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Evaluating the Level of Student and Teacher Involvement in Second-Level School Processes and Participation in Decision Making: an Irish Case Study

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Evaluating the Level of Student and Teacher Involvement in Second-Level School Processes and Participation in Decision Making: an Irish Case Study

Kathy Harrison, Gerry McNamara, Joe O'Hara

Abstract: The Education Act (1998) is the key policy document in Irish Education. The Act emphasises the rights, roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders, including parents, teachers and pupils in schools. Since 1998 the Department of Education and Skills (DES) has stressed the need to implement mechanisms, reflecting an increased role for teachers and pupils in decision making. It is timely to explore the implementation of this more collaborative school environment and the response of teachers and students to it. This study focuses on a rural second-level school of approximately 600 students. A survey by questionnaire was completed, and interviews conducted, with transition year students (aged 15–16, entering senior secondary education) and their teachers. It finds that while the school is proactive in involving students and teachers in decision making, a source of social, personal and professional empowerment, experienced teachers, and students in particular, want a more substantial voice in decisions. Overall, participation is considered important by all stakeholders.

Keywords: participation, decision making, student and teacher involvement, Irish culture

To build achieving organizations, you must replace power with responsibility.

Drucker (1995, p. 15)

Introduction

This paper documents a case study conducted in a rural Irish (Republic of Ireland) second-level school with a student population of over 600. The research investigates the involvement of sixty students and twenty-six teachers in their school life and in particular the extent of their participation in the decision making processes. The research focuses on transition year education (approximate age 15–16 years) in Ireland, a year between lower secondary school and the school Leaving Certificate programme. The Leaving Certificate examination is the final assessment in second-level education and leads into the world of work or further or higher education. Describing transition year, the Department of Education and Science (DES) (1994) outlines that the ‘curriculum content is a matter for selection and adaptation by the individual school’. The department provides broad signposts in the form of subject areas, but it encourages schools to have regard to local community interest and employment prospects.

In common with European counterparts, Ireland is experiencing austerity due to an economic recession and government policies. In an educational context, this requires excellence in education with the full participation and engagement of educationalists, teachers and students to support national recovery. In collaboration with European and international partners, this research is an attempt to inform educational policy with the intent of enhancing future provision and aiding national recovery.

The research recognises that ‘educational policy is a public good associated with human rights’ (Taysum, 2013). It is predicated on a culturally responsive educational environment nurturing all regardless of gender, creed, ethnicity or socio-economic background. It seeks to ‘increase the likelihood that social and educational policies and practices are more socially just (fair, equitable, [and] respectful of human dignity)’ (Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment - CREA, 2013) and aims ‘to enable [all] learners to achieve their full potential and contribute to Ireland’s economic, social and cultural development’ (DES, 2011, p. 3).

Underpinning democratic principles, this view is supported by Banks (1997, p. 1) who argues that “people are not born democrats.” Consequently, an important goal of the schools [research] in a democratic society is to help students acquire the knowledge, values, and skills needed to participate effectively in public communities’. Broader recognition of this philosophy, with education pivotal in the development of the whole person, is highlight-

ed by the United Nations (UN,1948) Article 26.2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality”. This right was written into international law in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights as Article 13.1, which was signed by Ireland in 1973 and ratified in 1989.

Context

This study examines the level of involvement in decision making teachers and students are afforded in one Irish school. It is widely accepted that the teacher's role includes the provision of a level playing field for each learner free from discrimination so she/he can thrive and contribute unique talents to society. This view is corroborated by Bhreathnach (1995, p. 9), as she claims ‘students are entitled to the highest possible standard of teaching and to be facilitated in the attainment of the highest quality of learning’. Taylor (1998, p. 218) makes this personal to the teacher, suggesting that ‘in choosing to become a teacher you have acknowledged your own responsibility to meet the personal, social and intellectual needs of every pupil in your care, day upon day, year upon year’. Aimed at primary school teachers, this is universally applicable in education.

