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Primary school councils: Organization, composition and head teacher perceptions and values

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Michael Burnitt

University of Manchester, School of Education, Manchester, UK

Helen Gunter

University of Manchester, School of Education, Manchester, UK

Abstract

School councils have been an integral part of primary school life for the last decade and, despite not being mandatory in England, they are now to be found in the vast majority of primary schools. This research article aims to examine the current position of school councils in terms of their organization, the issues they address and the views held by senior leaders regarding the setting of agendas, their management and composition. The fieldwork took place in 50 primary schools within one local authority in the North West of England. This involved quantitative analysis based on a questionnaire sent directly to the head teachers. The data confirmed the widespread use of councils, with 100 per cent of responding schools having one in place. Certain themes relating to school council membership emerged, such as a positive emphasis on councillors being role models and possessing strong organizational and communication skills. Little importance, however, was given by head teachers to high academic attainment or creativity. The indications given by school leaders is that there is a clear commitment to having in place effective mechanisms via which children can raise their views, ideas and concerns, whilst promoting equality. However, in practice the emphasis on effective communication skills appears to actually limit the diversity of children actively taking part in primary schools councils. Therefore, school leaders need to take steps to allow a wider intake into their councils, in order to generate a truly representative council.

Keywords

composition, councils, head teachers, organization, primary school

Introduction

Baginsky and Hannam define a school council as ‘a body which draws together pupils/students to discuss what is happening in their school and, to a varying degree, consider their views on these matters’ (Baginsky and Hannam, 1999: 6). Whilst currently non-mandatory within England and, therefore, not a requirement of the National Curriculum, primary school councils as a method for facilitating pupil voice have been supported by New Labour (DfES, 2004) and continue to be endorsed by the present Coalition Government (*The Guardian*, 2012). Because over 95 per cent of primary schools now have school councils (Whitty and Wisby, 2007), they can be viewed as an integral element of school life and are often interviewed during the Ofsted inspection process. The value of school councils is highlighted by Claire and Holden (2004), who give examples of their direct advantages, including the effective promotion of eco-projects, raising community links and acting within a peer mediation role to resolve conflicts and offer solutions to school based problems. Given both their increasing importance and prevalence, this article, through the use of a questionnaire, will examine the views and experiences of head teachers, and consider what they regard as significant and their perceptions of the input of school councils on strategic

decisions and planning. Consideration is also given to the ‘level’ of involvement as a function of the children’s ability to understand what could be deemed complex issues, given the age range 7–11 years of the majority of councils. Although there is an emerging literature on school councils in primary schools (Iliasov et al., 2010; Tisdall et al., 2008), which focuses on their distribution, pupil perceptions and governmental policy, this article makes a distinctive contribution by reporting on council selection and the pupil skills and attributes deemed significant in terms of being suitable and effective councillors. The role and positioning of head teachers within school council meetings, in terms of the setting of the agenda, control mechanisms and the value they place upon the process, is also explored.

The development and role of school councils

Having a school council in place can be seen as meeting a requirement of schools to deliver successful citizenship

Corresponding author:

Michael Burnitt, University of Manchester, School of Education, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK.
E-mail: mike@burnitt.fsnet.co.uk

education, as highlighted in the January 2010 report from Ofsted, *Citizenship established? Citizenship in schools 2006/09* (Ofsted, 2010). The requirement by Ofsted to 'witness' citizenship teaching/modelling places a pressure on head teachers to provide opportunities, and thus, whilst school councils are not at present mandatory in England, they could now be viewed as being expected and an effective instrument in the provision of evidence.

Whitty and Wisby (2007) highlight the number of policy developments implemented within the past 15 years aimed directly at enabling and encouraging pupils to make significant decisions. These include *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) and the *National Healthy Schools Standard* (DfEE, 1999), along with national guidance on promoting direct pupil participation in school-based decision-making. The idea of the provision of an environment where all views are both welcomed and, where appropriate, acted upon, can be closely identified with New Labour's direct support for the teaching of active citizenship within schools (Faulks, 2006). However, this idealistic view is contradicted by Whitty et al. (2007). They question whether school councils are in practice an effective and democratic mechanism for the instigation of new ideas and positive change, or a mere empty token offered to the children via a process which, whilst modelling democracy, is in fact a blunt tool with virtually no chance of instigating meaningful sustained change. This has led to a situation described by Gunter and Thomson (2007: 23) where the absence of an effective pupil voice within school leadership is compensated 'by children being asked to respond to and hence legitimize adult practice and plans'.

