Participation in School Processes and Practices: The case of an Arab School in Israel

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Abstract: School leadership can play an important role in leading change in the traditional patriarchal hierarchical cultures of developing societies. One way in which the leadership can introduce greater democracy is by increasing staff and students' participation in school decision-making. This subject has not been widely studied in developing societies and very little research has related to staff/student participation in Arab schools in Israel. The present pilot case-study in an Arab senior high school aimed to clarify the extent and quality of teachers' and students' participation in educational and administrative school processes and practices. A qualitative methodology employed interviews with two teachers and three students, focusing on their experiences, concerns and aspirations. The findings revealed that both teachers and students were aware of the concept of participation in school decision-making and in their school's daily life. However, and despite this awareness, not all the participants have the opportunity to practice this involvement due to different obstacles such as time constraints, curriculum demands and the apparent inability or unwillingness of school leadership to facilitate collaboration between teachers and students and their involvement in decision-making. It is concluded that there is a need for empathetic educators'-students' dialogue, a need to listen to the voice of the younger generation, and to address the challenge of Arab society's norms in order to promote more egalitarian and democratic perceptions and practices.

Keywords: social justice, equity, participation, model of empowerment, optimise well-being and learning

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Introduction

Copious studies have investigated the practice of equity and democratic participation in institutional processes and practices (Francis, 2010; Lindsey et al., 2011; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Smith, 2012); this is complemented by increasing research on the practice of social justice in education in developing societies (Oplatka & Arar, 2015; Chapman & West-Burnham, 2010).

Lumby (2008) indicates that educational leadership can play a major role in establishing staff and student participation and pedagogic transformation in educational institutions, and 'successful implementation of these processes is inextricably linked to students' growth and teachers' teaching' (p.8). Leaders who promote such participation value diversity, engage in school and cross-cultural communication, model inclusive practices, and engage in critical reflection (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011; Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken, 2012).

Student participation in school processes may be expressed at different levels: at the level of the classroom, they may be involved in shaping curricula and issues relating to contents and methods of learning, outside the classroom they may be involved in school procedures including both decision-making and implementation. Successful participation constitutes education for contemporary citizenship, assisting students' integration and participation in the formation of their society and culture in the future (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000) and preparing them for active participation in labour markets, and in their communities, nation state and global markets (Lumby, 2008; Taysum, 2013). Increasing student participation is therefore an essential role for schools in any modern society and the education system arguably needs to be supported and adapted to fulfill this role at five different levels: beginning with the state level where resources and policies must be provided, towards the district level that mediates between the local government and the state, through local government to school leadership and then at the school level where leadership focuses and processes policy, and finally at the classroom level where teachers' personal beliefs and professional identities, and classroom practices need to be attuned to participatory student learning and participation in decision-making (Kozleski et al., 2012), a process that takes on different tones in each nation state (Taysum, 2013).

Although education policy may promote public good and is largely associated with the implementation of human rights (Kozleski et al., 2012), the degree of implementation of the principle of participation in determining education policy, differs from society to society. Each nation state has its own values and beliefs relating to participation that are rooted in their

complex histories, economic structures, cultures, religions, and philosophies. In some nations, student participation in school processes and practices evolved from the children's rights' movement (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

Research has focused on opportunities teachers and students have for participation in their educational institutions' processes and practices (Taysum, 2013). From these studies it appears that in practice 'students don't have much to say about the curriculum, as knowledge is selected and organized into subjects and fields far from their participation' (Young, 1999, p. 463). Additionally, research has discussed different forms of teaching and learning that students find challenging or limiting, and 'how different regimes and relationships shape students' sense of status as individual learners and as members of the community' (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000, p. 76). Yet there has been little study of the different ways in which particular societies enable participation within their schools.

The present pilot case-study of an Arab senior high school in Israel aimed to add to this corpus of knowledge by clarifying perceptions of teachers, students and educational leaders regarding the extent and quality of their participation in school processes and practices including decision-making. More specifically the research attempted to respond to three research questions: (1) What cultural practices and leadership systems promote or hinder the participation of different stake-holders in decision making in the institution? (2) How do teachers and students perceive the extent and quality of their participation in school decision-making and their engagement in different participatory processes? What might promote or hinder their participation (3) Which institutional characteristics are perceived as valuable by the stake-holders?

Equity and participation in education

In recent years, education research has become increasingly interested in the practice of equity and social justice in schools, reflecting the aspiration that 'all children can learn' that underlies so many schools' mission and vision statements (Lindsey et al., 2011, p. 25). Yet, the use of the concepts of equity and social justice seems to be largely rhetorical and it is difficult to see their implementation in schools' policies and practices (Blankstein & Houston, 2011).

In a global climate that respects market trends and consumer viewpoints it is strange that school students have not been seen as consumers worth consulting (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Nevertheless, demands for further school improvement have provided the most striking opportunity for teachers, researchers and policy makers to work on a common agenda

of inclusion and it is in this context that the issue of students' and teachers' participation is being most obviously addressed at two levels; the classroom level, and in building curriculum in school decision-making at the school level (Ibid).

The report to the Equalities Review published in 2007 (University of London, 2009, p. 6) told us a great deal about fairness and equity, defining an equal society as one that: "protects and promotes equal, real freedom and substantive opportunity to live in the ways people value and would choose, so that everyone can flourish. An equal society recognizes people's different needs, situations and goals and removes the barriers that limit what people can do and can be."

Equity apparently also includes the right to be different. While equity is a difficult term to define and measure, it can mean different things to different people. Equity might be fairness in treating everyone equally (equality of opportunity), or might be treating people differently so that certain outcomes can become more equal, and therefore, more fair (equality of outcome) (Smith, 2012, p. 3).