Teaching in Ireland

Overall, teachers in Ireland are perceived to enjoy public confidence. This is evidenced by O'Donoghue and Harford (2010, p. 99) who look at the post-primary education sector, noting that by the time Irish student teachers graduate they have progressed through the most competitive selection and training process in Europe. Commenting on the relationship between teachers and the general population, they observe that ‘teaching in Ireland carries a high social status and teachers typically enjoy good levels of public support’. However, from a leadership role perspective, it would appear that teachers' motivation can be thwarted and they experience isolation in their attempts to contribute to current and future education policy. Brown (2005, p. 398) points to a major reason for teacher frustration when she remarks that “over recent years many [teachers] have come to see themselves as powerless in the face of highly prescribed curricula, and they have little enthusiasm for creative developments that are unlikely to have an impact on ‘official’ ways of thinking”.

The impact of this situation and the incumbent diminished motivation is reflected in the work of McNamara and O'Hara (2008, p. 202) who, in their research into developing education professionalism through self eval-

uation, argue that many projects promising long term success “have faded away when the impetus for them has been withdrawn”. In addition, they argue that processes, including teacher and school self-evaluation, will be difficult to sustain “since isolation and lack of ongoing motivation seems to gradually erode early enthusiasm for reflection and self-study” (McNamara & O'Hara, 2008, p. 203). A greater level of support, with the necessary resources, including time, training, and a non-threatening environment was suggested as a means of ameliorating this situation. Teacher motivation is a prime influencer in school life which is highlighted by McLean (2003, p. 5) who points out its importance, suggesting “teachers need to nurture their own self-motivation, before they consider how they are going to motivate their students”.

The impact of diminished teacher motivation is also observed in the area of teacher-led research by Sugrue (2009) who notes that educational reform and policy change are informed by such activity. Following a review of the research from all educational sectors, Sugrue highlights a possible reason for the dearth of teacher input into educational reform. He found that published research in Ireland is predominantly small-scale, single authored, one-off research papers, which he maintains indicates a lack of both funding and established research culture. He emphasises that without large scale collaborative research and the commensurate funding, there can be no consistent policy on research which could inform educational policy and make substantial inroads into educational reform. However, Loughran (2006) points to initial teacher training for the slow progress, suggesting that student teachers find the area of research taxing. He states a need for student teachers to be supported in their efforts, and for research to be included as part of all initial teacher training. It could be added here that this challenge is not solely confined to new teachers. Unless experienced teachers are given the skills, time and encouragement to use them, they too may find the field of research equally challenging.

Changing culture

A move towards a more culturally sensitive and holistic relationship between teaching (and the teacher) and learner is shown by Fox (1993, pp. 143-144), who points to the changing perception of the teacher's role: “A classroom [learning environment] can be described in organizational terms as a socio-technical system. The technical task (delivering the curriculum) interacts with the social needs of the pupils (and teacher) to form an interdependent system. If teachers simply concentrate on the task side of teaching (delivering the curriculum) while ignoring the social side, they will not maximize the learning within the class.”

The learner-teacher relationship is paramount to learning, which is shown in a large scale study by Hanushek et al. (1998) who investigated the importance of the teacher's role in the learner-teacher relationship. From a dataset collected from over 3000 schools in Texas, following approximately 500 000 students (3rd to 6th grade – aged about eight to eleven years) for either three or four years permitting detailed analysis, they found the single most significant factor affecting student achievement is teacher quality. Bearing this out in an Irish context, Smyth (1999, p. 54) maintains “the nature of relationships between teachers and pupils in a school has a significant effect on pupil performance”.

However, the teacher-learner relationship impacts more than just pupil performance. This relationship can be drawn on as a means of boosting community development. Through a partnership approach in the school, learners, together with their teachers, can develop their skills as agents of change. In turn, these acquired skills will empower them to work for the betterment of their community. This is true at any time, but is particularly important in times of austerity. However, to fully bring these benefits to life, focus has to transcend a prevailing culture in Ireland, where the teacher-learner relationship is bound by the curriculum in the pursuit of examination grades (Submission to the National Strategy for Higher Education, 2009). For this to happen there must be more student and teacher involvement in school processes and in decision making to build individual and social capacity. In addition to providing practice and experience, this will promote transparency and shared responsibility in the school, which are the basic tenets of a Learning Organisation. Longworth (1999, p. 215) describes such an organisation as one which “encourages, all its people in all its functions to fulfil their human potential by putting the emphasis on ‘learning’ and planning its education and training activities accordingly”.

