking and listening policy*' (e.g. children raise their hand before they can speak). The council is given a high profile. Photographs of the council members are displayed in reception and the headteacher has acquired badges for them to wear on their uniforms.

The council meets usually once a month, due to time pressures, though they would like it to meet fortnightly. It meets in lesson time on Thursdays or Fridays at about 2.45 (just before the end of day) for about half an hour. All year groups from Reception – Year 6 are represented, with two students from Reception (one class) and one student from each of the other classes (14 in total). It was reported that some of the younger ones feel '*star struck*' with the older ones – but it is good for them to get involved – '*good for their listening skills*'.

Council members are elected by their classmates – names are put forward and must be seconded. The students vote secretly on paper. One member is elected from each class, plus a substitute in case of absence on the day of the meeting. Membership is annual – '*but we do encourage them to vote for someone who hasn't had a chance before*'. In terms of preparation for their role, a Learning Support Assistant helped with an induction day for the representatives. This was useful but a one-off. Mostly the councillors learn as they go on and through getting older.

The agenda deals firstly with feedback by the chairperson on the last meeting and any progress made. Then, the children talk about issues that have been discussed in their class groups. At the time of the telephone interview, it was reported that a questionnaire on school meals was to be circulated, as the new headteacher is keen to find out if children are eating what they would like to be eating.

The school council has discussed the development of the questionnaire. Other issues discussed have been: toilets (type of toilet tissue, privacy issues, e.g. girls' toilet doors are low); water fountains; playground equipment (e.g. goal posts for field); buddy system to combat bullying; salt and pepper pots on dining room tables; planting trees on the school field for shelter; sponsored events; team sports against other schools.

The teacher chairperson takes informal minutes. Classes talk about what has been discussed in the meetings, and members of the council must ask those in the class if there are any issues they want to be raised. The notes are also pinned up on the school notice-board. Issues are taken forward from teachers to the headteacher and go to other staff if relevant. Class teachers get copies of the minutes. There was uncertainty about governor involvement. The council does not have a budget as such, although if it needed money the teacher in charge could put forward a case.

The councillors were said to be very positive about the council: *'You can tell from their enthusiasm – they ask when the meetings will be.'* They like the idea that they can bring their own ideas forward. At least half of the children see the council as an opportunity to express their views. Some of the younger councillors find it more difficult but, in the end, they develop confidence. Other students feel that they have a voice as well – they get the opportunity to express their opinions. Lots of names go forward of those who want to be members – it is given high status to be a member of the council. There is no staff reluctance at all about a council. The interviewee was not aware of governors' views.

The benefits to the school are that it gives children a voice – *'they are empowered'*. For example: the school is broken into a lot, probably by local children. If children feel ownership of the school, this is less likely to happen as there is peer pressure not to do so. Councillors were said to develop: listening skills; confidence – *'the quiet ones are pushed on'*; a sense of responsibility – *'they blossom'*; and some understanding of democracy. Non-councillors were said to be *'happy about being given a voice'*. There were not thought to be any disadvantages. The time of the teacher in charge is sometimes a problem and the additional workload, *'but it is worth it – this is not a disadvantage'*. Changes made as a result of the council include: introduction of soft toilet tissue; a buddy system to combat bullying; salt and pepper on dining tables; the provision of an outside toilet.

## SCHOOL D

### Background

This comprehensive, mixed upper school with 900 13–18-year-old students is located in a growing ‘medium-sized’ rural market town. The socio-economic status of the catchment is just below national average and there are few higher-attaining students on school entry. By the end of key stage 4 the attainment is above national average. The school was named as an outstanding school in 1999 and has many national awards, including technology status. It has a major programme of extra-curricular musical, arts and sports activities. In the school’s prospectus, two of the four aspirations, which the headteacher stresses, are: *‘that we must lead young people towards autonomy where they are able to make decisions and take charge of their lives; that the school must be a community and in all its activities it must speak of care, consideration, pride and hard work’*.

The school’s OFSTED report in 1998 especially commended the quality of teaching and relationships between students and teachers, the community feeling and the development of spiritual, moral, social and cultural awareness: *‘The school is strongly led with great sensitivity and vision. It projects an excellent ethos as a confident and outward looking place which expects the best for everyone.’* The inspection report pre-dated the school council, but it notes that *‘the wide range of extra-curricular activities, such as debating, work experience, visits to Parliament, mock elections and others, develop confidence in forming and expressing views and opinions’*.

