School councils and pupil participation in Scottish secondary schools

October 2007
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- carrying out research into consumer issues and concerns;
- informing key policy and decision-makers about consumer concerns and issues;
- influencing key policy and decision-making processes;
- informing and raising awareness among consumers.

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Scottish Consumer Council
Royal Exchange House
100 Queen Street
Glasgow G1 3DN
Telephone 0141 226 5261
Facsimile 0141 221 0731
www.scotconsumer.org.uk

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Written by Dr Kay Tisdall, Programme Director of the MSc in Childhood Studies, University of Edinburgh

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The SCC assesses the consumer perspective in any situation by analysing the position of consumers against a set of consumer principles.

These are:

ACCESS
Can consumers actually get the goods or services they need or want?

CHOICE
Can consumers affect the way the goods and services are provided through their own choice?

INFORMATION
Do consumers have the information they need, presented in the way they want, to make informed choices?

REDRESS
If something goes wrong, can it be put right?

SAFETY
Are standards as high as they can reasonably be?

FAIRNESS
Are consumers subject to arbitrary discrimination for reasons unconnected with their characteristics as consumers?

REPRESENTATION
If consumers cannot affect what is provided through their own choices, are there other effective means for their views to be represented?

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Preface

As the direct consumers of education, children and young people have a right to be involved in the decisions made by schools and Councils. This right is enshrined in the Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc. Act 2000 and well understood by all those who work in education.

One of the key ways that the voice of pupils is heard is through school councils. These councils provide an opportunity for young people to participate in the decisions made about their school. The popularity of school councils is demonstrated in this study, where the vast majority of secondary school pupils know that they have a council. We also found that over the course of their schooling, around a third of pupils will have experienced being a member of a school council, going some way to explode the myth that only the smartest young people participate in the system.

However, the findings are also a cause for concern. While most secondary school pupils know that there is a council to represent their views, they appear cynical about the extent to which the involvement of pupils can actually lead to change. Unless pupils can see the effect of participation on school policies and practices, they are likely to continue to view it as tokenistic.

A further word of concern is that less than one in eight secondary school pupils feel that the school regularly asks for their views about school issues. Of course it is possible that school staff are regularly consulting pupils but that the pupils themselves do not recognise it as such. Whether this is true or not, it is a worrying finding that so few young people feel that schools are interested in listening to them.

This report calls on the Scottish Government to act to improve the quality of pupil participation. Investment in guidance for schools, training for school staff and school council members and mechanisms to share good practice on pupil participation would help to ensure consistent standards across Scotland’s schools. Without this investment, it remains questionable whether schools, through school councils or otherwise, are living up to the ethos of the Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc. Act 2000.

Douglas Sinclair
Chair
Executive Summary

This report summarises research into secondary schools pupils participation through school councils (sometimes called pupil councils), and more generally on pupil participation in schools. SCC commissioned Ipsos MORI Scotland to gather evidence from a nationally representative sample of secondary school pupils. In total, 1969 young people aged 11–18 completed the questionnaire. SCC was able to build on data gathered by the Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People (SCCYP) in 2005 and therefore to make comparisons over time. The SCC is grateful for permission to use the findings from the previous SCCYP survey.

Key Findings

- 84% of 11–16 year olds reported that their school had a school council, an increase of 6% since 2005.
- The gap appears to be closing between pupils from the least and the most deprived neighbourhoods. In 2005, 86% of 11-16 year olds, from the least deprived neighbourhoods, reported they had a school council, compared to 68% from the most deprived. In 2007, there was no significant difference between pupils from the least and most deprived neighbourhoods, in whether they had a pupil council.
- In 2007, 8% of secondary school pupils reported that they were a member of a school council. Approximately one-third of pupils reported being a member at some time during their schooling.
- Some of those who are not currently members appeared to feel excluded by the selection process. For example, 21% felt that they were not a member because no one had asked them to be, 10% felt that they were not a member because the teacher had not picked them, and 11% were put off by having to be elected.
- Other reasons for not joining the school council suggested disenchantment with the council, for example 30% thought the school council was boring while 18% felt that the council did not have enough power to make a difference. As pupils progress through school they are increasingly likely to report that the council does not have enough power to make a difference.
- With regard to the effectiveness of school councils, 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that ‘the council has given me a say on how my school is run’. Over a quarter of pupils (28%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that ‘the council has improved things at my school’, while a similar proportion (29%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.
Despite some disenchantment, pupils seemed hopeful about school councils’ potential. Forty-four per cent either agreed or strongly agreed that ‘I think school councils are a good way of listening to pupils’ while 18% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Girls were more positive than boys, and pupils in S1 were proportionately more positive than older pupils.

