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An English Case of Participation in School Processes and Practices

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An English Case of Participation in School Processes and Practices

Alison Taysum

Abstract: The purpose of this English secondary school pilot case-study is to establish if the research design addresses the questions about teachers' and students' patterns of participation in institutional processes and practices. Such participation is important because individuals can prepare for participating within labour markets, and shape culture in their communities' and 'big society'. The case study draws from a post-positivist and an interpretivist approach. The mixed methods case study included qualitative interviews with two teachers and two students that focused on their experiences, concerns and aspirations. The findings revealed that leadership systems of value enabled learning to start with students and fostered collaboration between teachers and teachers, and teachers and students' learning, assessment for learning and planning. Collaboration was underpinned by healthy relationships characterized by friendliness, trust, respect and an ethic of care, an inclusionary approach, a sense of fun, and a spirit of enquiry. Research participants stated optimal participation had been reached, and further participation would require the creation of time in the curriculum. The findings were theorized from which we developed pilot questionnaires to test the findings. The evidence from the pilot of the questionnaires is here reported. Reporting the qualitative findings is not possible because it would not be possible to maintain the confidentiality of the teachers and students.

Keywords: grassroots up, participation, assessment for personal and social learning, equity, inclusion

Introduction

Education policy is a public good associated with human rights (United Nations, 1948). Individuals in different nation states require education, yet there are issues that arise with regard to participation. Each nation state's rules that shape their values and beliefs about participation are rooted in their complex histories, economic structures, cultures, religions, and philosophies. The research focuses on opportunities teachers and students have for participation and/or consultation in their educational institutions' processes and practices (Ruddock & McIntyre, 2007). The research aims to seek the views of teachers, students and educational leaders of educational institutions to find out who is included and excluded in the engagement of institutional processes and practices. The voices heard represent diverse views and reveal patterns of participation and how these influence decision-making. The research also seeks to reveal the limits of participation and how particular groups exercise influence over decision-making. Teachers and students were invited to talk about, and report via questionnaires their experiences, concerns and aspirations. Such an approach moves beyond measuring what is easily measured to measuring what is of value (MacBeath, Frost & Pedder, 2007).

Ruddock and McIntyre (2007, p. 176) present five values that provide a conceptual framework for this research: "that are to do with openness, attentiveness to the views of others, mutual respect and support through Advocacy by institutional leaders; enabling structures and practices; a school culture that values and listens to all staff; a culture of enquiry and research among teachers; a tradition of pupil involvement in decision-making".

The nation states involved in this research have different socio-cultural histories, different ideologies that may have experienced significant paradigm shifts, and different educational policies which are carefully mapped in *The Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* (Taysum et al., 2012; 2014; 2017).

The pilot interview data was analysed and systematically theorized in a series of papers drafted by the international research team. The theorizing was then tested using a co-constructed pilot questionnaire. We present three key themes from the pilot interviews, and the theorizing of this data as a form of literature review. First, the cultures, practices and leadership systems that influence the participation of different stake-holders in decision making in the institution. Second, ways in which teachers and students engage with different participatory processes. Third, the institutional characteristics that institutional stake-holders place value in.

The methodology is then presented that includes how we took both a post-positivist and interpretivist approach, and used mixed methods with

a sample of twenty-two female and eighteen male year 9 students and 15 teachers. The team developed two questionnaires one for students and one for teachers to test our theorizing from the interview data. Issues of reliability and the ethical framework are discussed. Next the findings from the piloting of the questionnaires that focus on the three key themes are presented. The researchers acknowledge that many more meaningful and worthwhile papers could flow from this pilot study alone. At the same time more questions are emerging from the pilot study along with a desire to further refine the current instruments. A full study is recommended to address the aims of the research and the research questions that will allow further development of the theories of participation. The second stage of the research is now in your hands because I am feeding the findings back to you, the school leadership. I would like to learn from you what you think of the research, and if any innovative evidence informed strategies might develop from this second stage.

To address the aims of the research three key questions were asked. First, what cultures practices and leadership systems influence the participation of different stake-holders in decision making in the institution? Second, how do teachers and students engage with different participatory processes? Third, in which institutional characteristics do institutional stake-holders place value? The second stage now tries to address the question: What similarities and differences in processes of sense making, strategic leadership and change exist in relation to optimizing stakeholder participation and consultation, and how much is regarded as optimal and why? Your responses to this next stage of the research are crucial with regard to whether this research is meaningful and worthwhile to you.