### School Council

A senior teacher, the head of sixth form, in charge of managing the school council was interviewed by telephone. The school has only had a full school council for a year, but the sixth form has had a council for a long time and there have been year councils before. It was a recent policy decision to build on these and have a full school council to allow representatives of the students in the different year groups to experience democracy and for them to contribute towards the school. Apparently this did not meet with universal approval by staff, some of whom were apprehensive about issues students might raise. The whole-school council meetings were chaired by the headteacher, who was also interviewed. He emphasised his belief that *‘the school is for the children’* and they

try to develop a strong community and teamwork. The head also claimed that the development of the political dimension of the school was in line with national policy developments and to promote further change in the school.

The council's aims are to: provide a forum for discussing matters; improve the school; and to give students a voice and some ownership of what happens in the school. In setting up a whole-school council, the aims have not changed and have remained more or less as they were for year councils. The school was said to be in the process of working up the value of the school council for the students, *'so that they feel that there is something good going on and that they want to be involved and that they feel they can make a difference. It's about giving them a voice and having ability to change what happens.'*

The council meets every half term during lunchtime for 30 – 40 minutes. Each class (8–10 tutor groups per year) elects two representatives who form a year council, which meets with the year head. The sixth form has a separate council chaired by the students. Three representatives per year group then meet in a full school council. The headteacher runs the school council and is the only adult present. Councillors serve for one year. They learn their role on the job. There has been some difficulty in helping students to identify representatives with appropriate qualities. For this they need some guidance. However, generally speaking they make choices as expected. There was some feeling that the sixth form could be too dominant in meetings so the number of their representatives had been reduced.

Initially the head sets the agenda for the school council. The year councils can put items on the agenda. In the past the sixth form has been very active in its year council and has been involved with charity fund raising, having a social role, making more private spaces, such as a common room, being involved with school procedures, study time and so on. The year councils have been concerned with issues such as siting of the bike sheds and who is allowed to do what. The school council issues largely concern facilities, uniform and catering. The head wants the school council to address whole-school issues. He was concerned that the agenda should reflect students' concerns to a greater extent.



A student acts as secretary for the year councils. In the full council, the headteacher takes action points and notes and these are typed by one of the school's secretarial staff. The minutes are circulated from the year councils to the tutor groups. The head was conscious that the process of information giving and idea generating took time. The active support of year heads affects the value placed on the process. The staff get a copy of the minutes and an agenda. It was reported that the governors are informed and take a polite interest. The council does not have a budget. Any budgetary needs have been vired from other headings. The sixth form council raises its own funds.

Almost all of the representatives are keen but occasionally somebody does not like meeting at lunchtime. Generally other students are said to be positive and give their view to the representatives: *'If the council makes a decision, it helps to make it effective in the school because the school council helps to make the decision respectable.'* It was said that staff take a polite interest and some are glad that the school council exists.

It was claimed that the main benefit to the school as a whole is that it provides a forum that does not exist elsewhere for receiving students' ideas: *'It is better that there is a formal route than that certain groups of children get the ear of the headteacher.'* Having the school council also improves the ethos. It will help towards the school's policy on citizenship. The head thinks that the school council helps to generate a *'community feeling'* and helps to move the school along.

The benefits to the councillors were thought to be: improving discussion, debate, listening, taking responsibility, some understanding of democratic process and some community participation (e.g. fundraising). Some of this complements the school's public speaking programme. Sixth-formers appearing on a radio programme claimed that they had learnt a lot about democratic processes. Some students who have become involved in year councils are taking advantage of this to get more involved in the school council. Some relish the opportunity to be public figures and some are ambitious, but it was felt that it is too early to evaluate the whole school council. Interviewees thought some of the students not on the council began to understand more about the

process. They are involved in choosing representatives in the tutor group and voting. But the tutor groups vary and some teachers will give this proper time and others just post the minutes up on the board.

There were not thought to be any disadvantages to having the school council. But the head was concerned that they might '*run out of issues*', or that '*they might have to say "sorry, but no" & too often*'. The head tries to explain how things happen and the reasons for doing or not doing them. Procedural outcomes and minor changes made are positive. Students now view the school council as valuable and more workable because they have paid attention to the procedures. But there is an issue about participation and involvement for all. The school council experiences also link with citizenship education across the curriculum and planned off-timetable days. Outcomes are vending machines, ramps for the disabled, the resiting of the bike sheds and providing car parking for sixth formers, who are also allowed to wear shorts in the summer.