Cox and Robinson-Pant (2005) identify a power dynamic which exists between the children (councillors) and the adults (teachers) as a possible barrier to effectiveness, whilst Baginsky and Hannam (1999: 3) draw upon comments made by primary school children, which identify a clear need for the development of a 'higher level of trust between students and teachers'. Perhaps a more fundamental difficulty is that of teacher beliefs, not only in their attitude towards school councils as viable and valuable forums, but also in their belief in the ability of children to understand and accurately express their ideas and opinions. This view, Franklin (1995) argues, has resulted in children being denied their rights, as outlined in Article 12 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1990), by national institutions or services. Franklin (1995: 10) goes on to elucidate this point by stating that he believes many connected with national institutions or services are of the opinion that: 'children lack the wisdom born of experience and are prone to make mistakes'. Alderson (2000) provides further examples of senior leaders questioning children's ability to move away from a purely reporting stance to one of being more reflective and proactive instigators of change.

A further common theme within the literature, when discussing teaching staff views, is the widely held notion that giving the children a voice is important, but that there are significant leadership and management issues about remit

and control. Cox and Robinson-Pant (2005: 17) give examples of teachers being concerned by such situations as:

- 'It's the same old stuff on the agenda. It gets into a loop'
- 'We've done the playground to death'
- 'How far do you let them discuss things that they can't change?'
- 'What would you do if they said they didn't want literacy? Can't get rid of it.'

This example also illustrates perhaps a more worrying aspect of the use of primary school councils, that of actually being at best ineffectual and at worst just a token. If this is indeed the case, then school councils could be undermining the very rights they initially set out to foster and promote, that of providing children with the time, freedom and the ability to express and discuss their opinions, ideas and beliefs. Perhaps a leadership and management issue exists here, that of staff training, in order to actively promote and nurture a school ethos of actively valuing the power of the pupils' voice. This could perhaps involve the rewriting of school policy and INSET provided by such organizations as School Councils UK.

Current literatures have focused on the importance of school councils in terms of enabling pupils to voice their ideas and concerns. Research has also been carried out into the views and experiences of children and teachers within their own school councils. However, little is available in terms of providing an insight into the perceptions of primary head teachers regarding councillor selection, membership attributes and the actual day to day running of their councils. This article aims: firstly, to provide an insight into how primary school councils, within the North West of England, are integrated within school life, in terms of their organization, composition and agendas; secondly, to provide an understanding of the views held by head teachers regarding the key skills and attributes needed by children to make effective councillors; and, finally, the value they, as school leaders, place on the development of children's understanding and experiences of democracy.

Research methodology

The methodology focused on a quantitative approach utilizing a short multiple choice questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed, via post, to 50 head teachers working in primary schools within a single local authority in the North West of England. These head teachers were randomly selected from the 124 primary schools within the local authority. The questionnaire was piloted by three primary head teachers, working outside the sample local authority. Feedback resulted in the clarification of questions, the reorganization of the questionnaire and the removal of questions considered redundant or ambiguous. The average completion time of 14 minutes was deemed to be appropriate, in terms of maximizing response rates and minimizing workload.

The resultant questionnaire contained 12 questions, which focused on:

1. School council organization
 - Length of time in place
 - Frequency of meetings
 - Timings of meetings
 - Staff attendance at school council meetings
2. Importance place by head teachers on the various issues addressed by their school councils
 - Issues related to school-based issues
 - Issues related to strategic development
 - Issues related to school improvement
3. Features of primary school councillors
 - Importance placed by head teachers on key councillor characteristics
4. The importance placed by head teachers on children's understanding of the processes of democracy
 - Council selection processes

The questionnaire generated quantitative data, via the use of a five-point Likert scale series of questions – for example, a succession of questions aimed at gauging senior leaders' views and understanding of the type of skills and attributes necessary for children to become effective councillors. The return rate was 62 per cent (31 questionnaires), which is both statistically sound and sufficient to identify emerging trends. The returned questionnaires were checked for completeness and accuracy, and the process of data reduction, as outlined by Cohen et al. (2000), was then undertaken. The data were then entered into a basic Microsoft's Excel spreadsheet. This resulted in each question either generating a percentage response from the 31 respondents or a decimal indicator, ranging from 1.00, representing issues deemed extremely important to 0.00, indicating an associated zero importance.