In the context of education, Wade (2007, pp. 1-2) argued that: "starting in the kindergarten we must educate youth to care about humanity and to begin to understand the immensity of the challenges that will face them as adults. We must embark upon teaching them the skills and knowledge that will ultimately enable them not only to live productive and empowered lives but also to work alongside like-minded others for the betterment of those who suffer from oppression and other inequalities."

In her review of the literature on social justice, North (2008) analyzed the tensions and contradictions that arise between competing models of social justice, especially 'recognition', 'redistribution' and 'participation'. She indicates that cultural groups compete for respect and dignity in order to gain 'recognition', while underprivileged socioeconomic classes vie for equitable sharing of wealth and power by 'redistribution'. As in the larger society, both these processes are played out in schools. If recognition and redistribution are attained, schools can become sites of participation for justice and inclusion, underpinned by an ethic of care in which students see and experience new ways of interacting with their peers and increasingly broader communities (Sapon-Shevin, 2011; Noddings, 1994). To implement such a vision, school leadership needs to actively promote social justice. For this reason this paper is important for the readership of IJSE.

In this context, Nieto (1994, p. 395) pointed out that students' perspectives have, for the most part, been missing 'in discussion and the next step is to build more opportunities for student participation and student voice into the fabric of the school's structure'; she stressed the need to build a climate in which both teachers and students feel comfortable work-

ing together on a constructive review of aspects of teaching, learning and schooling as a democratic practice.

Recent moves towards greater student participation in school decision-making have in part been based on instrumental rationales, such as effects on increases in test scores and improvements in behaviour (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011). However, a more radical view of reform stems from a key text of the New Left in North America and the UK, a paper on prefigurative practice by Boggs (1977/78). He relates to this practice as "the embodiment within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (Boggs, 1977/78, p. 100). In Brazil, in a context of distrust of formal politics and educational institutions, McCowan (2010) employed this strategy in schools, creating prefigurative enactment of democratic processes in order to build forms of citizenship within the school. Using this strategy, school activities are shaped to act as models for possible future modes of existence, including the use of assemblies and other democratic processes of decision-making. McCowan was able to enhance the democratic culture of the schools and improve the teacher-student relationship by envisaging the model of society that they wanted to build and embodying the principles of participatory democracy and horizontal relations in the school's process. 'However, a number of problematic issues were also raised, including the difficulties in extending participation to the whole student body, and the tensions with teachers when students began to exert greater influence in school' (McCowan, 2010, p. 21).

Tackling the issue of 21st century skills, Facer writes about 'the future-building schools' as 'a school that recognizes its role as a prefigurative space for building socio-technical futures. In other words, it sees itself as a place in which young people, teachers and the wider community can come together to understand how to live well and wisely with our emergent technological capabilities' (2011, p.127; emphasis added).

The school profile

'Ibin Khaldoun' school (fictitious name) is a state senior-high school, established ten years ago and serves approximately 500 students. It is positioned in a relatively large rural village, with a population of less than 10,000. Young people (0 -18 years) constitute 56.5% of the village population, which exceeds the national proportion of young people in the Arab population (47% 0-18 years). Students mainly belong to low socio-economic strata, the average monthly wage per household being New Israeli Shekel (NSI) 3,950 ($987) compared with a national average Arab wage of NIS 4,700 ($1,174) while the national average Jewish wage is almost twice this

sum. There is a low proportion of self-employed parents (12%) in comparison to their proportion in the general Arab population (18%) (Khamaise, 2012).

Girls constitute 65% of the students, since many of the village's boys are defined as weak achievers and streamed to vocational high schools at the end of Grade 9 (junior high). The school includes theoretical, theoretical-technological and humanistic theoretical streams and remedial classes[1]. The proportion of girls in science and technology classes (including chemistry, physics and biology, software engineering and communications) (61%) resembles their overall percentage in the school. The school is considered a medium size school, 40 teachers are employed, 57% females and 43 % males. All teachers have academic qualifications. A large proportion of the teachers (46%) hold a second academic degree. In 2010, 56%, of students were eligible for a matriculation certificate (for girls – 68.3%), this success rate is 18 % higher than the average success rate for Arab schools in Israel (Khamaise, 2012).

Research ethics

To address the issue of role conflict and to comply with ethical guidelines, from the study's inception, I described the research goal and methodology to the school principal, and obtained his permission to interview staff and students and to record the research process, promising to maintain the anonymity of the school and its staff and students (Creswell, 2003). Once permission was attained, teachers and students were invited to participate, gave their informed consent and parents were asked to provide written consent for the participation of students who were below the age of consent. All participants and parents were given full explanations concerning the purpose and conduct of the research.

Methodology

In order to clarify the extent of teachers' and students' participation in school processes and practices I adopted an inductive approach (Creswell, 2003; Sharan, 1998). Qualitative methodology was employed in the first stage of the research, using a semi-structured interview to elicit data from both teachers and students.

After the consent of the principal was obtained, five thorough in-depth interviews were conducted with three students (one female and two male

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[1] Theoretical technological stream: software engineering, communications and cinema, business management; Theoretical scientific stream: chemistry, biology, physics. Humanistic stream: history, sociology, geography; Remedial studies for students with special needs.

students in Grade 11 (age 16), and two teachers with more than 5 years teaching experience. The respondents were selected to reflect diverse attitudes within the school so that it included both interviewees who took an active part in school activities beyond the duties of their specific job and also others who were less involved in active participation unless specifically required to do so. In the case of the two interviewed teachers one was more involved in voluntary participatory activity than the other.

The interview questions related mainly to five axes: participation in decision- making at both classroom and school level, the effect of mutual relationships between teachers and students on the learning process, awareness that effective dialogue offers learning opportunities for both teachers and students, the opportunities that the school leadership provides for both sides to participate in decision-making and how school learning and teaching is connected with the outside community either now or in the future.