## SCHOOL E

### Background

This mixed grammar school, with technology college status, has around 720 11–18-year-old students and is located to the west of London. Students come from several ethnic groups, and about half the students come from homes where English is not the first language, although there are no students at early stages of learning English. About 12 per cent of students are eligible for free school meals. Students' attainment on entry is above the national average, although it covers a wider range than that found in many other grammar schools. This is because the school is in an area where over two-fifths of students are educated in selective schools and because the school accepts a very significantly larger proportion of students who have not reached the prescribed standard at age 11. The school's recent OFSTED report noted that *'They [students] behave very well and relate well to each other and to staff, so the school is a very harmonious community. Pupils develop confidence, maturity and responsibility.'*

### School Council

The school prospectus states *'We encourage pupils to develop and express their opinions in a constructive and positive manner'* and the school council is explicitly mentioned: *'School Council enables everyone to put forward their ideas and play an active part in the school.'* Moreover, the school council is twice commended in the school's OFSTED report:

*The school council, chaired by a pupil, provides a forum through which pupils are able to contribute to school policy. They identify concerns and confidently express their views on a wide range of issues, such as avoiding congestion in the school canteen and improving the school environment.*

*Pupils are encouraged to develop some independence. One of the most impressive features of this is the elected school council, chaired by a student, in which pupils learn to take on responsibilities and play an active part in some aspects of the management of the school.*

The member of the SMT whom we interviewed is the staff representative on the school council. He sees his role on the council as minimal. But he is always present to answer any questions that might be asked or refer them to SMT, or the relevant member of

staff. He only intervenes if he really needs to, for example, on any discipline issues.

There has been a school council for at least five years. The council has no formal aims; they are '*left quite open and broad. It is seen as a vehicle by which students can voice their opinions.*' The council meets once every half term. The meetings are held after school for about one hour. Every year group is represented on a form basis. Two students from each tutor group are elected or '*volunteered*' and the meeting also includes the head girl and head boy, six or seven prefects (elected democratically by the school), and a senior prefect who chairs the meeting. In total, approximately 60 students are present. The representatives serve for a year or longer (with one exception the interviewees had served between two and four years). There is no formal preparation for being a councillor, but prefects will go into classes before members are elected to brief them about what is involved and expected, i.e. that the council must be taken seriously and needs commitment. The member of SMT thought that the students could benefit from 'training' on how to conduct meetings but that they learn the relevant skills of the process as time goes on via involvement in school council. The chairperson has a meeting with the SMT member to go through the agenda. Usually:

- minutes of the last meeting are discussed;
- each prefect gives feedback on his or her own role (e.g. there is a charities prefect, marketing prefect, etc.);
- each tutor group representative will ask his/her tutor group if there is anything that they want to be discussed, which is then put on the agenda;
- the SMT member gives any feedback on issues discussed at the last meeting, e.g. any outcomes, update.

Students decide what to discuss – anything is allowed (within reason!). Issues in the past have included school facilities, and catering. In a previous year students in one year group wanted to know why they were the only ones who were unable to do basketball during PE (this issue was then discussed with PE teacher and rectified). Otherwise, the general running of the school is discussed.

The council has a secretary (a student representative) who takes the minutes. Tutor group representatives feed back minutes to form groups. The minutes are not specifically fed back to staff unless an issue with a particular member of staff comes up, in which case the

SMT representative will talk to them directly. It was said that governors had never shown an interest in the school council, but had not been well informed about it.

There is no specific budget for actually running the council, although the school secretaries are aware that the representatives must be allowed to do photocopying, and so on. Last year the council was given a sum of money to spend on a millennium theme – it was decided that they would do a millennium garden. The school was in the process of deciding on a budget for this year and the council will then discuss what to spend it on.

The SMT member thought the councillors feel the council is worthwhile. They participate freely and attend when they should. There is always enthusiasm and the time is always put to good use with plenty of things to discuss. He was less sure about the perceptions of the non-councillors. He had never been present when councillors have given feedback to classes (he thought that perhaps he should do this). Staff rarely attend council meetings, despite being given the opportunity.