Key findings

1. School council organization

Setting up of school councils. Whilst, at present, there is no legislative requirement for primary schools to have a school council, 100 per cent of the responding schools have had one in place for at least a year, with 92 per cent having them in place for at least three years (see Table 1). As such, school councils are now viewed as an integral part of primary school life. Analysis of the candidate selection process clearly indicated that the majority, 93 per cent, opted for the free selection of councillors by their peers, with no direct influence from either staff or senior leaders. However, one school opted for councillor selection by staff; further research would be necessary in order to obtain a clear rationale for this unique approach. Whilst the work of Inman (2002) highlights the importance of ensuring that the form and structure of a council represents the whole of the school community, she does not indicate how the selection process is an integral element of this.

Frequency of meetings. This question of how often council meetings were held was used as a gauge of the head teachers' commitment to their school council and a measure of their view of its usefulness and effectiveness. Only a

Table 1. Length of time school council in place.

Do not have one	0%
Less than 1 year	0%
1 to 2 years	4%
2 to 3 years	4%
3 to 4 years	15%
4 to 5 years	26%
5 to 6 years	11%
6 to 7 years	7%
7 to 8 years	11%
Longer than 8 yrs	22%

minority of 15 per cent held meetings less than monthly, with nearly one in five holding weekly meetings (see Table 2). Whilst Baginsky and Hannam (1999: 3) raised concerns over time constraints directly impacting on head teachers' commitment to their school council, this view is not supported in our research. Other factors, such as maintaining pupil enthusiasm and giving sufficient time for changes/ideas to be implemented, have also impacted upon the frequency of meeting.

Table 2. Frequency of school council meetings.

Each week	19%
Once a month	48%
Three times per term	4%
Twice a term	11%
Once a term	0%
Every two weeks	19%

Timetabling of meetings. The analysis of when meetings were actually scheduled generated some interesting data (see Table 3). The zero response to holding meetings before or after school can be viewed in two ways: firstly, a desire on the head teachers' part not to burden parents with having to rearrange their timetables, perhaps indicative of concerns about the values parents place on school councils; secondly, a need on the head teachers' part not to commit to a specific 'out of school' time. Perhaps, the most telling result here is that only 33 per cent of schools view school council meetings of sufficient importance as to warrant the removal of children from lessons, with the resultant loss of curriculum time, perhaps owing in part to school councils not being a mandatory requirement under the National Curriculum. However, 66 per cent are content to conduct meetings within playtimes and assemblies, with the resultant loss of leisure/social time or the opportunity to take part in collective worship. Again, these data contradict the concerns raised by Baginsky and Hannam (1999) and are contrary to the best practice outlined by Inman (2002). Again, at present, there is no literature available that offers a detailed insight into the timetabling of primary school council meetings.

School council attendance. From the data, a pattern of headship/senior leadership direct involvement emerges, with 54 per cent of meetings being attended by either the head

Table 3. Timetabling of meetings.

During curriculum time	33%
During assemblies	22%
During lunch or break times	44%
Before school	0%
After school	0%

teacher or deputy (see Table 4). It is difficult to say whether this is a deliberate manoeuvre on behalf of the senior leadership, in order to monitor and direct the work of their councils, or simply a question of the availability of other staff. Further research aimed at obtaining the views of senior leaders and other teaching staff would be necessary in order to fully clarify this position. What is interesting to note, however, is the significant lack of involvement of non-teaching staff in the process: for example, the site manager, having an excellent overview of the premises, would be the ideal person to give feedback on any site issues or improvements. It should also be noted that only a very small minority involved their governors in the process, which is surprising given the current high levels of governance responsibility/accountability (James et al., 2012), and the widespread use of link governors. These data reflect an interesting situation, that of whether governors are: firstly, aware of the school council; secondly, view it as important; and, finally, have any other method of accessing the pupil voice. No literature is currently available that explores the relationship between governing bodies and their interactions with school councils. Alderson (2000) highlights the strong evidence within the Crick (1998) Report for the need for governors, staff and pupils all to work together to make agreed changes, citing the importance of school councils within this process. Therefore, it could be argued that no school council can be truly effective without the full integration of representatives of all stakeholders.