Cultures practices and leadership systems that influence participation

The interview data from the pilot study revealed that structures existed that enabled the students and teachers in this school to systematically participate in processes and practices. These included groups of students having a timetabled process that enabled students to talk about issues that were of interest to them. Representatives of these groups took matters arising from the discussions forward to another group. Similarly the teachers had structures that enabled their participation in school decision-making.

Due to issues of anonymity and confidentiality discussed in the methodology it is not possible to say more about this here. The culture of participation and leadership structures was theorized using Bateson (2002). Bateson argues that structures within schools to facilitate building relationships is very important. Such structures help human beings to discuss a world of

meaning and make sense of it. Further such discussions enable human beings within relationships to learn how to interact socially with others and enable them to develop a sense of balance between their self-interests and the interests of others (Noddings, 2003; Kohlberg, 1981). These are important life skills to develop when working together in school, and beyond when pupils become civically engaged in society and make a cultural contribution to their community and an economic contribution within the labour market. Stenhouse (1983; 1971) affirms the value of developing participatory structures. These are important to enable individuals to work together in groups to explore sustainable ways of living in a world for them. This includes exploring their personal boundaries within legislative frameworks.

In a world with unpredictable futures, and unknown future needs of the labour market such participation is arguably vital. Participation of this kind is hallmarked by tolerance for cultural diversity and I would suggest is arguably 'cultural intelligence'. At secondary school level Hornby et al. (2003) argue that amongst other things it is important to develop: new and more mature relationships with peers of both genders, prepare for making a living or career, acquiring a set of values, ethics, or an ideology as a guide to behavior developing socially responsible behaviour' (p. 8). These might all be characteristics of 'cultural intelligence'.

Teachers and students engagement with classroom participatory processes

Evidence from the interview data revealed the teachers are committed to planning lessons based on formative assessment. The students are part of this assessment, planning, evaluation and reflection on what they have learned and how they have learned it. This can be theorized using Ruddock and McIntyre (2007, p. 68) who state: "Young people like being together much of the time. They take pleasure, confidence and security from being a member of a peer group and from interacting with one another. In classrooms therefore they value collaboration, in whole-class discussion, in groups or in pairs".

This is further developed with teachers and students identifying from the interview data that students' curriculum enables them to connect what they are learning with their hopes for the future in terms of joining the labour market, and developing their cultural engagement with 'big society'. It is not clear if the extent to which this occurs is systematic and written into the curriculum. The space for the ways in which different career aspirations may be written into the curriculum needs further consideration. Teachers identified that the curriculum is hierarchical and set by policy. Perhaps there is space for policy writers to consider how curriculums might connect more with

students' will to believe in their future career aspirations. This is important because referring to Bourdieu's (2000) notion of cultural capital, there may be some students who have very clear ideas of the opportunities available to them because of the cultural capital they bring with them to the school. However those that have different capital may not have the same awareness of their opportunities.

Theories of participation: building relationships based on values of trust, positive regard, respect and social justice

Through a process of concrete abstraction the evidence from the pilot interviews reveals that processes and practices create opportunities for participation including pupil voice, collaboration between teachers and teachers, and teachers and students, sharing learning planning, sharing evaluation of learning, sharing assessment, and planning in light of new knowledge. The participatory institutions also fostered healthy relationships characterized by friendliness, trust, respect, treating each other fairly, a sense of fun, and a spirit of enquiry. Further, a characteristic that came through the interviews was that the students felt safe and were able to take risks in their learning and have confidence that there was a safety net for them to do so. These values engage with the values for cultural alignment including building relationships based on trust, and positive regard (Wong & Glass, 2009; MacBeath, 2009; Taysum, 2013; Stenhouse, 1983; Pring, 2007). Further participation may be connected to treating everyone fairly which connects with social justice (Taysum & Gunter, 2008). Hornby et al. (2003) argue that there are learned ways of interacting with children and adults that enable people to cope with everyday situations. These ways keep involvement on a superficial level. To survive day-by-day in school and at home such strategies are necessary. However, at the same time they are barriers to authentic participation, and the construction of an authentic identity within the classroom.