The data from the pilot interviews were analysed and interpreted and informed the building of pilot questionnaires for teachers and students, which were administered to 19 teachers (10 senior and 9 junior teachers) and 60 students (17 boys and 43 girls). Teachers and students were invited to talk about, and report their experiences, concerns and aspirations through the closed-ended questionnaires which included different statements that respondents graded on a 4-point scale. The questionnaires, for both groups ended with the same two open-ended questions: Would you like to become more or less involved in decision-making in your school and if so how? What do you see as most valuable in your involvement in school?

While all the respondents agreed to fill in the questionnaires, not all of them cooperated fully with the open-ended questions. 68% of the students and 63% of the teachers answered these questions fully.

Since I wanted to check that the findings from both the interviews and questionnaires were meaningful, and that our research methods were robust and of high quality (Taysum, 2013) I uploaded data from all the tools onto an Excel spreadsheet so that I could compare graphs and develop our theories of participation.

The evidence from the pilot of the questionnaires is presented here, and will be reported back to the school leadership and management team for the next and third cycle of the research, and subsequent action. Practical conclusions drawn from the findings from the questionnaire are discussed here in order to generate new knowledge about participation that may guide further study and practice.

Findings

Three main themes were identified from the findings and they are described below. In the quotations from the interviews and questionnaires, interviewees are referred to by a code number and open ended responses from questionnaire respondents by fictitious names.

Cultures, practices and leadership systems that influence participation

According to Rogoff (2003) culture, is like air is to our biological systems, it permeates our sensibilities, dispositions, analytical tools and conversational moves, and exists not merely inside individuals but in the interactive spaces that we inhibit. Cultural norms and values affect our practices and how we see and judge activities around us, but these notions are dynamic, since they are constantly being shaped and reshaped in our personal, professional and community spaces as well.

The responses to the interviews and the questionnaires pointed up the students' motivation and desire to be involved in shaping the school's daily life and to participate in decision-making whenever they have the opportunity. However, present practice, shaped largely by traditional Arab culture with its hierarchical structure does not meet their expectations to be active participants. The questionnaires revealed that only 25% of boys and 24% of girls indicated that they had enjoyed real opportunities to be involved in decision-making at school.

Figure 1 - Students' perceptions of the extent of student involvement in school decision-making
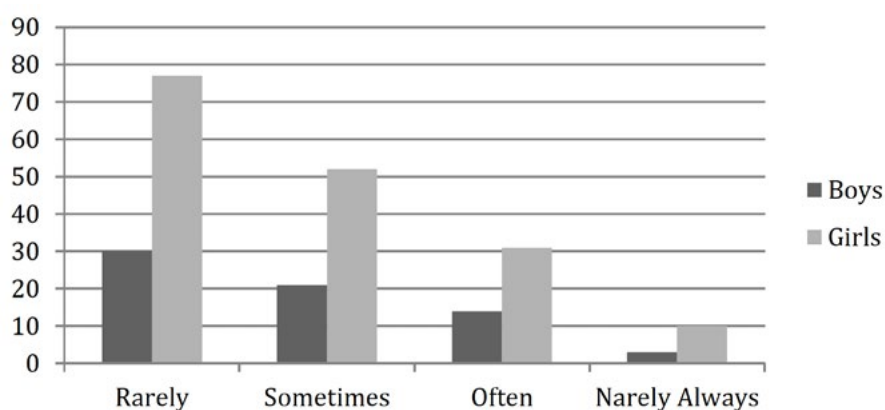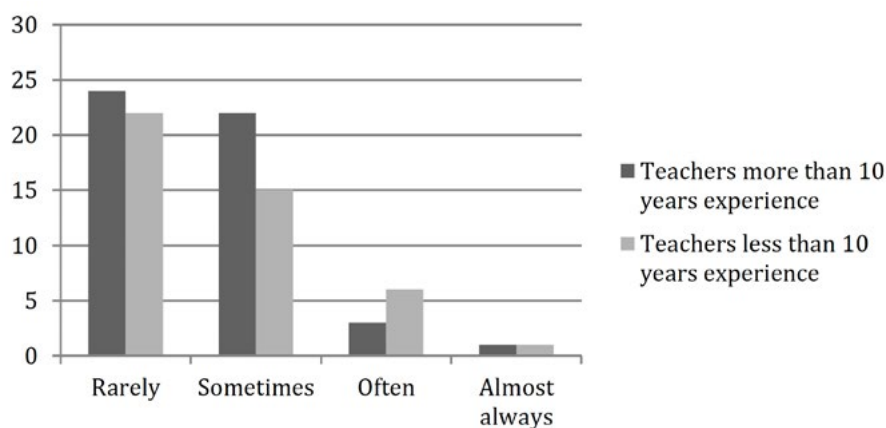
Figure 2 - Teachers' perceptions of the extent of teacher involvement in school decision-making

Most of the students expressed their desire to participate in the application of justice and equality in their school. One of the female students (N.20), when asked about her involvement in the school's daily life, explained:

> It means practicing decision-making, and learning how to become a future leader [in] my society, to reach far horizons. It means going beyond grades and Matriculation, being able to shape my personality and to bring change to my society. So, don't frustrate us; encourage us to be the generation that will bring change to this nation.

Another female student (N.37) also indicated that it was important to allow all the students to become involved:

> The school should provide all the students with opportunities to participate in decision-making and not just students from the students' council.

In his interview, a male student in Grade 12 (Ahmed), an active member of the student council explained how he saw his role:

> As a member of the students' council I'm involved in making decisions concerning different issues such as the school constitution. I see myself as a mediator who takes the students' suggestions to the responsible committee in order to discuss them and make the final decisions.

As is clear from the above-mentioned quotations, the students were aware of the responsibility that their participation in school decision-making would involve. However, they noted that not all of the students were lucky enough to have opportunities to participate in decision-making.