A large minority of pupils aged 11-16 (41%) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement ‘I would find it easy to talk to teachers if there were things I didn’t like about the way the school was run’. This is considerably higher than the result found in the 2005 survey where 24% agreed with the statement.

Similarly, 30% of pupils aged 11-16 agreed or strongly agreed that ‘I can think of at least one important thing that has changed in our school because pupils asked for it to happen’, an increase from 24% in 2005.

Despite these positive findings, over half of pupils (54%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that ‘the school regularly asks for my views about school issues’. It appears from these findings that most pupils did not feel that they are regularly consulted by the school.

The Scottish Consumer Council recommends that the Scottish Government convene a working group to develop guidance on pupil participation to ensure consistent standards across Scottish schools.
1. Introduction

The Scottish Consumer Council (SCC) believes that all pupils, as consumers of education, should have a voice (both individually and collectively) in decisions made about their education. Listening to children and young people can improve the quality of decisions made on their behalf. Participatory mechanisms can also be seen as an important component of education for citizenship. The right of children and young people to have their voice heard is enshrined in Scottish law through the Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc. Act 2000.

This report summarises research with secondary school pupils, to find out how they feel about current levels of participation in school decision-making. While other mechanisms for consulting pupils exist, we have focused on school councils as these are the key formal structure used by schools to listen to pupils as a whole. SCC commissioned Ipsos MORI Scotland to gather evidence from a nationally representative sample of secondary school pupils. In total, 1969 young people aged 11–18 completed the questionnaire.

What are school councils?

There is no legal definition of school councils in Scotland. For the 2007 survey, respondents were given the following explanation:

School councils are intended to give children and young people a say in how schools are run. Sometimes they are called ‘student councils’ or ‘pupil councils’ or ‘pupil forums’.

A more specific definition is given by the School Councils UK:

School councils are democratically elected groups of students who represent their peers and enable pupils to become partners in their own education, making a positive contribution to the school environment and ethos.

This definition, however, does not necessarily match all school council structures. For example, some school councils are not democratically elected, but selected by teachers or open to all.
2. Background

Scotland should be a leader on pupil participation in schools. In 2000, it was the first country in the UK to place children’s participation on a legal footing. The breadth of this provision was given further force by the Scottish document *Education for Citizenship* (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2002) which emphasises that citizenship must be implemented in practice, within schools, as well as being taught in lessons. Citizenship continues to be central to the Scottish curriculum, with ‘responsible citizenship’ being one of the core values of the developing *A Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Executive, 2004).

**The Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc. Act 2000**

- Education authorities must have due regard to the views of the child or young person in decisions that significantly affect them, in regards to the child or young person’s school education. (Section 2(2))
- Education authorities must consult children and young people, on the authorities’ annual statements of improvement objectives (now incorporated into Integrated Children’s Services Plans, Scottish Executive, 2006a). (Section 5(1))
- Head teachers must state how they plan to consult pupils and seek to involve the pupils, on decisions about the everyday running of their schools. (Section 6(3))

Pupil participation in schools is one aspect of a broader trend, in the UK, of promoting children and young people’s participation in decision-making. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has been a strong impetus. Ratified by the UK Government in 1991, the UNCRC requires a child’s views to be given due weight, in all matters affecting the child, in accordance with the child’s age and maturity1. The Scottish Executive (2000) developed a Child Strategy Statement, applying to its own policy development and review, which requires consultation with children and young people to be considered. The right of children to have their views considered has been increasingly incorporated into legislation and policy, most notably in the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 but also across numerous areas from the code of practice for additional support needs, to mental health legislation, to community planning. The first Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People (SCCYP) took up post in 2004: her general function is to promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people, and she must encourage the involvement of children and young people in her own work2. Children and young people’s participation has never been a more popular policy demand.