Described by Senge (2000) as a vision, the Learning Organisation is one in which:

- all individuals are engaged
- the individual strives to reach personal goals
- personal, collective and organisation goals are in alignment
- the individuals care – convinced they make a difference

Such a learning environment can support staff, teacher and student motivation. It is founded on equality, inclusion, collaboration, and trust, which embrace a whole school approach indicative of a community of practice. This is described by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a community built on shared knowledge, skills and insight in relation to a particular subject area or occupation. The information is generated and shared freely among the participants, specifically including those learning about the subject area or occupation. Shared knowledge and experience adds value to the individuals

involved and through them the community of practice and ultimately the individual participants' communities. Hebert, (2006 p. 5) resonates these concepts within a school context as she describes how, as a prospective principal, her expected success as a leader would develop from her "ability to create and sustain a sense of community". She relates on shared leadership, listening to all views and a collaborative approach, which she believes is a move away from "the expected "principal as leader and teachers as followers" dynamics" (Herbert, 2006, p. 44). She also extends this value to listening to students, and the promotion of leadership skills in young students which can stand to them in school and in life. These models share commonality with a collegial approach, which Bush (2003) argues is prevalent in higher and primary education, but which is slower in uptake in secondary schools, which he attributes to the established traditional culture of a hierarchical style of management where the principal assumes authority. The collegial model is described as 'decision making as a participative process with all members of the institution having an equal opportunity to influence policy and action' (p. 74), but therein lies its main challenge which is, it diffuses the focus of responsibility. Collegiality is associated with three leadership models, described as transformational, participative and interpersonal (Bush, 2003).

Realising Senge's (2000) vision of a Learning Organisation demands an holistic approach. In common with the objectives of this study (stated below), it rests on team work based on relationships underpinned by the values of openness, trust and unconditional positive regard for the individual (Rogers, 1965). In essence it fulfils the obligations of fairness and social justice.

The Research

The study was carried out in a second-level rural school in the Irish midlands with students in transition year (4th year) education and their teachers from the current or previous year. The students' age bracket was about fifteen to sixteen years. The teachers involved in the research are identified as experienced teachers with ten or more years teaching experience and teachers with less than ten years experience. There was a gender mix across both the participating students and teachers. In total sixty students and twenty-six teachers participated in the study.

The objectives of the research are four-fold, and attempt to find answers to the following:

- What are the cultures, practices and leadership systems in the school that influence the participation of teachers and students (stakeholders) in decision-making in the institution?
- How do the stakeholders engage with different participatory processes?

- In which institutional characteristics do the stakeholders place value?
- Through which institutional processes and practices were stakeholders' values embodied?

As the aim of the research was investigating the experience of being involved in the processes and decision making mechanism in their school, the research employed both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The teachers and students were interviewed using a semi-structured approach advocated by Fisher (2007, p. 159), who suggests that in adopting this approach the interviewer ensures an *aide-mémoire* while 'the respondent has much latitude to respond to the questions in the ways that seem sensible to them'. In addition, both teachers and students completed a survey which comprised a range of both open and closed questions. The analysis of the data was underpinned by Husserl's (1931) Interpretative Phenomenological approach together with Glaser and Strauss's (1967) Grounded Theory drawing on axial coding.

The data was gathered from the viewpoints of teachers and students and drew on mixed research methodologies while employing a number of data collection tools. This methodological mix helped triangulate the findings of the study (Berg, 2004).

Conceptual framework

The study is underpinned by values which closely resemble the pillars inherent in a Learning Organisation and which Taysum (2013) suggests are values concerned with 'openness, attentiveness to the views of others, mutual respect and support'. These values, which lay the cornerstones for building a culture which fully supports the characteristics, processes and practices sought in this study, have been identified by Ruddock and McIntyre (2007) as:

1. advocacy by institutional leaders;
2. enabling structures and practices;
3. a school culture that values and listens to all staff;
4. a culture of enquiry and research among teachers;
5. a tradition of pupil involvement in decision-making.