The main benefits to having a school council were *'Action is taken, changes are made.'* Things have changed as a result of the school council so it is given recognition. Benefits for the councillors were perceived as developing skills of conducting meetings, chairing meetings, debate, discussion, speaking in front of others, expressing their opinions freely, expressing themselves. Also students experienced *'the whole process of democracy – giving them a voice'*. Benefits for others were less tangible.

Possible disadvantages to having a school council are: the large group is difficult for the chairperson to manage, although the chair does develop appropriate skills; it is sometimes a worry that the council *'gets too big for its boots'* in the sense that *'it can keep on and on about issues that have been debated and decided upon'*; although the council does not take up curriculum time as meetings are held after school, this may mean representatives miss out on other extracurricular activities.

Positive outcomes included changes to catering – more fruit had been made available in the canteen, but this turned out not to be particularly popular with the rest of the school so it was dropped: *'The problem is that a few suggest but the majority don't always go along with it.'* It was not seen as the council's role to change formal policy – it might query policies and the reasons behind them are then explained and understood.

## SCHOOL F

### Background

This 11–18 school with 1,098 girls is a mixed comprehensive in a suburban location in a unitary authority to the west of London. The school is oversubscribed and draws its students from a wide geographical area as well as the immediate locality. Most students come from advantaged rather than disadvantaged homes and parental support for education is strong. Entitlement to free meals at five per cent is low. Approximately 20 per cent of students are from ethnic minority backgrounds, mostly from the Indian sub-continent, but with a few from Italy. Most students join the school with average attainment, but the school has relatively more higher-than lower-attainers. The school has academic results that are consistently above local and national averages. Ninety per cent of Year 11 girls continue in education and three-quarters of Year 13 go on to higher education. Around one-fifth of students are on the school's register of special educational needs, which is average. Extra-curricular activities, especially sports and music, are encouraged. The prospectus states that the aim of the school is *'for our girls to become confident adaptable young women who can work co-operatively but who are also capable of thinking for themselves, making rational decisions and taking control of their own lives'*. The OFSTED Report mentions that *'Pupils are encouraged to take part in the life of the school including joining the school council ...'*.

### School Council

The assistant headteacher, who is responsible for the school council, thought that there had been a council for more than ten years. It was initiated by the then head of Year 10 who felt there was a need for students to be able to channel their feelings as they came to her with issues. There had been no particular problems in setting up the council.

The aims of the council are: to give a voice to girls in Years 9, 10 and 11 (what was described as 'middle school council'). Girls in Years 7 and 8 were not included but during the research an attempt was being made to extend the council to Year 7 moving into Year 8. The sixth form has its own council.

The council meets every half term, or more frequently, at lunchtime for approximately half an hour. Previously the council met after school but this was difficult because girls missed out on club

activities and were late home as many had distances to travel. There are six representatives from each year group, but not necessarily one from each form. Only the assistant head used to attend meetings, but during the research another teacher began taking over leadership of the school council. Elections occur in October at which time Year 11 girls finish and are replaced by Year 9. Representatives remain on the council from Year 9 until Year 11 unless they no longer wish to do so. Thus effectively it has been a council of Years 9 and 10. The representatives are voted in by the year group; it is suggested that one person from each form group is selected, although this does not always occur. Each representative has a substitute. The students are given a briefing from their tutors when deciding to stand for the council and existing members talk to year groups and make themselves available for questions.

The agenda is decided as follows: a mixture of ongoing items are discussed, then followed up and reported on in the next meeting; the SMT might decide to take an issue to the council; council members discuss ideas with their peers and propose items. The following topics have been discussed: uniform; benches in the playground; availability of sanitary towels; lunches; availability of lockers; maintenance on the building; availability of water fountains. Importantly, curricular items have also been discussed: notably, restructuring PSHE classes previously taught in mixed-ability tutor groups, but girls wanted it to be like other classes; and PSHE content – some girls thought they were being taught certain things (e.g. about cars) at an inappropriate age, when they were too young to drive.

The assistant headteacher keeps records – not formal minutes. Councillors '*ideally*' give feedback to their peers. Feedback to staff depends on the topics discussed. Feedback is given to the head if necessary. There is no mechanism for feeding information to the governors. Members of staff responsible for the items discussed will be informed, e.g. if it is a maintenance issue, the 'site controllers' are informed. There is no formal feedback to the school as a whole but an announcement might be made in assembly if relevant. There is no specific budget but the council is able to access the maintenance budget or furniture budget if needed, and general school central funds.