Hornby et al. (2003) provide an example of the potential dangers of shutting children down to manage the whole class. A boy was presenting very disruptive behaviour in the classroom. Instead of shouting at the student, the teacher talked with him outside the classroom for a few minutes. The boy explained he was having problems and explained these briefly. The teacher listened, and the boy felt heard, validated, and cared for. In that moment the boy felt like he mattered, and that he had been validated. Both the teacher and student went back into the classroom, and the boy was not disruptive again. This example of participation we suggest, is not advocating having counselling sessions with children randomly throughout the school that take infinite amounts of teachers' time. Rather, it is about understanding some key issues and strategies that are important for teachers in day-to-day

relationships that are underpinned by respect, trust, positive regard, treating each other fairly, human dignity, and including the right to privacy (Peters, 1966). The right to privacy for example would include education attainment.

These characteristics of positive relationships need to overtly connect the curriculum with the students' home life, and community members' working groups (Pring, 2012). Pring argues this is important because it facilitates authentic pedagogical relationships that have the potential to align core elements of students' values and identities with their learning experiences in school. These issues need to be considered in relation to thinking about respect for the self and others (Peters, 1966), the nature of the human condition, the understanding of the purpose of a lived life in balance with the self and others (Kohlberg, 1981), and what it means to individuals to lead a good life in balance with others.

Stenhouse (1983) argues that the nature of characteristics of relationships are controversial regarding values and cultural diversity, and therefore educational professionals who engage with them need to be sufficiently prepared to do so. It is also vital that candidates selected for Initial Teacher Education have appropriate dispositions and virtues for the profession (Pring, 2000). Perhaps this is equally as important as having the right disciplinary qualifications. The virtues of teachers are important because teachers have platforms, and positions of power that can influence the shaping of identities (Stenhouse, 1983). Thus it is important that teachers learn to know themselves well, and present balanced views in the classroom when facilitating dialogues, and pedagogical relationships that enable the students to learn and to get to know themselves better. Relationships of this kind are hallmarked by deep listening (Leal & Saran, 2004).

However it is frequently not until postgraduate research programmes including doctoral level study, that educational professionals get a chance to engage critically with these issues. They can then mobilise their new ways of thinking, in partnership with Universities, by facilitating Continuing Professional Development as Research Informed Specialised Educators (RISE). The RISE is amplified through communities of professional educators and administrators' networks. Doctoral and Masters study is not prolific within the education profession due to lack of time in the working day of busy professional educationalists' lived lives, and a lack of funding (Taysum, 2006). The situation is problematic because the education profession needs to engage with these issues from pre-service, early career, mid-career through to expert of a professional educator and administrator to divestiture. Supporting professional educators and administrators throughout their career informs learning and teaching that optimizes students' well-being and achievement which is required to do the students justice (Sahlberg, 2012). Further equipping educational professionals to engage with these issues will enable them

to bring professional judgements to situations where conflict exists between agendas of performativity and neo-liberal market forces, and building relationships that are student centred agendas with more inclusive approaches of 'education for all' (Masaaki, 2012; Sahlberg, 2012). The education profession requires leaders who have the knowledge skills and experience to engage with Stenhouse and Hornby et al's arguments and can develop networks and evidence informed strategies to support participation in school processes and practices.

Methodology

The post-positivist and interpretivist approach for this research uses mixed methods (Denscombe, 2007). A pilot interview was carried out with a male student and one with a female student, and one with a teacher with less than ten years experience and one with a teacher with more than ten year's teaching experience. From year nine (thirteen to fourteen year olds) twenty-two female students completed the questionnaire and eighteen male students. Fifteen teachers completed the questionnaire.

The pilot of an interview schedule with two teachers and two students was analysed and theorized. Our ethical framework presented us with problems here, because we realized that the school had provided cover for the teachers to be interviewed. This meant that Senior Leaders might be able to recognize the responses from the teachers which would mean we would not be able to guarantee confidentiality. Therefore we used the interview data to develop theories of participation to be tested with the questionnaire, but we could not represent quotations from the interview data. We learned from this and will need to plan how we can guarantee anonymity and confidentiality when a gate keeper of a school provides us access to colleagues in the school. It may be that interviews are carried out after school, and that we might use focus groups.