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1 Article 12. A child is defined in the UNCRC as up to the age of 18, unless majority is obtained earlier (Article 1). For precise wording, see http://www.ohchr.org/english/law/pdf/crc.pdf (accessed 1.06.07)
2 Commissioner for Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2003, Sections 4 and 6.
Children and young people’s participation in schools can be argued for on several grounds:

- **Legal obligations**: the UNCRC and national legislation.
- **Moral obligations**: Children and young people have a right to take part in matters which concern them.
- **Consumer arguments**: Children and young people are consumers of school education, along with their parents. As there are limited opportunities to exercise choice in the education received, investment must be made to ensure the views of children and young people are represented and services built around their needs.
- **Children and young people’s own development**: Positive participation can help build their self-esteem, self-efficacy and ability to express themselves. They can develop particular skills, such as negotiation.
- **Encouraging citizenship**: It can develop children’s and young people’s commitment to their own decisions and assist them in growing up to be active citizens.
- **School ethos and achievement**: Participation in schools can lead to higher than expected academic achievement, improved pupil behaviour, and better pupil-teacher relationships (see Davies et al, 2006).

School councils are one way that many local authorities and schools are seeking to take forward children and young people’s participation and citizenship. As Alderson writes:

\[
\text{School councils are a key practical and symbolic indicator of respect for children’s rights. There are other useful methods for pupils to contribute to school policy … Yet only councils provide a formal, democratic, transparent, accountable, whole-school policy forum (Alderson, 2000, p. 124).}
\]

Scotland may have been on the legislative forefront of pupil participation, but it was soon joined by England and Wales. In England and Wales, the Education Act 2002 requires local education authorities and governing bodies of maintained schools to have regard to any guidance about ‘consultation with pupils in connection with the taking of decisions affecting them’ (Section 176(1)).

Under the Act, the government has powers to prescribe regulations for school councils by order but has not chosen to do so in England. Instead, guidance was issued in 2004 on pupil participation in schools (DfES, 2004), with particular reference to school councils. England is currently revising its guidance on pupil participation, as promised by the White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (DfES, 2005). In Wales, however, all primary, secondary and special schools must have a school council^3^.

Northern Ireland does not yet have such provisions in legislation nor guidance, although the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children & Young People is promoting this.

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^3^ School Councils (Wales) Regulations 2005
The available research findings, particularly from England, suggest that there are common trends relating to school councils and pupil participation:

- Pupils’ overwhelmingly wish to be involved in participative decision-making in their schools (see for example, Alderson, 2000, Kilkelly et al, 2004, Pedder and McIntyre, 2006). They frequently ask for respect and to be treated fairly.

- Smaller-scale and/or qualitative research often finds pupils dissatisfied with the extent of their participation. Large-scale research has contradictory findings that might be partially explained by methodology. Surveys of English secondary school pupils in 2002/03 found about 80% feeling that they were involved in making decisions on how their school was run (NOP, 2003). In contrast, Cleaver and colleagues (2005) developed a combined measure of ‘student efficacy’, and found secondary school pupils reporting only moderate levels at a mean of 42 (on a scale of 0-100, with higher scores indicating that students thought they had a say in the running of their school and how they work in their classes).

- Pupils tend to be negative about school councils that are tokenistic and lack power. A number of studies found councils were only involved in trivial matters, that little action resulted from their decisions, and that pupils received little feedback on why decisions were not acted upon (see for example, Alderson, 2000, Borland et al, 2001, Cotmore, 2003, and Wyse, 2001). In contrast, Wyness (2005) writes of his small-scale study that teachers were critical of the ‘unadventurous nature’ of a school council’s agendas, set by the pupils themselves. The teachers wished to engage the council on whole-school issues such as teacher recruitment.

- There are very positive stories about pupil participation, from both pupil and teacher perspectives. For example, see case studies submitted to Learning and Teaching Scotland4; the citizenship portrait of current practice from HMIE (HMIE, 2006) and; a view from English pupils on a school council (Lewars, 2005).

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4 http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/citizenship/sharingpractice/index.asp (accessed 1.06.07)
3. About this study

As yet, little systematic evidence exists on key questions about school councils in Scotland, and more generally on pupil participation. To this end, the SCC commissioned questions as part of a national representative sample of secondary school pupils.

Five questions on such matters were included in an Ipsos MORI Scotland survey undertaken from February-May 2007. A total of 1969 young people, aged 11-18, completed the questionnaire, distributed through schools. The SCC was able to build on data commissioned by the Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People (SCCYP). In 2005, SCCYP similarly commissioned Ipsos MORI Scotland to undertake a representative survey with 2150 young people aged 11-16, also through Scottish secondary schools. This was part of the wider 'Being Young in Scotland' survey. Certain questions were common to both surveys. In this briefing, the surveys are referred to as ‘the 2005 survey’ and ‘the 2007 survey’. When comparisons are made between 2005 and 2007 only responses from 11–16 year olds are included to ensure comparability.