Teachers similarly indicated that they felt it was important to be involved in decision-making to benefit their own career and work within their school. A female junior teacher (N.8) explained how involvement in school decision-making affected the teacher's commitment to his career:

> I work with feelings of satisfaction, because I'm a partner in making decisions. This contributes positively to my dedication to my job.

However, according to the questionnaires, only 16% of junior teachers and 8% of senior teachers reported any real involvement in school decision-making and they blamed school leadership for the lack of opportunities for participation. According to one of the female teachers (N.8):

> The leadership should show its desire to provide all teachers with opportunities to make decisions [relating to the school].

Just like the students, some teachers indicated that there are individuals who are given opportunities to participate in school decision-making while others are not. A female language teacher (Mona), noted restrictions on her participation when she was asked about the ways that her participation in the 'leadership team' enabled her to become involved in school decision-making:

> My participation in decision-making is limited. It's sharing some opinions rather than making decisions. The school leadership team depends on certain people to make the decisions. I think that the administration should encourage teachers to bring more suggestions and new opinions for improvement.

Thus too, another senior female teacher (N.6), claimed that the school's regulations made it clear that decision-making is limited exclusively to a particular group within the school but that she was happy to leave decision-making to them:

> I don't consider [school] decision-making as something normal [for teachers] to do; therefore, I don't look for such opportunities, and I rely on the responsible people to do that. For me, what matters is my focus on my students.

However, a pedagogical activities coordinator (Sonia) who considers herself as an active participant in her school felt that each teacher should undergo particular processes to enable them to become active participants:

> The first process is to become a teacher with an additional professional function. Second is to become a teacher with a vision. The third process is having the authority to make decisions both in the class and the school level such as deciding in terms of grades, exams or teaching style. There is another process by which the teacher is enabled to get involved, which allows them to become a partner in the education process.

The research findings show that although the majority of the students and teachers claimed that they lacked the opportunities to become involved in school decision-making, some individuals from both groups showed serious intentions to participate in such opportunities out of their commitment and feelings of affiliation to their school, as the pedagogical activities coordinator (Sherin) explained in her interview: 'The most important value is the feeling of belonging to my school. This value motivates me to become involved even beyond my function's responsibilities'.

The evidence reveals that most of the teachers and students view participation in school decision-making as a significant right that they would like to experience; however, the question is whether to demand this right or to wait until it knocks on their doors. In other words, should the school's leadership be satisfied with the motivated teachers and students, who already participate whenever they have the opportunity, or should the school make more efforts to encourage such motivation and create more opportunities to include all teachers and students?

Teachers and students engage in different participatory processes

According to Gerstl-Pepin & Aiken (2012, p. 267) education systems are complex human activity arenas in which multiple units of analysis gel activities toward specific outcomes.

When it comes to involvement in decision-making opportunities at the classroom level, both students and teachers expressed more positive attitudes compared with their attitudes concerning participation at the school level (Kozleski et al., 2012).

Figure 3 - Students' perceptions of the extent of their participation in classroom decision-making
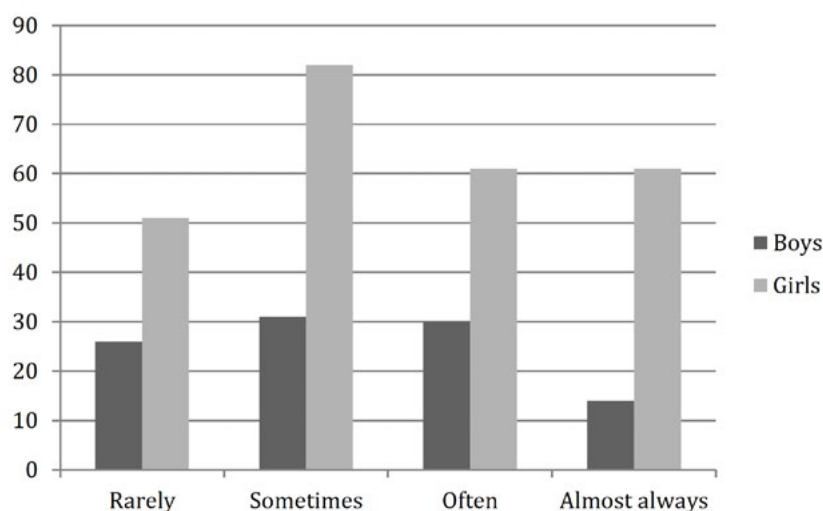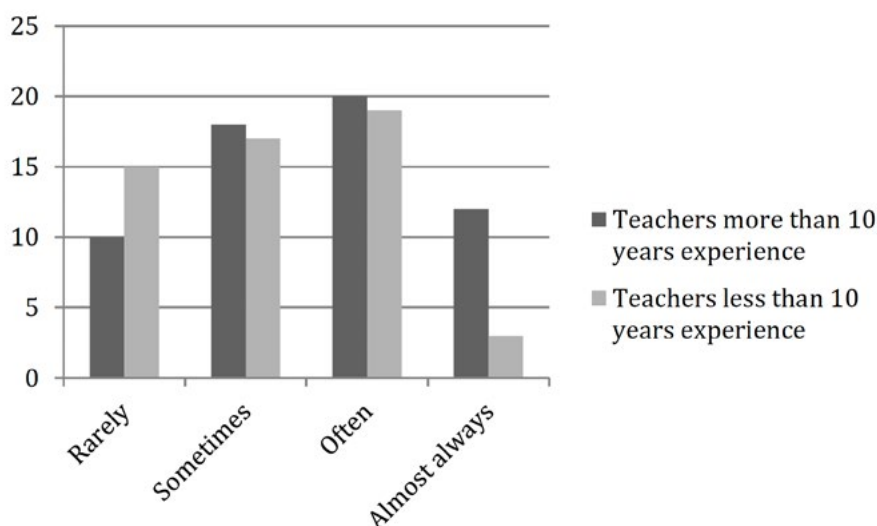
Figure 4 - Teachers' perceptions of the extent of their participation in classroom decision-making

Another issue investigated in this study is how learning and teaching is affected by the extent of involvement of both groups in society-the school. According to responses to the questionnaires, there was some disagreement between the students on this issue: Only 22% of boys and 23% of girls expressed positive attitudes when they were asked about the opportunities to become involved with their community. A male Grade 12 student (Ahmed) explained his attitude to these opportunities:

> School is a community, and students are engaged in this community. School helped me to know more about my society, encountering different students and people and becoming involved with different activities. I acquired different skills such as dealing with other students and learned to be more social. Moreover, as a member of the students' council I became more aware when it comes to complicated situations such as problems. I want to ask the following question: can schools change a passive student into an active one?