Table 4. Staff attendance at school council meetings.

Head teacher	33%
A senior leader	21%
A teacher	31%
A teaching assistant	10%
A non-teaching member of staff	0%
Governor	5%
Parent	0%
Other	0%

Importance placed by head teachers on the various issues addressed by their school councils. The data shown in Table 5 indicate only limited involvement by the school councils in the strategic planning and running of schools. Perhaps we could argue that an element of tokenism by the head teacher is apparent here, with less than a quarter of schools actively involving their councils in regularly inputting towards the planning of the curriculum. This direct control of the curriculum is understandable given the pressures head teachers now face operating within an environment driven by standards, where pupil attainment is assessed via high stakes

testing and is seen as the primary indicator of a school's success rather than the right to have a voice. Whilst it could be strongly argued that many other factors – for example, the maturity of the council – are at work here, the data provide evidence of the narrowing of primary school councils' remits.

The identified lack of direct strategic involvement is mirrored by the findings of Whitty and Wisby (2007), who highlight this lack as a major stumbling block to the creation of effective councils. Their view is strongly supported by this research, with the majority of councils focusing on issues directly linked to the everyday running of the school and those with a direct effect on the children themselves, for example, sufficient balls in the playground. Issues requiring more complex planning and implementation – for example, school meals – were rarely discussed, with only 23 per cent of school councils taking an active and regular part in more long-term strategic planning.

The use of councils within the selection of staff was observed in 67 per cent of the schools investigated, with 19 per cent of these only being used in the appointment of senior leaders. The level of influence the council has on the actual selection is difficult to gauge; however, the majority were given the opportunity to set and/or ask questions for prospective candidates. It should be noted that recently concerns have been raised by the NASUWT teaching union (Times Educational Supplement, 2010) over the misuse of councils, citing them as possible 'management tools'.

The low usage of only 15 per cent of respondent school councils in the monitoring and offering of suggestions for the introduction of new teaching styles and curriculum changes is also understandable, for the reasons previously outlined. However, this is surely an area in which children have a lot to offer in terms of personalizing their learning – a backbone of the previous Government's *Every Child Matters* agenda (DfES, 2003). Whilst the findings of Cotmore (2004) support the notion of school councils pursuing very narrow agendas, little data are currently available to gain an insight into the rationale and mechanisms behind the setting of these boundaries.

Work undertaken by Springate (2003) provides a clear indication that the adoption of 'narrow agendas' within UK primary school councils is mirrored by those within Europe. He states that school councils within Norway, Holland and Portugal tended to focus on issues connected to the school environment and general organizational matters, shying away from more complex issues, such as curriculum timetabling, standards of teaching and staffing.

2. Features of primary school councillors

Importance placed by head teachers on key councillor characteristics. The quantitative data in Table 6 build a detailed picture of the 'type' of primary school pupil head teachers felt 'fitted' the role of school councillors. Factors of <0.5 indicated a negative view of the characteristics, i.e. deemed to be unimportant to the ability of a child to function as an effective councillor. Factors of

Table 5. Issues raised at school council meetings (importance placed by head teacher on the school council's involvement in strategic planning).

Planning for the new year:	
Never	11%
On occasions	59%
During 50% of meeting	7%
Frequently	19%
Always	4%
Use of school councils in staff appointments:	
Never	33%
On occasions	15%
For approx. 50% of staff appointments	0%
Frequently	19%
Always	15%
Only used for senior leadership staff appointments	19%
Lessons and teaching approaches:	
Never	33%
On occasions	48%
During about 50% of meetings	4%
Frequently	15%
Always	0%

~0.5 indicated a neutral stance. Finally, factors >0.5 increasing to 1.0 indicated an escalating belief that these characteristics ranged from important to critical to the success of children as councillors.