Research ethics

Prior to conducting the study all necessary permissions were sought from the school principal, staff and students. All participants gave their written informed consent to participate, and were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality with the use of pseudonyms used throughout. The right to withdraw from the research was assured until point of publication. All correspondence was accompanied by plain language statements of the purpose and conduct of the research. The ethical obligations required by Dublin City

University's School of Education Studies, and the ethical framework provided in the methodology chapter of this special edition journal of the Italian Journal of Sociology of Education, which supported the research, were adhered to throughout the course of the study.

Findings

Students' views

In their interviews, the students identified three committees through which students can have direct involvement in their school: Student Council (SC); Young Social Innovator (YSI); and Green Schools. In the case of the SC, it is necessary to be elected by class peers onto the Council, a position that allows the elected student to represent the other students for the school year. During one interview, John (not real name), explained the importance of the SC, stating '*that [it] means you can directly put forward ideas for improving the school, or different ways of doing things*'. The YSI was viewed as a means of making improvement to the school while the final committee, Green Schools, was perceived to be a way of helping to make '*the school more eco-friendly*'.

In relation to the question on what the students found helpful in their learning, their responses included comments such as: building a one-on-one relationship with the teacher; being able to clarify points of learning with the teacher; having the opportunity to clear up misunderstandings; and, raising and discussing problems or issues.

Looking at how their learning connected to what they would like to do when they left school, Jake and Ronan (not real names) spoke about undertaking work experience, which was thought to be very helpful. The students also talked about the importance of their career guidance class. Ronan explained that it '*is just dedicated to us talking about what we will do in the future, help us get to doing it*'. They also mentioned curriculum vitae preparation.

It was observed that the students interviewed held positions on one or more committees, and may not be representative of the class. However, it was open to the whole class to volunteer to participate in the interviews. The students who did volunteer may have done so because they are active in volunteering generally.

Survey Open-Ended Questions

These questions helped elicit student responses to the research question: Through which institutional processes and practices were student values embodied?

In order of frequency, Table 1 provides a summation of the themes from the student responses from the following open-ended questions which were contained in the survey:

- what ways would you like to get more or less involved in decision making in your school?
- what is of most value to you about your involvement in school?

The students' responses have been categorised into themes. Many of the themes appear in responses to both questions.

Table 1 - Summation of the themes from the student responses

Number			Theme	
F	M	Total		
29	11	41*	More say, class discussions, vote, not just Student Council (SC) representation, make a difference	Tradition of involving pupils in decision-making**
6	7	14*	Would like to be on or value being on SC or other committee(s) and would like more discussion with management, more feedback, on important (not just trivial) issues	
4	2	6	Consultation, involvement in discussion, before decisions are taken	
2	2	4	Want voice in what and how we learn	
6	5	11	Having, making friends, getting to know new people	Enabling structures and practices**
5	4	9	Value learning, class	
4	3	7	Value playing sport	
3	2	6*	Value or would like more involvement in school activities, being part of the school	
4		4	Confidence issues: <i>want</i> OR <i>value</i> gaining confidence (don't speak/want to speak because...)	Advocacy by institutional leaders**
3		3	Having a voice; being listened to, paid attention to	
2	1	3	Students should be shown more respect; value being respected	
1	3	4	Value working for, have no want/time for involvement because of, Leaving Certificate/ timetable	

* includes one student of undeclared gender

** see items 1,2,5 on p.108

The greatest frequency (41) in the student replies related to wanting more of a say, more classroom discussions and an individual voice which was not

just through representation with two students (one girl, one boy) elected from each year to the SC. It is interesting to note here that in particular the girls responded strongly, with this view being expressed by a total of 29 out of the 33 girls, compared with 11 out of the 27 boys. The second highest frequency (14) showed the value students placed in being on, or wished to be on, the SC or other committees. This result was more evenly spread between both girls and boys. Similar or linked themes which occurred in responses were the desire to have school leadership to consult students before decisions are taken (6 instances), wanting a voice in how and what is learned (4 instances), valuing having a voice (3 instances) and valuing or wishing to be respected (3).

Different themes that emerged highlighted that students placed a value on socialisation, including friendships (11 instances) and participation in sport (7 instances); they also showed how the students value education, as learning (9 instances) and education combined with socialisation, as being part of the school or wishing to participate more in school activities (6 instances).