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5 Data were weighted according to age, class, school year and region. Valid percentages are reported in the following results section. Only statistically significant results are reported.
4. Results

4.1 School councils are on the increase.

In the 2005 survey, over three-quarters (78%) of 11-16 year olds reported having a school council. This has increased by 6% to 84% of 11-16 year olds by 2007. Most of the remaining young people reported that they did not know if there was a council or not. Only 1% of pupils stated definitively that they did not have a school council.

Chart A: ‘From what you know, does your school have a school council?’ Comparison of 2005 and 2007 survey, for 11-16 year olds (valid %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005 Survey</th>
<th>2007 Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't Know</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Stated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When a representative survey was undertaken of secondary schools in England\(^6\), 97% had a school council (Cleaver et al, 2005). All schools in Wales should have a school council, as these were required by 1 November 2006.

It may be that there are considerably more school councils than a decade ago. Alderson and colleagues (2000) surveyed pupils (aged 7-17) in 49 schools across the UK, which included Scottish schools. Just over half (52%) of pupils said they had a school council at that time.

Only slight differences were found in the 2007 survey between pupils from Black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds\(^7\) and other pupils, with 82% of young people from BME backgrounds reporting the existence of a school council compared to 85% of other young people. This finding must be treated with caution however, due to the small number of young people from BME backgrounds included in the study.

There were also slight differences between pupils from the most deprived neighbourhoods and pupils from the least deprived neighbourhoods but, in the 2007 survey, these were not significant (see table 1).

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\(^6\) The survey also included 50 colleges, but the number of student councils given here is only for the secondary schools.

\(^7\) Young people who indicated that their ethnicity was mixed race, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, other Asian backgrounds, African or other Black backgrounds and other ethnic groups.
Table 1: Existence of school council by deprived neighbourhood status. Comparison of 2005 and 2007 survey, for 11-16 year olds (valid %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pupils in the <strong>most</strong> deprived neighbourhoods reporting existence of a school council</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupils in the <strong>least</strong> deprived neighbourhoods reporting existence of a school council</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall</strong> percentage of pupils reporting existence of a school council</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 2005 survey had found a more substantial difference in relation to deprivation, with 68% of pupils from the most deprived neighbourhoods reporting that they did have a school council compared to 86% of pupils from the least deprived neighbourhoods. With the overall growth in school councils, the gap between pupils from the least and most deprived neighbourhoods appears to be closing.

4.2 School council membership

In 2007, 8% of pupils reported that they are currently a member of a school council. Considerably more pupils (about one-third) had previously been members:

- 21% reported being members at primary school;
- 7% reported that they were formerly a member at their current school;
- 1% were formerly a member at a different secondary school.

Given that primary schools tend to have smaller school rolls than secondary schools and responding pupils had completed all their primary years, the high results are perhaps not surprising; equally, it may be that primary schools spread membership more widely across their pupil population than secondary schools. Overall, 64% of pupils reported that they had never been a member of a school council.

A number of pupils who were not currently school council members appeared to feel excluded by the way that pupils were selected:

- 21% of these pupils felt no one had asked them to be a member;
- 11% were put off by having to be elected;
- 10% reported that the teacher had not picked them;
- 6% did not know how to become a member;
- 13% had run but were not selected; and
- 1% wrote in that no one voted for them or no one would vote for them.

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8 Note that pupils could choose more than one answer and therefore responses do not add up to 100%.
9 As above.
Research undertaken by Birchall and colleagues (reported in Prout et al, 2006) suggests that the invitation to participate, by someone you know, is a key factor in motivating people to join participative groups. Thus, the findings that one in five pupils felt no one had asked them to be a member has potential practical implications for exclusion although it would be impractical and perhaps counter-productive for all pupils to be invited to participate in selection processes if most school councils have restricted numbers.

Other reasons given by pupils for not being involved in the council relate to disenchantment about the council itself:

- 30% thought the school council was boring;
- 12% thought it was not cool;
- 18% felt that the school council did not have enough power to make a difference; and
- 1% of pupils wrote in that ‘nothing much happens’ or it ‘doesn’t seem to do anything’.

For some pupils, participating was just not convenient:

- 24% felt they did not have enough time to be a school council member currently;
- 9% reported that the school council meetings clashed with other activities they did at school; and
- 3% had to catch the school bus home at the time of the school council meetings.