From the analysis the team developed a questionnaire for teachers and a questionnaire for students. The questions were essentially the same, but for the teachers we asked additional questions about their teaching, and their own learning that informed their practice.

Through the pilot process we wanted to elicit if the findings from both the interviews and questionnaires were meaningful, that our research methods were robust and of high quality (Oancea & Furlong, 2007; Levin, 2004; Pollard, 2008). However, the most important stage is in your hands, as to whether this research might inform any intervention strategies, or whether a fuller funded case study, might underpin innovative evidence informed strategies with the potential to go to scale.

Cultures practices and leadership systems that influence participation

The 22 female and 18 male year 9 students and 15 teachers were asked if they knew the roles and responsibilities available for them to get involved in decision making at school, whether they participate in decision making about things that happen in school, whether they participate as much as they want to and whether they have opportunities to contribute to decision making about problems and possibilities in school. The answers to these questions were clustered together and the findings are presented in tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 - Ways in which students get involved in decision making at school level

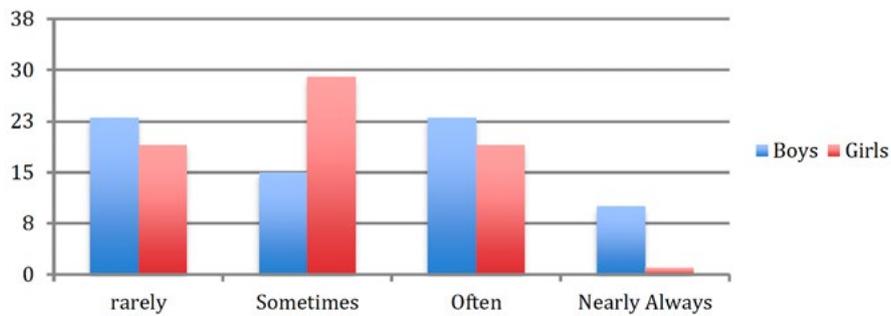
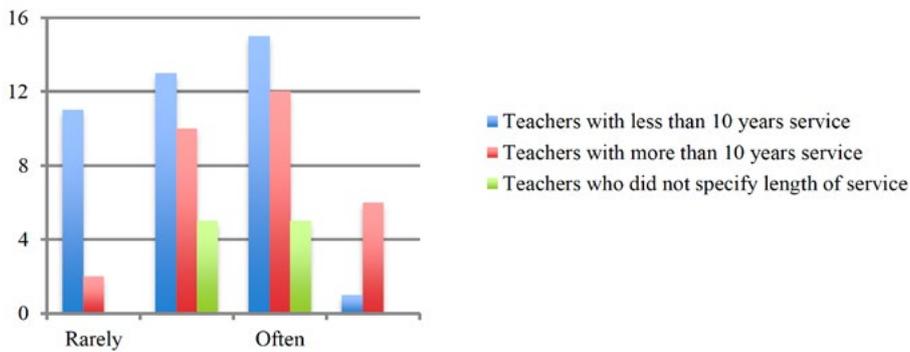


Table 2 - Ways in which teachers get involved in decision making at school level



Findings reveal students and teachers do and do not perceive that they participate in decision making at school level (Bateson, 2002). There are variations in the responses and we do not know what is causing the variations. What is clear is that a significant number of teachers and students suggest that they rarely and sometimes participate in school processes and practices.

The open ended questions provided some insights regarding how students might like to participate more:

- I would like to get more involved because I want to make a difference, maybe become someone in the year group that helps with decisions.
- I would like to help the school decide new things and what we can do to make it better for us.
- What the money is spent on and the teachers.
- I would like to have an input on where money is spent around the school and also what parts of the school are more developed. If this was my school there would be many things I would change.
- By getting asked what we think is best and what would benefit us more and better understanding and by given more choice.

The findings reveal we need to carry out the full research project to further investigate this issue, and to find out in what ways teachers and students may wish to participate more. We need to collect more data from interviews, develop our theorizing from this, and then administer the questionnaires to test the emergent theories. We will then present the findings to the School Leadership Team and document their responses to the findings, including any strategies for improvement. We will then conduct a further cycle of the research, further theorise participation in light of the improvement, and test out the theories of participation.

Teachers and students engage with different participatory processes

The 22 female and 18 male year 9 students and 15 teachers were asked if they participated at classroom level, and if they wanted to contribute more in what is learned, and how it is learned. The answers to these questions were clustered together and the findings reveal are presented in tables 3 and 4.