The low value placed by head teachers on the importance of prospective school councillor's academic attainment, in terms of their ability to be effective council members, is an interesting point. This stance can be viewed as encouraging all children to take an active role, regardless of ability, and closely mirrors the philosophy outlined by the *Every Child Matters* agenda DfES (2003); however, whether this actually manifests itself in reality is debatable, because this 'equality for all' stance is somewhat contradicted by the great emphasis placed on a councillor's abilities to communicate with peers, be trustworthy and set high standards for oneself, which would tend to indicate a child who is achieving well within the primary school environment, or has successfully fitted in. The neutral perspective placed on being creative is also surprising, because the generation of new ideas/views could be viewed as one of the fundamental functions of an effective council. At present, no quantitative research has fully investigated either the academic ability or social skills of the children involved in primary school councils. Our findings could, therefore, be seen as starting to draw out what could be termed 'common' features of councillors, which seriously question the true representative nature of English primary school councils.

The importance placed by head teachers on children's understanding of the processes of democracy. Ninety-two per cent of schools within the study use the same councillor selection method – that of a secret ballot after hustings. This indicates a strong belief in the importance placed by the head teachers on the value of modelling the democratic process, although, it might not lead to the

Table 6. The value head teachers place on the key characteristics of school councillors.

Able to communicate with their peers	0.92
Able to listen to all views	0.92
Trustworthy	0.90
Able to set high standards for themselves	0.84
Able to confidently argue their point	0.82
Able to confidently argue their point	0.82
To see the whole picture	0.81
Able to communicate with adults within school	0.81
Well organized	0.81
Realistic and able to get things done	0.80
Resilient	0.79
Viewed as a role model within school	0.78
A free thinker	0.76
Creative	0.57
Well-liked by the staff	0.47
Respected by other parents	0.45
A trend setter	0.36
Achieving well in all areas of the curriculum	0.35
Have supportive parents who are active within school	0.31

selection of the most 'suitable' candidate as outlined within Table 6.

This view is further supported in Table 7, which shows an 89 per cent positive response to the idea that free voting aided children's understanding of democracy. Clearly, head teachers have identified an opportunity to demonstrate the effective use of the right to vote – an important future lesson for citizenship. It seems that the various processes outlined above run parallel to what Davies et al. (2007: 22) have termed an 'apprenticeship in democracy'. Further work would be needed to address the question of whether early involvement in school councils could create an anti-democracy viewpoint discourse as outlined by Davies et al. (2007) and Rowe (2003).

The almost 50:50 split in head teachers' beliefs in whether a school council provides an effective opportunity for Ofsted to monitor the use of pupil voice is maybe more of an indication of a head teacher's view of the monitoring role of school inspectors rather than their belief or otherwise in their council's ability to project an accurate picture of school life and their role within.

This research has started to illuminate the complex and dynamic world of primary school councils, giving examples of the importance placed upon them by both staff and children. The picture is clear as to the real need to allow children to fully utilize their competences and exercise their rights and, perhaps, move away from the elements of tokenism that already exist. Hart (1992: 45) gives a very clear view of a tokenistic 'pupil power' situation when he states: 'children are asked to say what they think about an issue but have little or no choice about the way they express those views or the scope of the ideas they can express'. This research supports this position, where councils are running in a democratically elected fashion, but have no real opportunity to suggest and bring about lasting change outside the direct control of school leadership.

Table 7. The importance placed by head teachers on children's understanding of the processes of democracy.

Opportunity for Ofsted to monitor pupil voice:	
Zero importance	11%
Of little importance	7%
Of some importance	33%
Important	15%
Very important	30%
Fundamental	4%
Allows children to see ideas are valued by adults:	
Zero importance	0%
Of little importance	0%
Of some importance	0%
Important	19%
Very important	37%
Fundamental	44%
Development of children's understanding of democracy:	
Zero importance	0%
Of little importance	0%
Of some importance	11%
Important	37%
Very important	26%
Fundamental	26%
Allows children to work as a team:	
Zero importance	0%
Of little importance	0%
Of some importance	0%
Important	11%
Very important	41%
Fundamental	48%

Summary

Whilst this research has drawn data from a small number of primary schools in the North West of England, the random sampling has allowed for data collection from schools within a wide range of differing socio-economic contexts and of differing sizes and ethos. As such, it can be seen as being broadly representative.