Wyness (2005) notes the practical and symbolic importance of when school council meetings were scheduled. If they were held during class time, pupils did miss educational input but their attendance was straightforward and they believed the school valued the school council. If meetings were held outwith class time, pupils could find it difficult to attend (for example, during short lunch breaks), pupils had to choose school council meetings over other desirable activities, and the school was not seen as valuing the council in the same way.

Questions of gender are rarely addressed within the literature on children’s participation. In 2007, boys and girls were roughly equal in their current school council membership. Girls were more likely than boys to respond that they had been members in a primary school (24% compared to 18%), which perhaps explains why boys overall were slightly more likely than girls to report never being school council members (67% compared to 61%). When those who were not current members were asked why not, there were further differences by gender:

- girls were more likely than boys to report being put off by having to be elected;
- boys were more likely than girls to report: that the school council was boring; that the school council was not cool; and that the meeting times clashed with other activities.
Membership of the council does seem to differ by stage. Experience of being a member in primary school decreased by school stage, so that S1 pupils were the most likely to state they had been a member at primary school. This could be a matter of recall or a recent rapid increase in schools councils in primary schools. For those who were not currently school council members, their reasons for not being so differed by stage. For example:

- S1 pupils were much less likely than pupils at other stages to say that they did not have enough time.
- As pupils progressed through the stages of secondary school, they were increasingly likely to report that the school council did not have enough power to make a difference.
- Pupils in S5 were more likely than other pupils to say they were put off by having to be elected while S1 and S2 pupils were more likely than others to say they had run for election but were not selected. The reasons for these differences bear further exploration: they could range from how peers perceive election success or failure, to younger pupils’ greater experience of being school council members.
- S3 and S4 pupils were most likely to say that the school council was boring or not cool. With most pupils able to leave school after S4, there may be a correlation between general attachment to school and feelings about school councils. S4 is also the time when non-attendance peaks in Scottish schooling, while school exclusions peak at S3 (see Scottish Executive, 2006b and Scottish Executive, 2007).

The survey did not ask why current members had decided to join their school council. This would be worth exploring with a large enough sample of current members to have significant findings.

4.3 Effectiveness of school councils

A significant proportion of pupils seemed disappointed with how their school council actually worked. As noted above, nearly one in five pupils (who were not school council members) thought the school council did not have enough power to make a difference. Pupils who knew they had a school council were asked whether they agreed with a number of statements, which sought to draw out aspects of school council effectiveness (see table 2).
Table 2: Overall level of agreement/disagreement with statements on the effectiveness of school councils. 2007 survey for 11-18 year olds (valid %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree/Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree or Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Don’t know/No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The council has given me a say on how my school is run</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The council has improved things at my school</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what the school council talks about</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know who the school council member is for my class, year or house</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think school councils are a good way of listening to pupils</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, well under a third of secondary school pupils agreed or strongly agreed with the first three statements.

The proportion of young people agreeing that the school council has given them a say on how their school is run has decreased over the past two years (see chart B\textsuperscript{10}). In 2005, one-third of 11–16 year olds (33%) disagreed, while one in four pupils agreed. By 2007, the number of 11–16 year olds who agreed fell to 21% and the number disagreeing rose to 39%.

Chart B: ‘The council has given me a say on how my school is run’
Comparison of 2005 and 2007 survey, for 11-16 year olds (valid %)

Note that Chart B uses only data from 11–16 year olds to allow comparison between the two surveys. There are very slight differences therefore between the figures quoted for 2007 in Table 2 and those used to generate Chart B. The figures for 2007 aggregate strongly agree/agree and strongly disagree/disagree to allow for comparison with the 2005 survey which did not collect this additional data.
In 2007, 28% of pupils disagreed or strongly disagreed that ‘the council has improved things at my school’, while a similar proportion of pupils agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

In 2007, certain groups of pupils appeared much more disappointed with their school councils than others. For example, S6 pupils were nearly twice as likely as S1 pupils to disagree or strongly disagree that ‘the council has given me a say on how my school is run’ and ‘the council has improved things at my school’. Agreement broadly followed the same pattern, but less dramatically. Disappointment tended to increase for pupils at later stages, with S5 pupils the least likely to agree or strongly agree with these two statements.

In the UK literature, great concern has been expressed about the lack of power of many school councils (see for example: Allan and l’Anson, 2003; Borland et al, 2001; Cotmore, 2003; Wyse, 2001). Alderson and colleagues’ research concludes that, if pupils see the school council as tokenistic, having a council has as much or more negative impact on pupil disaffection than having no council at all (Alderson, 2000).