Table 3 - Ways in which students get involved in decision making at classroom level

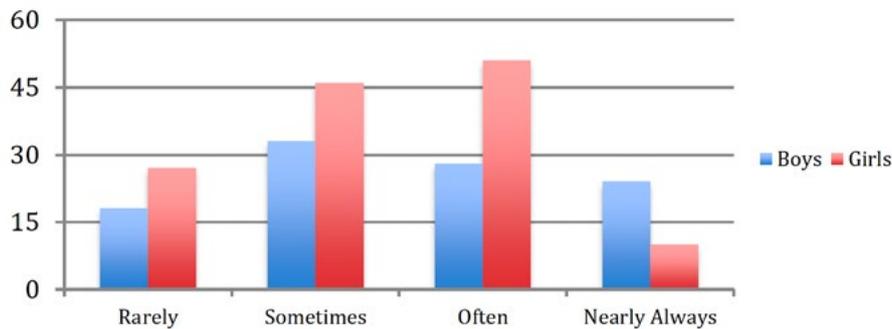
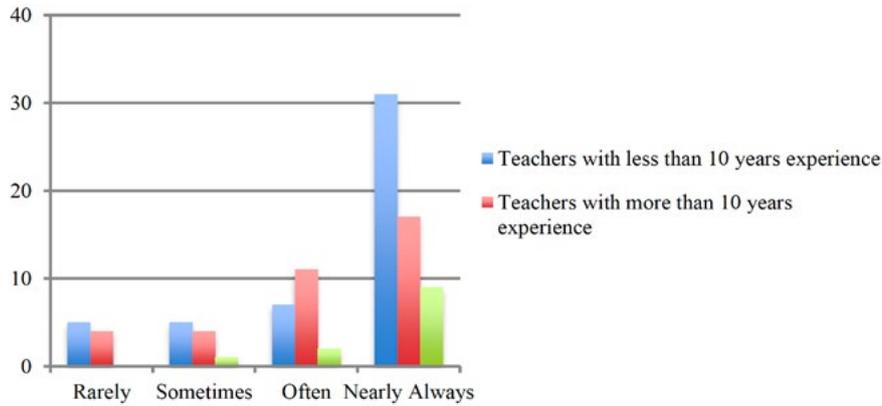


Table 4 - Ways in which teachers get involved in decision making at classroom level



The findings reveal again very mixed responses. There are students and teachers who do consider they participate in what is learned and how it is learned often and nearly always, and students and teachers who believe they participate in what is learned and how it is learned ‘sometimes’ and ‘rarely’ (Ruddock & McIntyre, 2007). Again this needs further investigation and raises more questions than it answers.

The 22 female and 18 male year 9 students and 15 teachers were also asked if students and teachers participated in discussions about how their learning would help them realize their dreams, how it will help them get qualifications to go to Further Education, Higher Education and the job they want. The findings are presented in tables 5 and 6.

Table 5 - Students perceptions of how they participate in discussions with their teachers about how their learning connects with their career aspirations