The only other unrelated themes to occur related to pressure of the timetable and preparation for the Leaving Certificate examination (4 instances) and confidence, either valuing the confidence gained through school, or wanting to gain more self-confidence (4 instances).

Teachers' views

It is important to say that some inexperienced teachers were satisfied to *not* be overly involved in the life of the school or in the decision making process, although they showed an awareness of the implications and a desire to change when they felt able. For example, during the interview with Emma (not real name), who teaches French, she explained that while she thought it was important to be involved, she was content with her level of participation, saying:

at the minute I'm happy where I am with the decision making because ... I've only been teaching since February so at the minute I'm really concentrating on the classroom side of things until I find my feet more and get used to that side of things, but in the future I would like to be involved. I think it is important.

Speaking about the curriculum she pointed to the need to *'follow the course to get it done because you're preparing them for that specific exam'*. When asked if she facilitated her students to take part in decision making processes in the classroom she explained that she did try to involve the students and consider their views, but remarked at a later stage that *'the way that the curriculum is at the minute you have to get a certain amount covered for the exam ... I'm trying to focus on what they need to get done'*.

Mary (not real name) is an experienced science teacher in the school and feels very involved in school life and in the decision making process. She holds the view that *'the more you volunteer yourself for the more you get involved in'*. She said she was satisfied with the level of decision making and considered she was involved to her 'capacity'. She considered the principal and vice-principal were fully supportive of her efforts and in the provision of financial aid where necessary for materials.

When asked if she facilitated her students in the decision making process in the classroom, Mary commented that, *'especially in transition year, the class would decide on ... classroom methodologies that we would use'*. She believed that in transition year there is *'more scope to develop the programme that suits the students'*.

Survey Open-Ended Questions:

These questions helped elicit teacher responses to the research question: Through which institutional processes and practices were teacher values embodied?

In order of frequency, Table 2 provides a summation of the themes in the teacher responses from the following open-ended questions which were contained in the survey:

- What ways would you like to get more or less involved in decision making in your school?
- What is of most value to you about your involvement in school?

The teachers' reponses have been categorised into themes

Table 2 - summation of the themes in the teacher responses

No			Theme	
<10yrs	>10yrs	Total		
3	9	12	Value students, teaching them and helping in their development	Advocacy by institutional leaders*
2	8	10	Prefer more meetings and discussions	School culture that values and listens to all staff*
-	4	4	Need to feel valued or they value feeling valued or appreciated	
1	3	4	There is a need for communication and reciprocal feedback between community members and the leadership	
2	1	3	Value participating in decision making in the classroom	
-	2	2	Value having a voice or influence	

No			Theme	
<10yrs	>10yrs	Total		
2	4	6	Value relationships and mutual respect with students and staff	Enabling structures and practices*
1	5	6	Curriculum inflicts top-down approach, undue time constraints, restricts input and decision making	
2	1	3	Find it difficult being new/other staff cannot talk freely in the presence of new staff	
2	-	2	Prefer more involvement in decision making for non-permanent/non full-time staff	
-	2	2	Need more time in general and for input into training and for continuous professional development (CPD)	Culture of enquiry and research among teachers*
1	1	2	Value involvement in extracurricular activities and in the community	

* see items 1,2,3,4 on p.108

Although there is some overlap apparent in the teachers' responses, in answer to the first question emphasis is placed clearly on a desire for more meetings, discussions and two-way communication with the leadership (14 instances) and a dissatisfaction with the constraints caused by the dictates of the curriculum with no input (6 instances). The responses to the second question demonstrate that teachers value their role in teaching students and contributing to their development (12 instances). They also valued relationships (with both students and staff) and feeling appreciated (10 instances).

It is interesting to note that it is the more experienced teachers who reported that they valued or wanted to feel they were appreciated, while the less experienced teachers did not reflect this sentiment in their answers. It is also interesting to note that it was mostly or only the inexperienced teachers who commented on the value of decision making in the classroom and a preference for greater participation in the process of decision making for non-permanent, non-full-time teachers.

Teacher and student responses to survey closed-questions

Outlined in Tables 3, 4 and 5 below are the responses to the closed questions contained in the students' and teachers' surveys. Accompanied by a summary of the topics covered in the questions for each category.