As forms of participative governance, school councils are expected to have some relationship with the wider student body and indeed good practice advice recommends this (Health Promoting Schools, 2007). In the 2007 survey, over half of pupils (52%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘I know who my school council representative is’ – though just under a quarter (22%) pupils wrote they disagreed or strongly disagreed and a further 13% wrote they did not know. Feedback from the school council to non-members did not appear to be common: only 20% of pupils agreed or strongly agreed that ‘I know what the school council talks about’ while 47% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

While there appears to be a level of discontent about the school councils’ ability to affect change, pupils in the 2007 survey seemed hopeful about school councils’ potential. Just under half of pupils (44%) either agreed or strongly agreed that ‘I think school councils are a good way of listening to pupils’, while only 18% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Girls were more positive than boys, and pupils in S1 were more positive than older pupils.

4.4 Participative schools

Democratic professionalism is advocated by many in the educational literature11, where teachers see themselves as collaborators with pupils as well as with parents and other work colleagues. Democratic professionals are less hierarchical, respecting and incorporating others’ views in their own ways of working. The 2007 survey suggests that some pupils felt they were experiencing such an approach in their schools, but they were still in a minority.

Young people were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with three statements about participation in schools (see table 3).

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11 Various terminology is used, such as ‘new professional’, ‘activist professional’ and ‘democratic professional’, but their characteristics are similar. For example, see Colley et al, (2007); and Sachs, (2000).
A large minority of pupils (41%) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement ‘I would find it easy to talk to teachers if there were things I didn’t like about the way the school was run’.

For 11-16 year olds, such agreement was slightly lower (40%) but still considerably higher than the results from the 2005 survey, where 24% of the pupils agreed (see Chart C). But disagreement was more similar over the last two years: 18% in 2005 disagreed, compared to 24% in 2007.

### Chart C: ‘I would find it easy to talk to teachers if there were things I didn’t like about the way the school was run’ Comparison of 2005 and 2007 survey, for 11-16 year olds (valid %)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree/ Agree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree/ Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Don’t Know/ No response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would find it easy to talk to teachers if there were things I didn’t like about the way the school was run</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can think of at least one important thing that has changed in our school because pupils asked for it to happen</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school regularly asks for my views about school issues</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12 Charts C and D only include data from 11–16 year olds. Percentages differ very slightly if only 11–16 year olds are included from the 2007 survey. In Charts C and D the figures for 2007 aggregate strongly agree/agree and strongly disagree/disagree to allow for comparison with the 2005 survey which did not collect this additional data.
As Table 3 shows, the proportion of pupils who thought pupils’ views changed things in their school is smaller than the number who would talk to teachers about how the school is run. Thirty-one per cent of pupils agreed or strongly agreed that ‘I can think of at least one important thing that has changed in our school because pupils asked for it to happen’, while 32% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

In comparing the 2007 and 2005 surveys (see chart D), it seems that pupils responding in 2007 had stronger views – either positive or negative – than pupils responding two years earlier. In 2005, 24% of pupils agreed with the statement above compared to 30% of 11-16 year olds in 2007. Similarly, 22% of pupils disagreed with the statement compared to 32% of 11-16 year olds in 2007.

**Chart D: ‘I can think of at least one important thing that has changed in our school because pupils asked for it to happen’**

Comparison of 2005 and 2007 survey, for 11-16 year olds (valid %)

Notably, a greater proportion of pupils responded to this question in 2007, rather than ticking ‘don’t know’ or not filling in the question.

A new statement was included in the 2007 survey, to gain further information about pupils’ views on participative processes: ‘the school regularly asks for my views about school issues’. Over half of pupils (54%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Only 13% of pupils agreed or strongly agreed, while 22% neither agreed nor disagreed. It would appear that most pupils did not think they were regularly consulted.

Consideration was given to whether pupils who reported never being a school council member were more or less likely to evaluate school councils negatively, compared to pupils who had previously been school council members. Substantial, significant differences were not found between the two groups of pupils suggesting that previous experience of school councils did not impact on pupils’ appraisal of the current school council.
Pupils’ responses do seem to differ by stage of schooling. For example, older pupils were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree that ‘I can think of one important thing that has changed in my school, due to pupils asking for it to happen’ (27% of S1 pupils compared to 41% of S6 pupils), although the differences were less substantial when agreement was considered. Pupils in S4 were the least likely to agree or strongly agree that ‘the school regularly asks for my views about school issues’, at 9% compared to a high in S1 of 18%.
5. Conclusion

The last time the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child evaluated UK’s progress, in 2002, it stated its concern ‘that in education, schoolchildren are not systematically consulted in matters that affect them’ (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2002). How far have Scottish schools progressed since then?