By asking this question, the student indicated that he is aware that there are many students who show little or no interest in becoming involved in school decision-making activities, and he feels this deserves further investigation.

Like the student Ahmed, 56% of senior teachers showed positive attitudes concerning the effect of involvement on learning and teaching and 98% of junior teachers indicated that students' involvement in their school has a positive impact on their learning. Junior teachers had a more positive approach

towards this involvement in comparison to the senior teachers. According to one female junior teacher (Sonia):

> I believe that being a high school teacher enables me to positively influence those of my students who are willing to become involved in their society. Therefore, I take my function as a pedagogical activities coordinator seriously. For the future, I'm thinking about a project in which we organise groups from my school and provide them with an opportunity to volunteer in elementary schools. I would like to create a generation who feels responsible for their community.

However another senior female teacher (Marwah) indicated that she had not been given opportunities to participate:

> I have never been asked to participate in or lead a project or something like that, I sit and wait for them to call me.

While it is clear that some teachers are more willing to volunteer for participatory projects, it should be remembered that many teachers have to balance home duties with school, especially when these activities take place after school hours. As one less active female teacher explained in response to an open question in the questionnaire:

> The reason that I participate less in the school social activities is that I need to run home early and look after my children's needs. They finish primary school earlier and I have no arrangement to look after them ... so I had to reduce my work to part-time.

Participation may be enhanced by ensuring that all teachers participate in supplementary activities such as playground duties, or using lunch times to support children's reading or doing maths clubs, or leading special activities for parents etc.

Like most of the teachers who felt that students' involvement in their community has a positive impact on their learning, many of the students also believed that social learning gained in participation in school decision-making has a positive impact on their own future. While 50% of the boys and 53% of the girls believe that social learning from participation in school often or nearly always provides an entry into a larger range of opportunities in terms of higher education or jobs, only 44% of the junior teachers and 43% of the senior teachers believe in such impact on their own personal and professional futures. In Finland, extensive student participation has helped to improve academic achievements to the extent that Finnish students are ranked the highest in the world Programme for Institutional Student Assessment (PISA) (Sahlberg, 2013). In Brazil, McCowan went one step further beyond the preparation of students for their own personal and professional futures and prepared them to move social and political change in their societies, by enabling them to experience just such a change in the protected space of the schools.

On the other hand, when teachers were asked whether what they learned from their participation in school decision-making could increase their opportunities for professional development and help them to attain their own future plans, 81% of the junior teachers but only 38% of the senior teachers believed that participation in school processes provided them with learning opportunities for their own professional development.

Figure 5 - Students perceptions of extent of influence of their learning from dialogue with teachers and participation in school decision-making on the promotion of their career aspirations
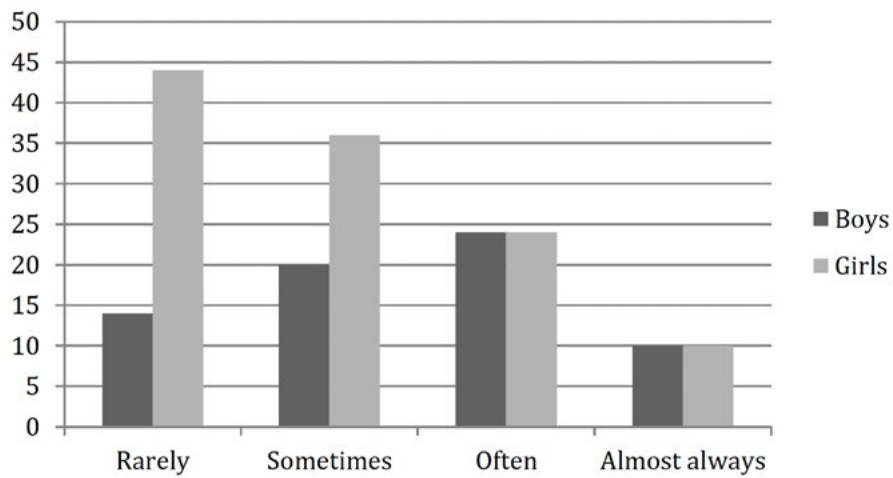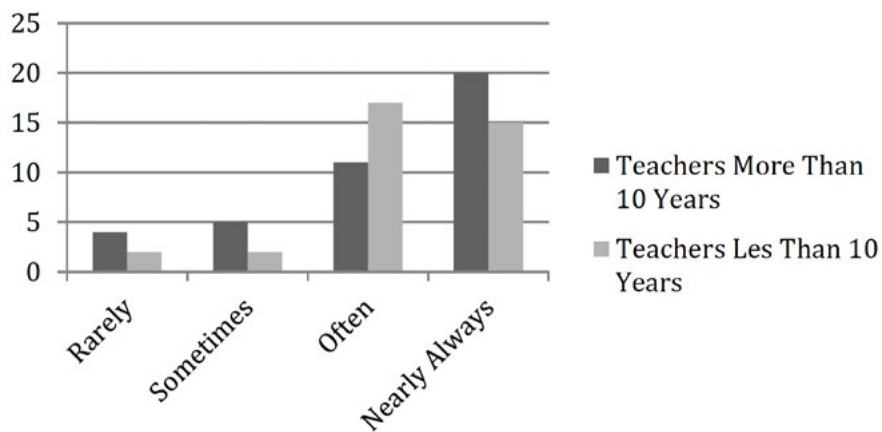