In Table 3 are listed the responses to the research question: What are the cultures, practices and leadership systems in the school that influence the participation of stakeholders in decision-making?

Table 3 - Cultures, Practices and Leadership Systems that Influence Participation

How involved students feel in decision making at school level: *knowing roles and responsibilities available for involvement in decision making; participating in decision making; participating enough in decision making; having opportunities to contribute to decision making; having opportunities to contribute to decision making about possibilities in school.*
A small majority feel they are “rarely” or “sometimes” involved (62%) – little difference between boys and girls.

How teachers get involved in decision making at school level: *knowing roles and responsibilities available for involvement in decision making; participating in decision making; contributing enough to decision making; having opportunities to contribute to decision making; having opportunities to contribute to decision making about possibilities in school.*
Experienced teachers (10+ years, number of teachers = 17) felt most involved “sometimes” or “often” (73%), whilst those less experienced (less than 10 years, number of teachers = 7) felt mostly (62%) they were involved “sometimes”; the difference with experience is underlined by the 65% of experienced teachers “nearly always” knowing roles and responsibilities in decision making, compared with 83% of those less experienced knowing them “sometimes”.

Overall, almost 40% of the students felt they were involved in decision making at the school level *sometimes*, with a quarter each responding *rarely* or *often*. This was evenly distributed between the boys and girls.

Overall, the teachers indicated that they were sometimes involved in decision making in their school. Experienced teachers indicated that they were slightly more involved than the more inexperienced teachers.

In Table 4 are listed the responses to the research question: How do teachers and students engage with different participatory processes?

Table 4 - Teachers and Students Engage with Different Participatory Processes

How involved students feel in decision making at classroom level: *participating (enough) in deciding how and what is learned; and how the learning affects job prospects following school and participation in groups outside school.*
A small majority overall feel they are “rarely” or “sometimes” involved (59%) – most girls (37%) feel “rarely” involved, whereas most boys (32%) feel “often” involved.

How teachers are involved in decision making at classroom level: *participating (enough) in decision making about students’ learning in the classroom; being able to decide to use enquiry based learning; facilitating student involvement opportunities for decision making about their learning; participating in decision making about assessment of students’ learning; facilitating student involvement opportunities for deciding how learning will be assessed.*
Most teachers (75%) feel “often” or “nearly always” involved in classroom-level decision making. There is a slight leaning toward less feeling of involvement in less experienced teachers (64%) than those with 10 years experience or more (76%). One noteworthy specific answer which gave a different view was of facilitating student participation in assessment, which drew 60% “rarely” or “sometimes” from all teachers, a figure which increased with experience to 69%.

Ways students consider learning opportunities help with what they would like to do when leaving school in terms of education or a job: participating (enough) in deciding how and what is learned; and how the learning affects job prospects following school and participation in groups outside school. Most (64%) students feel learning opportunities “rarely” or “sometimes” help with what they would like to do when they leave school – learning opportunities such as: talking with teacher(s) about how learning will help realise dreams, or how learning will help get the qualifications needed for further or higher education, or the job they want, or feeling motivated to learn - little difference between boys and girls.

Ways teachers consider learning opportunities connect with the students’ real world: they connect with what the students already know; and there are opportunities to discuss with students how their learning connects with: their plans for further and/or higher education; the kind of job they would like; them realizing their dreams for their future.

Less experienced teachers are slightly more positive (50% “often”, 39% “sometimes”) than their colleagues (28% “often”, 37% “sometimes”) but this difference may be insignificant as the more experienced teachers’ reports are more widely spread.

Most students (about one in three) felt they were rarely involved in decision making at the classroom level, with over a quarter each responding sometimes or often. Reflecting the responses to the open questions, this lack of involvement was felt most keenly by the girls, whilst the boys’ responses were more evenly spread with a leaning to feeling they were often involved.

At classroom level teachers felt they were often or nearly always involved in the decision making. This is to be expected because the teacher works semi-autonomously in the classroom.

Answering the questions about the relevance of learning opportunities in the school to what they would like to do when they leave school (in terms of education or a job), the students’ main responses fell to sometimes with an even spread between often and rarely.