This article provides an insight into both the role and organization of primary school councils and provides strong evidence of their widespread use within North West of England primary schools. Whilst previous work has focused on these elements of school councils – for example, Cotmore (2004) and Cox and Robinson-Pant (2005) – this article provides strong evidence of how school councils are actually organized in terms of both their timetabling and composition.

The article's focus on head teacher's perceptions has provided an original insight into how senior school leaders both direct and value their school councils. The research has started to identify significant trends, notably the lack of school council involvement in strategic matters, along with the very limited involvement of other members of the school community, namely school governors and non-teaching staff. Both these elements could be viewed as being under the direct control/remit of the head teacher and, as such, a reflection of senior leaders' priorities and commitment to fully enabling and utilizing their school councils.

Further important trends identifying a value system adopted by head teachers on both the role of councils and the type of children who make suitable councillors have been identified. The data clearly illustrate a lack of belief on the part of senior leaders, in terms of their councils' ability to contribute significantly to strategic thinking – that is, the ability to perceive and understand the whole picture and then to offer significant and realistic contributions. One could argue that this is understandable, given the age of the children involved (6–11 years); however, it could also be seen as the loss of a valuable opportunity, which has perhaps, in some cases, resulted in an element of tokenism. The emphasis placed by many head teachers on attributes other than academic achievement of their councillors is a reassuring one and can be seen as validating the desired democratic nature of school councils, which aim to represent the whole school, as outlined by School Councils UK (www.schoolcouncils.org). However, the weighting given to communication skills could be seen to limit the opportunities of some pupils, particularly those with special educational needs. The data have started to illustrate an 'attainment demographic' of school councils, providing insight into trends in composition and the importance and relevance of a range of pupil skills and attributes. Head teachers clearly indicated the importance of efficiency, in terms of their councillors being able to organize themselves; this belief might again favour the more able, perhaps again limiting the opportunities of some children. Further research could illuminate the role of head teachers in leading, or indeed manipulation of, their school council's direction. It is interesting to note the almost unanimous support shown by head teachers for the free selection of councillors and the opportunity this provides in terms of modelling democracy.

The current position of school councils in the North West of England is, on the whole, a positive one, with the vast majority of schools having a school council in place and head teachers and senior leaders being willing to devote time to their effective running. Whilst the actual practicalities of schools councils may be in place, some serious concerns have emerged over their effectiveness, in terms of being involved in and dealing with 'bigger issues', particularly those requiring significant financial or time commitments. Perhaps this is indeed the crux, which limits primary school councils – that of their inability to actually make any significant decisions without the direct consent of an adult, usually the head teacher. Therefore, without any real power, one could argue that school councils are operating a pseudo-democracy.

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Author biographies

Michael Burnitt is a part-time postgraduate researcher at the University of Manchester, currently completing a doctoral thesis, whilst working as a full-time primary school teacher within Cheshire. Prior to commencing the EdD, he completed Masters' research, also at Manchester, which focused on the current practices utilized in the selection of deputy head teachers within the primary sector of education. He is currently in the process of completing his thesis, which focuses upon the perceptions held by primary school head teachers of their accountability and how this may be directly linked to their school's context. [Email: Michael.Burnitt@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk]

Helen Gunter is Professor of Educational Policy and Director of Research in the School of Education, University of Manchester, UK. She is an Academician of the Academy of Social Sciences. She has produced over a hundred publications including books and papers on education policy, leadership theory and practice, and she co-edits the Journal of Educational Administration and History. Recently, she completed the Knowledge Production in Educational Leadership Project funded by the ESRC, in which she studied the relationship between the state, public policy and knowledge, and the book from this project, *Leadership and the Reform of Education*, has been published in 2012 by Policy Press. [Email: Helen.Gunter@manchester.ac.uk]