Figure 6 - Teachers perceptions of the extent of influence of learning from their dialogue with students and participation in school decision-making on their career aspirations

The findings from the questionnaires reveal that students do not perceive that dialogue in class influences their learning or influences their decision making regarding their careers. The teachers on the other hand do believe the dialogue in class influences their students' learning and their decision making on their career aspirations. This interviews agree with this position. One junior female teacher (Sonia) responded to the open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire as follows:

> When I started teaching in my school I began exploring what abilities I possess. For example, I found that I have effective leadership skills which enable me to initiate different kind of activities and projects. Every time I was assigned a particular mission, I was amazed by the skills and the abilities that I could demonstrate. I'll never forget when my principal told me 'if I keep you in the laboratory it's like keeping a lion in a cage'. Therefore, he encouraged me to start teaching and then to continue my higher education and gain a second degree. So I can say that my school provided me with the appropriate opportunities to improve and develop professionally. Thus school has empowered me and enriched my capabilities and experiences, which build my professional identity as a teacher and educational evaluator.

In comparison, a female senior language teacher (Mona), when asked about the school's contribution to her future avoids a direct response and refers instead to the contribution of other bodies:

> I participate in different professional development courses which contribute to my career as a teacher.

While the junior teacher (Sonia) considers that the school leadership is an empowering factor, the senior teacher (Mona) showed some reservation. While it appears that there is no clear consensus between teachers or between students with regard to the impact of participation in school decision-making on: i) their learning, ii) their future involvement in the community and iii) their future personal plans including career aspirations, there seems to be a significant harmonious agreement that participation in school decision-making is an empowering process that facilitates learning and teaching.

These findings are in line with the assertion of Rudduck and Flutter (2000) that school regimes, which embody values in their structures and relationships, shape students' attitudes to learning and their view of themselves as learners. "The more that the regimes are changed to reflect the values that students call for (intellectual challenges, fairness, etc.), the stronger student's commitment to learning and participation in school is likely to be" (p. 85).

Institutional characteristics: Stake-holders value trust

The school mission statement emphasizes academic excellence, a value infused educational climate and social involvement. According to the school principal the management style employed includes decentralization of authorities, and the school is run with a participatory management style (Hargreaves, 2010; Cosner, 2009).

This is expressed in the fact that each grade has a grade coordinator and counsellor, so that the school is led by 6 lead team figures (6 grade coordinators). Two significant committees participate in school management, a Teaching-Learning-Evaluation Committee headed by the Pedagogic Coordinator, and an Educational Climate Committee headed by the Community and Personal Commitment Education Coordinator. This management style allows participation in decision-making and school leadership, enabling introduction and follow-up of change and an optimal school climate.

The Evaluation Coordinator noted 'A school project awards the role-holders an opportunity for annual evaluation and introduces them to mechanisms of optimal continual improvement'.

The school principal adds 'the school conducts a discourse of empowerment for all role-holders, I sit with each one and find out what their interests are, where they envisage themselves in five years and build a program for their development together with them.

According to an educational counsellor: 'We constructed an educational project, some of the teachers contributed voluntarily providing an hour for students that chose to integrate in the program, the PE teacher provided a bicycle riding class'.

There is well-established research evidence that trust is a significant positive factor in promoting education, for instance, the presence of trust has been found to be beneficial in areas such as student achievement, the flow of communication with their teachers and leadership success (Cosner, 2009). Hargreaves (2010) highlighted the contribution of trust between peers to the sharing of good practices and learning between professionals, it has also been seen as an influence on collaborative work in the school: "trust is often identified as the sine qua non of successful collaboration and conversely mistrust is a potential barrier" (p. 109). In order to understand the elements that would improve student involvement in the school, teachers and students were asked to what extent they thought that learning was facilitated when students like, trust and respect teachers and are treated fairly. The results appear in Figures 7 and 8 below:

Figure 7 - The extent to which students consider learning is facilitated when students like, trust, and respect teachers and are treated fairly
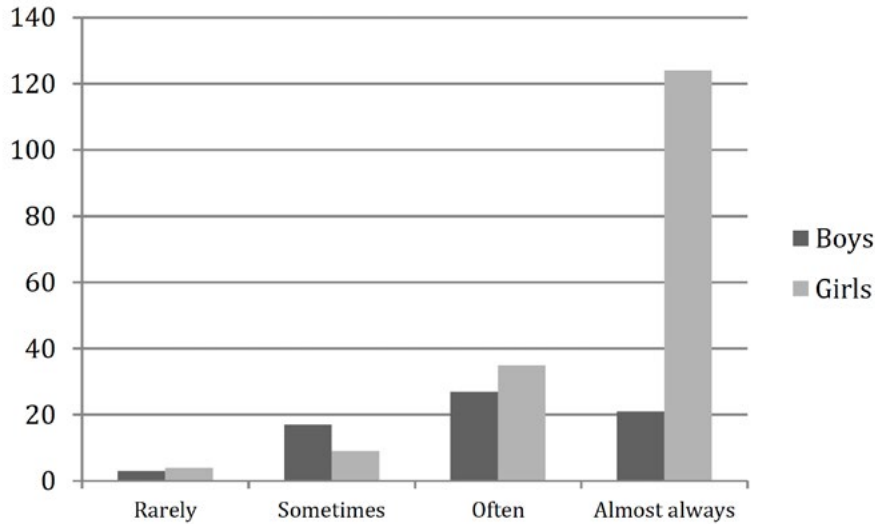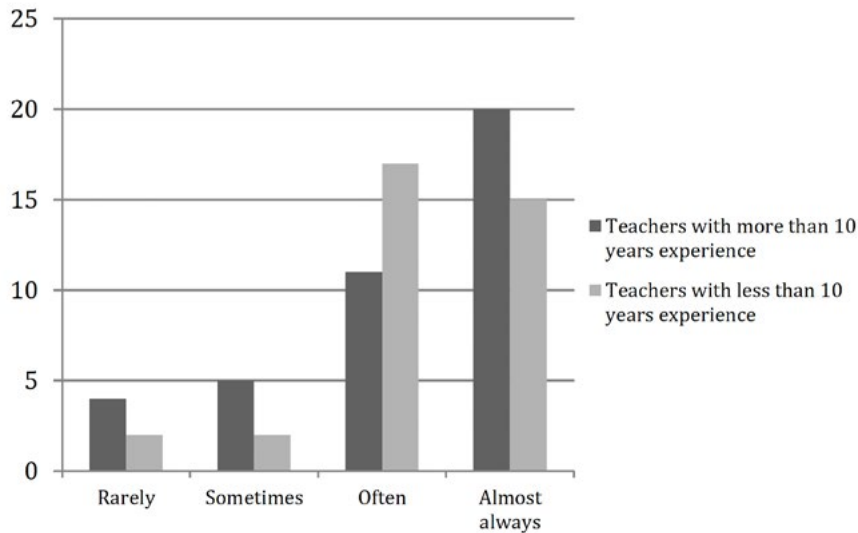

Figure 8 - The extent to which teachers consider learning is facilitated when students like, trust, and respect teachers and are treated fairly

The 97% of the junior teachers and 75% of the senior teachers believed that being trusted, respected and treated fairly, often or almost always facilitates learning. A junior female teacher (N.4) clarified this point when asked what would facilitate better teacher involvement in the school:

> There are many things; but the most important is respect, students'
> trust and my leadership's trust.

Another junior female teacher (Sonia) indicated the importance of mutual respect between teachers and students: 'The most important thing is respect and creating a positive image for the teacher. I think that the moment the students love their teacher, everything will go smoothly'.

The school counsellor explained:

> We feel it is important to base communication between students on
> trust and reciprocal assistance... the school initiated a tutoring pro-
> gram, where academically strong students assist weaker students ...
> a group of students has been regularly helping the elderly in a senior
> residential home.

A student who worked on the students' council noted, in his interview: 'The school needs to trust us and our abilities and express concern for our needs, then they will help us to be more concerned and involved.

In line with the teachers' attitudes, 85% of the boys, and 92% of the girls perceived respect, mutual trust and justice as essential pillars for their progress in their learning process. The student, Ahmad indicated that negative relations between teachers and students may even engender academic failure:

> I think that each school has its own pros and cons. My school has its
> own disadvantages such as some of the teachers: there are teachers
> who can't communicate with their students and, therefore, they can't
> convey the targeted material and this has a negative effect on the stu-
> dents. For example, there was a teacher who couldn't create positive
> relations either with me or with my classmates. As a result no one
> passed his test.

Thus too in response to the open-ended question in the questionnaire one male student indicated that the teacher's care and concern was critical: 'When I see my homeroom teacher is concerned about me and even wakes me in the morning so that I won't be late, that obliges me to take steps and be more responsible for myself and for her'. As stated, both students and teachers attribute an important role to respect, mutual trust and justice in order to improve learning and facilitate involvement and participation and they believe that school leaders should apply these three values. A male junior teacher (N10) noted that the leadership's trust and support could encourage teachers to perform in a better way:

> I need a leadership team that supports the teachers' initiatives, and
> understands the challenges that teachers face in their work

Showing awareness of the leader's role in promoting participation in the school, a female student (N2), made it clear that there should be more in-

clusion of different shareholders in leadership: 'There should be emphasis on equal participation of all the participants in my school leadership team, including teachers and students'. One homeroom teacher explained how peaceful conflict-resolution was now being employed in her class:

> Each class has a student committee that works in close cooperation with the homeroom teacher and discusses problems that arise in the class and deals with them.

Another field of agreement between teachers and students relates to the importance of understanding the individual student's unique needs to facilitate learning. Both a female Grade 11 student (Mariam) and a male Grade 12 student (Sami) explained how learning became more efficient when their teachers related to their own particular learning styles and adopted appropriate teaching techniques.

The teachers indicated that it was not always possible to provide appropriate teaching for learners with different learning styles due to different constraints, as a female junior teacher, Sonia, explained:

> The opportunities that I have are limited since we teach in classes with a minimum of thirty students. Exams give us some understanding of our students' needs. There are students who can identify their own needs and they ask for my help. For example, I teach a student who learns better when reading things on the computer screen. Therefore, I try my best to provide him with all the presentations that I prepare. Another example is a student who only understands through frontal lectures and detailed explanation. Therefore, I sit with her in small tutorial groups. In these two cases the students are aware of their needs. The question is what about the rest of the students who haven't encountered such opportunities. In addition to the previous constrictions that I mentioned, I want to add the fact that we have a very onerous number of hours that we teach in comparison to the free hours that we have. There is a lot of work and responsibilities and in many cases I don't find time to talk with my students and to form closer relations with them.

Discussion and conclusions

The study focused on an Arab senior high school in central Israel serving 500 students. It appears from the school's mission statement and the interviews with the more experienced teachers that in the main the school adopts a proactive approach to the involvement of students and teaching staff in the school decision-making process, viewing it as a source of empowerment (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). The interviewees indicated that under the present

circumstances optimal participation had been reached, and further participation would require the allocation of designated time in the curriculum.