Responding to questions on their students and learning opportunities, three-quarters of the teachers believed that the opportunities sometimes or often relate to the students’ real world.

In Table 5 are listed the responses to the research question: In which school characteristics do the stakeholders place value?

Table 5 - School Characteristics: Institutional Stakeholders Place Value In

What students find helpful in their learning (A): if teachers get to know them, or like them, or when there is mutual trust between them and their teachers: most (83%) find it “often” or “nearly always” helps – little difference between boys and girls.

What students find helpful in their learning (B): most (83%) students find mutual respect for teachers, fair treatment for all and peaceful conflict resolution helpful in their learning “nearly always” or “often”. Showing a slight difference, boys were more likely to answer “nearly always” (50%) but girls were more likely to answer “often” (47%).

What teachers find helpful in facilitating learning (A): opportunities to talk with the whole class and small groups; trusting and respecting **the students**; peaceful conflict resolution.

Over two thirds of all teachers found these topics of gaining "good grace" with students "nearly always" helpful - little difference can be seen with level of experience.

What teachers find helpful in facilitating learning (B): if the students trust and respect **the teacher**; if everyone is treated fairly.

As in the responses to the other topics on facilitating learning (above), four out of five teachers found these topics of students gaining "good grace" with teachers "nearly always" helpful, the other fifth found them "often" helpful – again, little difference can be seen with level of experience.

In response to what students found helpful in their learning (A in Table 5 above), dealing with issues of mutual trust and teachers knowing and liking students, almost half of students felt it helped them *often*, and another one in three said it *nearly always* helped.

Answering the same question (B in Table 5 above), but dealing with issues of respect between teachers and students, and fairness with peaceful conflict resolution within the classroom, and how these aspects helped with learning, almost half of students felt it *nearly always* helped, and another 40% of students felt that it *often* helped. There was a slight difference between the boys' responses (most positive) and those of the girls who were more likely to answer that it *often* helped.

There are two sets of questions on facilitating learning from the teachers' perspective. The first set considers the teachers' regard for students in the classroom and the second set reflects on (the teachers' perspective on) students' regard for teachers in the classroom. Responses from both sets of questions show that overall two-thirds of teachers felt that learning is *nearly always* better if both teacher and students trust and respect each other.

Discussion

In the teachers' case, it would appear from the evidence that the level of input is curtailed by the teachers' need to satisfy curriculum stipulations, which is perceived to drive priorities in education. Morgan (2005) makes the point when she claims that young people still pass through an out-of-date educational system which has changed little in form from that experienced by generations who have preceded them. This is not without its impact on second-level education students, which is observed by Smyth (1999, p. 109) who claims 'curricular packaging influences pupil stress levels within school' in relation to subject choice, which she claims 'may occur because students do not see the school as responsive to their particular needs or abilities'. Adding substance to this view O'Brien (2008) observes that well-being is negatively impacted by being denied a voice, which she notes applies to students who find themselves excluded from educational debate.

At this time of austerity in Ireland teachers are also suffering stress, as more is required of them in terms of their resourcefulness in satisfying the needs of a growing multicultural Irish population (Devine, 2012; Darmody et al., 2012). Notwithstanding this, there is clear evidence from the findings that the teachers are committed to caring for the students entrusted to their care and value being in a position to help them in their development.

The teachers felt somewhat empowered overall by the leadership in the decision making process, but expressed a need for all staff to become more involved (including non-permanent and non full-time staff). They also expressed a wish for more discussions, meetings and reciprocal communication between staff and the school leadership. It needs noting that although some inexperienced teachers felt less involved and less enabled to be involved in school processes than their more experienced colleagues, it is not necessarily as a result of exclusion. This point was made above by Emma in her interview when she explained that, as a new teacher, she was content with her level of participation until she was more comfortable in her teaching role.

It is not surprising that the teachers appeared, on the whole, to be satisfied with the decision making process at classroom level or that the majority of teachers found that learning is facilitated when there is mutual trust and respect between students and teacher. However, when it came to their students' learning and learning opportunities, the teachers' responses show that at best these only related to the students' real world of future education, work and dreams some of the time.