The council is viewed positively by councillors. Sometimes members are sufficiently keen and enthusiastic to serve for two years: *'It is a useful learning experience.'* The councillors were said to appreciate that when they put forward an idea, change might not happen and that everything they want is not always possible. The views of non-representatives depend on how effective their representative is and how much feedback they receive. Staff were reported to be positive about the council but the governors' reactions were unknown.

The main benefits of having a school council were perceived as being the changes made to school and that staff are prepared to listen to the students. The benefits claimed for councillors are: an understanding of political literacy; a greater understanding of the running of a large organisation; insight into democratic processes. But those who put themselves forward for the council are likely to be those who are also active in other areas of the school community. It was also claimed that students not on the council also gain an insight into democratic processes.

There are possibly difficulties rather than disadvantages to having a council. For example, the uniform issue must be handled carefully with sensitivity: *'They are told they have a voice and then their ideas are turned down. There is a difficult balance between listening and providing an explanation of why we can't necessarily do it.'*

There have been several positive outcomes and changes made as a result of the council: change to PE uniform (although changes to the main school uniform have not come about); more benches in the playground; all students now have a locker; restructuring PSE lessons (now in class groups rather than in mixed-ability tutor groups); changes to PSE content; more water fountains; catering contract changes – suggestions on food given to new contractors.



## SCHOOL G

### Background

This relatively small school for 568 boys aged 11–16 is situated on a split site in a northern London borough. It has experienced difficulties, and staff shortages are ongoing, but its numbers are increasing. One-fifth of the students are refugees and it also welcomes students excluded from other schools. There is a high degree of student mobility. More than half the students have English as a second language. The number of students entitled to free school meals is above average, as is the proportion with statements of special educational need. Attainment is also well below average. The schools aims stress both personal and social and academic development and OFSTED found that students' attitudes were good.

### School Council

One of the school's aims is to '*encourage students to participate fully in the life of the school*'. The school appeared to place some weight on its school council, which was mentioned on a separate page in the school prospectus:

*Boys from each form are elected as School Council Representatives by their classmates. Meetings are held regularly with the Headteacher. The items discussed are decided upon by the boys and this year they have included: a) homework; b) ICT facilities; c) requests for particular library and revision books; d) school dinners. One student is elected by the representatives to be Chair of School Council, and he will arrange meetings with heads of subjects, heads of year, deputies, or non-teaching staff to discuss issues raised and then report back at the next meeting. He will also be involved in the school's annual review with the local authority.*

The school council was mentioned positively several times in the school's OFSTED report, for providing opportunities for responsibility, consultation and beneficial changes:

*Pupils have good opportunities to take responsibility for others through the work of the school council, for example, meeting with the school cook to discuss dinner menus. ... They handle well any responsibilities they are given, for example, ... taking part in the school council.*

*The behaviour code was drawn up following consultation with all members of the school community and the school council. Pupils were consulted about the change in uniform. They approve of the change, which they like (colour), but especially because it distinguishes [this school] pupils from pupils from other schools. When they wore the same colour as other schools it was known that any bad behaviour outside school was attributed to [this school]. There is a feeling that they can wear the new uniform with pride.*

*After full consultation with staff, revised school aims are due to go to the school council, and then the governing body, for approval. This is a noteworthy example of pupils being able to participate fully in major aspects of the school's work, itself one of the aims.*

The headteacher, who joined the school two years before the research, initially decided to take a leading role in the school council to 'keep it afloat' as she thought it would help to encourage 'communal care and responsibility' and 'community spirit': 'If the children feel as though they have ownership of their school, it'll be a better place.'

The council meets fortnightly, during the lunch hour for 45 minutes. Two students from each form are elected to the council, which was run, but not chaired by a senior teacher. Councillors are usually elected for a year but they can stand down after a minimum of one term. There is also a substitute system. The chairperson and secretary are elected at the first meeting, usually from Year 10, so as to avoid conflicts with working towards exams in Year 11. The headteacher thought it was 'very important to give them the skills they need to be effective reps'. She gives training about how to take minutes about the main points, later displayed in classrooms, and in how to give appropriate feedback and how to obtain ideas from the form groups. The head thought that the main disadvantage of having a council was lack of time and staff to undertake training for the councillors so as to make their role more effective: 'some are natural, but others do need training'. The head gives relevant feedback to the governors; the students would like the governors to be more involved with the council and to do a presentation to governors about some things they would like changed.