In response to the first research question, (1) 'what cultural practices and leadership systems promote or hinder the participation of different stake-holders in decision making in the institution?', it seems that the school projects an ethos of team work with active involvement of students in the community. According to the more experienced teachers, students are encouraged to join internal and external committees to develop 'leadership skills, decision-making skills and teamwork skills' in order to build their self-confidence. Yet despite the declarations of the principal and many members of the staff, efforts to involve the students have only affected a small proportion of students and teachers. Teachers also reported practical difficulties that limited the extent of their participation in social activities despite their desire to become involved. Perhaps additional mechanisms have to be found to involve them in the running of the school, to improve trust between them and the school leadership (McCowan, 2010; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

In response to the second research question 'how do teachers and students perceive the extent and quality of their participation in school decision-making and their engagement in different participatory processes?', findings revealed that students and teachers have different perceptions of the extent to which they participate in school decision-making (Lindsey & Terrell, 2011). They also revealed that most teachers and students believed that participation in school decision-making and processes facilitates learning (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Students indicated that their experiences as participating learners both in classroom policy and practices and in school decision-making enable them to feel a stronger sense of commitment to the school and to their learning; this commitment enhances effort and the students' level of attainment as they feel that they have a stake in school and are respected enough to be consulted. This is important because learning new knowledge and skills concerning decision and policy making and implementation, equips individuals to operate flexibly within labour markets, and participate in decision-making within their communities and 'larger society'.

In response to the third question: 'Which institutional characteristics are perceived as valuable by the stake-holders?' both the interviews and the questionnaire clearly affirmed that teachers and students value relationships based on trust, respect, and being treated fairly (Taysum, 2013). This is expressed especially in attempts to involve both teachers and students in school decision-making. This is a significant finding because the present-day school agenda in Arab schools usually promotes a 'grades economy' emphasizing academic achievements (Arar & Abu-Asbe, 2013), leaving less and less time to develop interpersonal relationships and a democratic society,

which can have serious detrimental consequences for the quality of learning (Smith, 2012).

Of course it should be taken into account that although participation may lead to significant enhancement of the democratic culture of the schools and changes in the teacher-student relationship, there may be difficulties in extending participation to the whole student body, and 'there may be tensions with teachers when students began to exert greater influence in school' (Mc-Cowan, 2010, p. 21). The teachers were very aware of the difficulties involved in engaging all students to participate in the formation of school policy and know that the deeply rooted structures of schools have not changed in the last thirty years in response to society's rapid technological, sociological and ideological changes (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011). As Rudduck & Flutter (2000, p. 86) stated: "Educating students today is a far different and more complex proposition than it has been in the past"; we need to recognize the implication of these changes.

Management of the school according to a participatory model and empowerment of school role-holders, while increasing student participation can help to broaden the circle of participation in the school, as suggested by the leading staff and the school counsellor (Hargreaves, 2010). This active participation may also constitute a feedback mechanism to enhance the quality of school performances (Morales, 2011).

The next stage of the research, will involve the presentation of the above-mentioned findings to the leadership team and senior management of the school, so that they can decide on the necessary changes and lead their implementation. These changes may include: shaping learning and teaching processes, sharing decisions with teachers and students, strengthening teacher autonomy and equipping students with 21st century skills. It is important not only to teach new skills but also to lead enriched holistic learning, through involvement and participation in the school processes, preparing students for active participation in a liberal society, able to integrate within existing labour markets and enhancing democratic processes in society (Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2011; Morales, 2011).

New strategies should be developed to enhance the participation needed for the challenging work of implementing social justice schooling. Teachers and students can become powerful allies in engaging multi-facetted educational change: employing concepts from activity theory, system thinking, and complexity theory (Kozleski et al., 2012). These transformative concepts emphasize the power of knowledge to give learners a sense that they can act to influence the world and increase the relevance of school knowledge and practices to everyday problems.

In conclusion there is a need for an empathetic educators-students dialogue, a need to listen to the voice of the younger generation, and to address

the challenge of Arab society's norms in order to promote more egalitarian perceptions and practices, both inside and outside the school.

As noted by Taysum (2013) a pilot study often provokes more questions, than it provides answers, and this was the case for my pilot study. The exploratory literature review convinced us that the issue investigated i.e. the participation of teachers and students in the Arab school in Israel, is currently under-represented in extant research, and insufficiently considered in national and international policy. The research I am proposing relates to the degree of participation of stakeholders in the Arab school in Israel, which I believe could provide a key to understanding how to develop effective schools committed to improvement of learner experience, achievement and attainment in many different contexts. Further, it could prepare students to take an active part within our particular nation state's legislative participatory frameworks and within the employment market and workplace.

Three practical and social implications emerge from this pilot case-study. First, it points up the need to highlight participation in different school processes and practices in order to facilitate critical discourse on transcultural challenges and the recognition of diverse learning styles. Second, it indicates that there is a need to strengthen an interactive teacher-student network to facilitate knowledge exchange, mobilization, and dissemination activities that may offer robust, evidence-informed suggestions and solutions to improve participation, learning, and skills. These processes necessitate forward-looking and informed leadership that can construct such a network. Experience in participating in such a network may facilitate students' participation in systems of production and exchange when they leave school, and the development of character to address societal challenges, social cohesion and cultural alignment.

The findings focused on the views of the school's teachers, and students, indicating that students and teachers wanted to participate in educational processes and practices, and that they valued building relationships characterised by trust, positive regard, respect, and social justice. However, participation was not always desired or facilitated and participation in the processes and practices did or did not allow this to happen. The HEI researchers will present their findings to the school leadership/ management team as part of the second phase of the action research. The school leadership team will work together with the researchers to make sense of the research findings, and create change strategies informed by the evidence. These findings will be presented at the British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society Annual Conference (2014). The final phase of the research, the impact of the change strategies will be presented at the European Conference for Educational Research (2014).

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