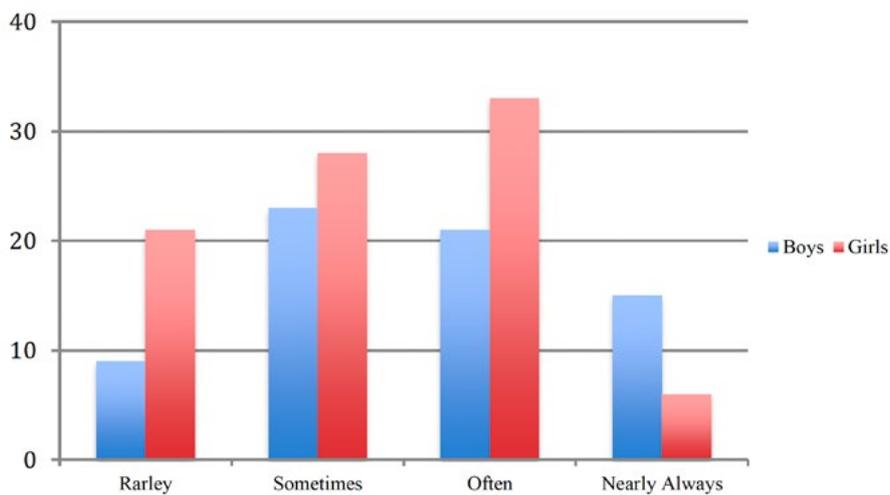
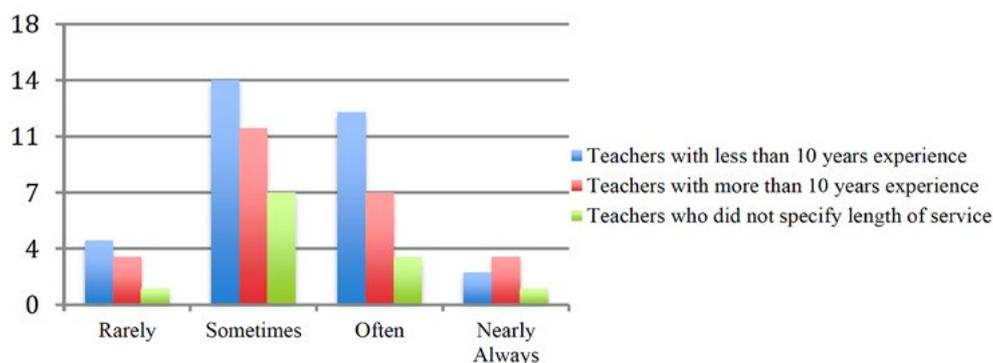


Table 6 - Teachers' perceptions of how they participate in discussions with their teachers about how their learning connects with their career aspirations



Again the responses agree with the theories we were testing about participation of this kind, and the responses disagree with theories. Bourdieu (2000) argues that those with the capital of the dominant and often traditional capital will be able to participate more readily with school processes and practices. Those that do not have the required capital may not participate in the same way. We would like to further explore this in interviews, theorise the findings, and then develop the questionnaire to include specific questions that address issues of capital. It is therefore potentially important that parents be involved in this research regarding funds of capital.

Institutional characteristics institutional stakeholders value

We asked the students what they find helpful in their learning and the teachers what they find helpful in facilitating learning. These questions were to test the theories of participation that connected with participation in relationships. The specific theories we wanted to test emerged from the analysis of the interview data and the literature focused on building one to one relationships between student and teacher based on mutual positive regard (like) respect, trust, and treating people fairly. In table 7 we reveal if students consider the learning is helped when students like, trust, and respect teachers and are treated fairly, and in table 8 we reveal if teachers consider the learning is helped when students like, trust and respect teachers and are treated fairly. Then we reveal if the learning is better if the teachers like, trust, and respect their students in tables 9 and 10.

Table 7 - Students consider learning is helped when students like, trust, and respect teachers and are treated fairly

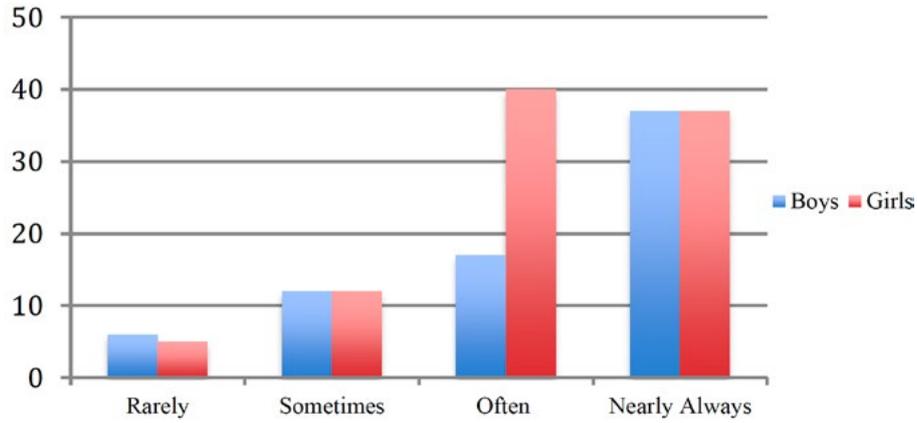
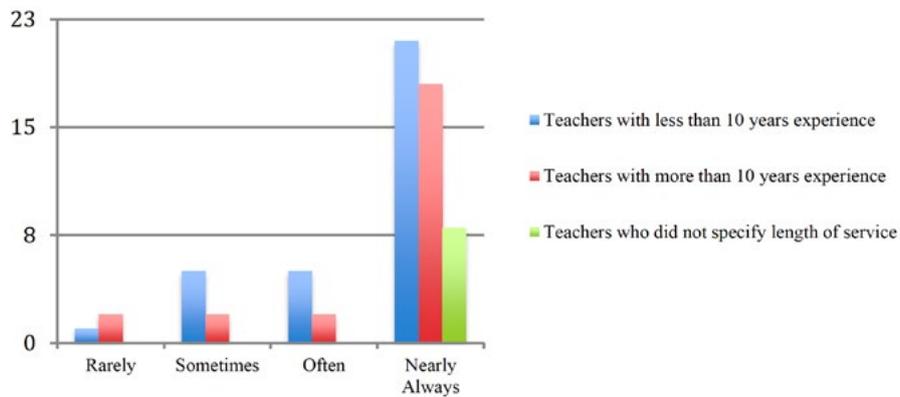