The survey information here shows that school councils are on the increase, with 84% of 11-16 year olds reporting they had a school council in 2007, compared to 78% in 2005.

Most school councils are restricted forms of participation, based on some form of selection (teacher, pupil election or some combination). The survey found 8% of pupils were currently members of their school council. But one-third of pupils reported having being a member at some time during their schooling, so that school councils as a participative form do reach a large minority of the pupil population.

When current school council membership is considered, girls were roughly equally involved as boys. Various perspectives on school councils seemed to exclude or ‘turn off’ particular groups from being members. When giving reasons why they were not currently school council members:

- boys were more likely than girls to say councils were boring or clashed with other activities while girls were more likely to be put off by the election process;
- older pupils were more likely to say they were put off by the election process than younger pupils.

The survey did not collect information on respondents’ disability or additional support needs; given the potential exclusion of pupils with such characteristics, this bears further exploration. Pupils from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds were included in the survey. However, less than 5% of responses were from young people from BME backgrounds and thus strong claims are problematic from this survey. A more focused study could evaluate how and to what extent participative forms do include pupils from such backgrounds.

If councils do not include all pupils, then their connections to the wider student body are important. About half of pupils, who were not already on the school council, reported they knew who their current school council representative was, but only 20% of pupils felt they knew what the school council talked about. The feedback loops, for any representative claims of school councils, may need to be strengthened.

Concerns have been expressed in earlier research that school councils do not always deliver the positive participative experiences nor impacts that might be hoped for. The survey findings here show similar concerns about impact. Most pupils did not think their school council has given them a say on how their school was run nor did they feel that their school council improved things in their school. But far more pupils felt hopeful: nearly half of pupils thought school councils were a good way of listening to them.
Particular groups seem to feel that their schools, and their school councils if they have them, are more participative than others. S1 pupils are typically more positive about school participation than older pupils, in some questions older pupils, seem particularly disenchanted. Overall, girls were considerably more likely to approve of school councils as a way to listen to pupils, than boys.

Are we expecting too much from school councils? Virtually all representative, formal democratic forums for representation are attracting a lower proportion of engagement and support amongst adults, and particularly amongst young people (see Barnes et al, 2007, O’Toole and Gale, 2008). The Scottish results, though, point to the potential of school councils: at least one-third of pupils gained experience of being a council member, at some time in their school career and a large minority of pupils themselves saw school councils as a good way of listening to pupils. This suggests that improvements in school councils, particularly in terms of impact, are worth investment.

In 2007 pupils appeared to have clearer views about participation than in 2005. More pupils reported being positive about their ability to affect change and ease in talking to a teacher in 2007 than they did in 2005 – but a greater proportion of pupils are negative too. The difference comes in the reduction of pupils who reported that they do not know how they feel about these participation mechanisms. This means that despite an increase in the positive responses regarding the effectiveness of pupil participation mechanisms, they still accounted for a minority of all pupils. For example, only 13% of pupils thought that their school regularly asks for their views about school issues. Of course, it is possible that school staff are consulting with pupils, but pupils may not recall or remember it as such. Given the legal duties in the Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc. Act 2000 and the current curriculum emphasis on citizenship, rights and responsibilities, the finding shows a mismatch between pupils’ perceptions and the policy requirements.
6. Ways forward

If the objective is to increase pupil participation in schools, one option is to make school councils mandatory. However, the results here suggest caution. Most secondary school pupils reported the existence of councils in their schools, but a large proportion of pupils did not seem to think they were effective, by such criteria as having an impact or liaising with the wider student body. Councils may include particular pupils, but they may exclude others.

The finding from Alderson’s previous research is salutary: to have a tokenistic school council is worse than having none at all (Alderson et al, 2000). But the support that pupils gave in principle to school councils was positive – effective pupil councils may indeed be a good way forward for pupil participation. This survey only involved secondary school pupils; it is possible that there is much to learn from primary or special schools on participation mechanisms.

Not all school council structures are the same: a very small school may include all students in participation activities, rather than following a representative model; some schools may have one school council whereas others have councils for each year. Some councils may be set in schools that have a wealth of other means to involve pupils, while other schools may have councils as their sole participative mechanism. The survey did not capture such diversity. It may be that different structures and combinations are more effective – including more positive evaluations from pupils – than others. This could be the subject of further evaluation.