During this time, they had discussed a '*broad range*' of topics:

- They changed the uniform – the boys suggested it to her as a joke, and they were really surprised when she said 'why not?', as long as they went through the right channels. They did a survey, talked about the issues, e.g. cost and suppliers, took the information to the governors and got it changed.
- Raising levels of achievement. They looked at barriers to learning, e.g. they opened a Learning Resource Centre, and with consultation with the librarian, got CD ROMs, more books, through publishers, and so on. They have discussed which textbooks they find useful. The councillors see the head of department if there is something they want to raise with them. It appears that they do not talk about the actual content of the curriculum, rather issues such as staffing shortages and how they affect them.
- Involvement in mock court trials at the local courts.
- Dinners – improvements were made, including the availability of mineral water – '*it makes a nice change from coke!*'
- The water fountains – about to be replaced.
- The sleepover for a collection for Crisis which they did at Christmas.
- The Award Scheme in which the winner is able to spend £200 in the school in any way he wants.
- Improvements to the school garden.

The council does not have a budget, but they are involved with the budgeting of expenditure for anything for which the council gets approval. OFSTED was impressed with the students' awareness of money management.

The councillors were reported to enjoy their role and to be enthusiastic: '*They feel like they can really contribute to the school.*' The chairperson was perceived by the head as very enthusiastic, sometimes overly enthusiastic, continuously sending her notes and checking up: '*He wasn't a popular choice, but I think it's been good for him.*' The views of non-representatives towards the school council were said to be variable, depending on personality, degree of cooperation in class with the feedback sessions, and whether their form tutor is supportive. Teacher support was also variable.

The benefits to the school as a whole were claimed to be: developing citizenship, giving the students responsibility so they feel they have some ownership of the school and a say in how it moves forward and improves; improving school ethos and atmosphere; providing a useful forum for feedback to all the classes; promoting mix of year groups. The benefits to the councillors were: developing understanding of council procedures, financial matters, note-taking, how to behave in a meeting, greater responsibility and ownership and communicating with people of different ages with older students regularly helping the younger ones. The head thought that non-councillors had other opportunities to learn the same sorts of skills, through the buddy system, community awards system, being part of the interviewing process for new teachers and helping to show visitors around.





## Related NFER publication

### **THE DEVELOPMENT OF VALUES, ATTITUDES AND PERSONAL QUALITIES: A Review of Recent Research**

**Mark Halstead and Monica Taylor**

Schools are charged with the responsibility of developing young people's values, attitudes and personal qualities alongside their academic abilities. National policies exhort schools to demonstrate particular values, and guidance suggests certain practices. But how are schools to know what works, by which means and in what contexts?

This comprehensive review of research interprets key concepts in this controversial area; clarifies realistic cognitive and affective goals for schools; indicates positive strategies in teaching and learning; and reviews assessment and evaluation methods which identify pupil change.

ISBN 0 7005 300 45

£8.00

If you wish to purchase or find out more information about the above or any **NFER publication**, contact Book Sales:

Tel: (01753) 747281

Fax: (01753) 747193

email: [book.sales@nfer.ac.uk](mailto:book.sales@nfer.ac.uk)

A complete list of NFER Publications can be obtained from:

[www.nfer.ac.uk/publications](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications)



National Foundation for Educational Research

## SCHOOL COUNCILS: THEIR ROLE IN CITIZENSHIP AND PERSONAL AND SOCIAL EDUCATION

School councils are currently advocated for their contribution to the life of the school, young people's experience of democratic processes, and as an aspect of the school's provision for Personal, Social and Citizenship Education.

This nationally based, NFER-funded study of school councils in primary and secondary schools reviews aims and roles in establishing a council and issues of organisation, representation and participation in maintaining a school council in practice.

It focuses on the perceptions of teacher leaders of the council, student councillors and their peers about their school council experiences. Importantly, the report provides evidence of practical changes and positive impacts on school life resulting from the work of the school council and explores councillors' claims about their learning of personal, social and problem-solving skills and their developing awareness and understanding of democratic practices.

ISBN: 1 903880 23 8  
£19.00