Table 8 - Teachers consider learning is helped when students like, trust, and respect teachers and are treated fairly



The findings from the questionnaires affirm the theories we were testing from the analysis of the pilot interview data. Teachers and students do value relationships based on trust, respect, and being treated fairly (Wong & Glass, 2009; MacBeath, 2009; Taysum, 2013; Stenhouse, 1983; Pring, 2009). This is fascinating because with an agenda of performativity there are arguably less and less opportunities to spend time developing relationships which can have serious consequences on the quality of learning (Masaaki, 2012; Sahlberg, 2012; BBC, 2013).

Conclusions

The mixed responses regarding patterns of participation, suggests there is an opportunity to take innovative practice to scale in the school. However, it is challenging to identify what is working well where the students identify strong patterns of participation. The issue is worthy of discussion with you.

The research focuses on sharing a toolkit of resources with you (Taysum, 2019) that are available from the author. As a professional learning community you can critique and reflect upon the issues that emerge from the dialogue stimulated by the toolkit. You may like to work with a mentor from an HEI or a professional body, or members of our team who have documented their case studies in this Special Issue of *IJSE*. The key is for you to engage in a dialogue as a professional learning community and share your thoughts as part of the second stage of the action research. With action research, the second stage would be to develop and implement an intervention strategy that emerges from your research findings and the toolkit to optimise students' wellbeing and learning. Should this be an attractive way forward for you, a third stage of the research would be to develop the first stage data collection tools to enable you to critically evaluate your intervention strategy. You can then repeat the first stage of the research using your new data collection tools to find out the impact of the intervention strategies. Working with a mentor may help you with this action research that can inform your 3 year and 5 year School Improvement Plan (SIP). You would need to work within a very clear ethical framework, as discussed above.

The team are keen to develop the bid, and to address weaknesses in the research. We recognize that when addressing the full range of students within the school we need to think through the extent to which the language we are using is accessible to all in the questionnaire. For example we ask 'I talk with my teacher(s) about how my learning will help me get the qualifications I need for further education or higher education'. We need to be sure that all students will be able access the questions to ensure that our research is consistent, and trustworthy. This will need further scrutiny in the fuller research bid, and your help would be greatly appreciated here, and in any other advice you can give to improve the research. However, we do appreciate that your time is precious.

We also need to consider how we can engage teachers in the questionnaire. With the very supportive help of the school we were able to administer the interviews. However, further thought needs to be given regarding the timing of the administration of the questionnaire. The questionnaires were administered towards the end of term and enough time was not given to explain to the teachers the aims of the questionnaire, and why their participation is important. There are also issues around the kinds of ques-

tions being asked, because if teachers consider national policy does or does not enable them to address the issues raised, they may not wish to engage with the questionnaire. These are issues that would need to be explored in the fuller research initially through interviews, theorizing, and developing a questionnaire to test the theories.

The pilot study has provoked more questions, rather than provide answers to our research, which is also something that I would like to discuss with you. However the initial findings that were presented provoked much thought. The study has convinced us that the issues being investigated are currently under represented in the research, in national and international policy. However, without your feedback the research will not adequately address how the developing patterns of participation might influence effective schools committed to improvement of learner experience, achievement and attainment in many different contexts within particular nation state's legislative participatory frameworks.

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