Overwhelmingly, available evidence shows that pupils do want to have their views considered in school decision-making. The evidence also shows that pupils can become disaffected if they feel they have been treated unfairly or with disrespect, or participative activities have been tokenistic, exclusive, or failed to have an impact. There appear to be pockets of good experiences for pupils – but far more needs to be done to ensure these are the experiences for all.

**Recommendation 1**

The Scottish Consumer Council recommends that the Scottish Government set up a working group to develop guidance on pupil participation to ensure consistent standards across Scottish schools.

Training and support for school council members may well assist council effectiveness, including members’ skills in representing other pupils and feeding back to their class or year group. Training and support may also assist school staff who support school councils, and school staff more generally (for example, to help good feedback mechanisms between school council members and other pupils). Indeed some schools are already providing training for pupils and teachers and we would hope to see this practice extended across Scotland.
Recommendation 2
Schools and education authorities should consider providing training to pupil council members and school staff to improve pupil participation.

Recommendation 3
The Scottish Government should ensure that initial teacher training and Continuous Professional Development includes training on pupil participation mechanisms.

Accumulation of good practice is potentially very helpful – particularly to encourage others to invest in pupil participation. Good practice can inspire pupils and staff through the chance to learn from real life examples, to see the benefits of participation generally and school councils in particular. Similarly, regular research could gather information on pupil experiences across Scotland. For example, the Scottish Government could commission regular representative surveys, through schools, with questions that regularly track pupils' perspectives on participation in their schools.

Recommendation 4
The Scottish Consumer Council recommends that the Scottish Government gathers regular research information on pupil experiences of participation mechanisms and shares good practice to help schools meet their legal requirements of giving due regard to children and young people’s views.
7. Resources and References

Resources

Extensive resources are now available, from a range of organisations, on children’s participation generally and school councils specifically. A selection on school councils are:

- The Scottish Commissioner for Children and Young People has a participation portal which brings together a wide range of information and resources on participation for those working with children and young people: http://www.sccyp.org.uk/
- Health Promoting Schools: http://www.healthpromotingschools.co.uk/youngpeople/factfiles/pupilcouncils.asp
- Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children & Young People: http://www.niccy.org/
- School Councils Wales: http://www.schoolcouncilswales.org.uk/
- School Councils UK: http://www.schoolcouncils.org/

References


Scottish Executive (2006a) Quality Improvement Framework for Integrated Services for Children and Young People http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/04/27135008/0 (accessed 1.06.07)


Appendix: Questions on 2007 survey

**Q1. From what you know, does your school have a School Council?**
Please tick one box only.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>☐ (GO TO Q2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>☐ (GO TO Q5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>☐ (GO TO Q5)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Q2. Have you ever been a member of a school council?**
You can tick more than one box.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I am currently a member</td>
<td>☐ (GO TO Q4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I used to be a member at this school</td>
<td>☐ (GO TO Q3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I used to be a member at a different secondary school</td>
<td>☐ (GO TO Q3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I used to be a member at my primary school</td>
<td>☐ (GO TO Q3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, I have never been a member</td>
<td>☐ (GO TO Q3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t Know</td>
<td>☐ (GO TO Q3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Q3. If you are not currently a member of a school council can you tell us why?**
You can tick more than one box

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I don’t know how you become a member</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one has asked me to be a member</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher didn’t pick me</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I ran for election but wasn’t selected</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having to be elected put me off</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The School Council is boring</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The School Council isn’t cool</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>I don’t have enough time</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>The meeting times clash with other activities I do at school</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The School Council meets after school and I have to get the school bus home</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The School Council doesn’t have enough power to make a difference</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please write in)</td>
<td>☐</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Q4. Thinking about your current school only, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
Please tick one box only on each line.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The school council has given me a say on how my school is run</td>
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<tr>
<td>The school council has improved things in my school</td>
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<tr>
<td>I know what the school council talks about</td>
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<tr>
<td>I think school councils are a good way of listening to pupils</td>
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<tr>
<td>I know who the school council member is for my class, year or house?</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Q5. Thinking about your current school only, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?  
Please tick one box only on each line.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I would find it easy to talk to teachers if there were things I didn’t like about the way the school was run</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can think of at least one important thing that has changed in our school because pupils asked for it to happen</td>
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<td></td>
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