From the students' viewpoint, there is clear evidence from the overall findings to show that they feel that they have a measure of involvement in their school and classroom processes, though there is an eagerness to have greater involvement and more of a voice. They felt that they would like to be consulted, but not just on 'trivial' matters, and 'prior' to decisions being taken. As school leadership and practice impact their learning and progress, this need cannot be construed as an unreasonable expectation. Greater demand to have a student voice is becoming more commonplace, particularly with the advance of technology. Rogers (2002, p. 139) refers to an awareness of the blurring between pedagogical and andragogical practice and the division of influence, particularly when teaching with new technologies 'where children challenge authority, especially today when different learning methodologies and more self-directed exploratory processes are being encouraged'.

Situated within an Irish context, this is also in line with Ireland's National Children's Strategy (2000, p. 30) which maintains that one of its goals is '... to give children a voice in matters which affect them and to ensure that their views are given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity'. This goal is underpinned by the value of children's need of 'help to learn re-

sponsibility as they grow towards adulthood and full citizenship' (p. 10). The Strategy also states that this goal 'recognises that children have an active contribution to make in shaping their own lives and the lives of those around them'. Providing a framework and supporting students in finding their voice meets one of the educational aims set out by the DES (1995, p. 12), 'to develop intellectual skills combined with a spirit of inquiry and the capacity to analyse issues critically and constructively'. However, this aim can only be achieved if students are proactively involved in all of the school processes, including decision making. This is congruent with inclusive practice and cultural sensitivity where "consultation with the aim of reaching consensus is the process which enables diversity to be accommodated" (Goddard & Leask, 1992, p. 9).

It could be said that students already have a voice in their school through the SC, but this does not appear to go far enough in satisfying the need for representation as expressed by the majority of students in the findings. This has already been highlighted in the interview with John, a SC member, who believed "it would be better if we had a suggestion box around the school for people who didn't get onto the Student Council". This finding is notwithstanding that students have more of an input into classroom learning methodologies and into the curriculum in transition year.

Relationships with the teachers were important to the students as issues of mutual respect and trust, which were seen as aids to learning in responses to closed questions. These elements were also raised in the open questions contained in the survey and in the interviews. Trust in the teacher has been shown to be of primary importance when it comes to the *self* in the learning environment, because communication from those we trust has a relatively large effect on our self-concept (West & Turner, 2006). The relational aspects concerning students also included friendship with other students, being involved in sporting and school activities, which were brought up in responses to open questions.

The relationship between the students' learning opportunities and their future, following school, was perceived to be less than optimal, although in the interviews students felt there was a positive relationship.

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that teachers and students in this school enjoy some influence and involvement in the decision making processes and in the life of the classroom. It would also suggest that there is room, and a wish, for improvement.

In this Irish school, the principal was described as progressive, supportive of initiative and change, by both experienced and inexperienced teachers in

their interviews. This style of leadership is heading in the right direction, reflecting collegiality and a participative style of management (McGregor, 1960). However, the findings show that the teachers would welcome a greater level of involvement. Students are also seeking to have their voices heard and to become more involved in decisions that affect them in their life at school and beyond. This would suggest that the school leadership needs to move towards becoming a Learning Organisation by showing greater trust, displaying more openness and sharing whole school responsibility.

In achieving such a community of practice there are a number of prerequisites. Teachers and students should receive school leadership support and mentoring to participate in school processes. The school should develop an empowering infrastructure and an inclusive climate, where input is actively sought from all stakeholders. The leadership could adopt a more participative style (Bush, 2003), taking into account views of stakeholders in a more democratic decision-making process. This would uphold the values of fairness and social justice and echo Ruddock and McIntyre's (2007) values stated above. This, although it is acknowledged as challenging, is urged by the DES (2000, p. 127) which maintains that "transforming the workplace into a learning organisation is arguably the ultimate goal of a workplace strategy."

To participate as agents of change in a learning organisation, teachers and learners need to become interdependent, collaborative, critical thinkers to allow them to make 'better and more informed decisions about whether something is likely to be true, effective or productive' (Cottrell, 2005, p. 2). The leadership can nurture and hone these metacognitive skills by advocating more active involvement in the decision making processes and the life of the school. In this way teachers and learners can come to make an appreciable, worthwhile difference to their individual and collective contributions to their school and their community during good and austere times.

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