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Research findings for the Committee's Inquiry into School Councils

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The Committee for Education is holding an Inquiry into School Councils aiming to examine the work of school councils in Northern Ireland, how they operate and their contribution to school life. This Research Paper presents the results of a recent survey of schools and focus groups with pupils undertaken as part of the inquiry.

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Key Points

- Research was undertaken as part of the *Committee's Inquiry* involving a literature review, a survey of schools and a series of focus groups with pupils;
- Over three quarters of respondents to the survey had a school council; post-primary schools were significantly more likely to report that they had a council;
- Most survey respondents stated that their school council had a clear purpose, and focus group participants described aiming to give pupils a voice and to improve life in school;
- The evidence suggests that most councils have a key member of staff involved in its work, and pupils highlighted the importance of genuine staff engagement;
- The literature states that for school councils to be effective they must have influence in matters that are central to their daily life in school, however, focus group participants felt that they had the most influence in organising one-off events and fundraising;
- Pupils highlighted a range of positive outcomes resulting from being a school councillor, including greater confidence, a sense of achievement, improved communication skills and changes to the school environment;
- Many students expressed a preference to 'learn on the job,' however some supported the idea for a forum to share ideas and practice across schools;
- Many school survey respondents who did not have a council planned to establish one, while others deemed alternative methods of engagement as sufficient;
- The majority of pupils in the focus groups who did not have a council stated that they would like their school to have one;
- Areas for further consideration might include:
 - How schools could be encouraged to establish and support a school council, and to ensure that the council has a say in matters that are central to students' daily life in school;
 - Whether teachers involved in school councils could benefit from specific training;
 - The usefulness of school councils having increased contact with the Board of Governors, and how this might be facilitated;
 - Ways in which pupils' achievements on school councils might be recognised and celebrated;
 - Whether a forum for participants in school councils to share ideas and good practice would be beneficial, for example, through a website.

Executive Summary

Introduction and methodology

The Committee for Education is holding an *Inquiry into School Councils* which aims to identify ways to support and enhance the work of school councils here. This paper presents the results of research undertaken as part of the inquiry. The research involved a literature review, a survey of schools in Northern Ireland and a series of focus groups with pupils.

Organisation of school councils

Over three quarters (77%) of respondents to the survey had a school council. Post-primary schools were significantly more likely to report that they had a council than primary schools, as were single sex schools (in comparison to mixed schools).

Most respondents to the survey stated that their school council had a clear purpose, and this was supported by evidence from the focus groups. Many participants described their council's purpose as giving pupils a voice and trying to improve school life. Just over half of respondents to the survey stated that they had a formal constitution setting out guidelines and rules on how the council should be run.

Most participants in the research felt that their school council was broadly representative of pupils of different ages and genders. Appointment to the council tended to be on the basis of an election after the candidates had made a speech or presentation; however other approaches included an interview panel and selection by teachers.

Engagement and reporting

Evidence from the survey and focus groups suggests that most school councils have a designated member of school staff who is involved in its work. Many focus group participants described their key contact (usually a teacher or vice-principal) taking their ideas forward to the principal, and a number of pupils highlighted the crucial importance of genuine staff engagement with the council. However, few pupils reported to their school's Board of Governors.

Influence

The literature states that for school councils to be effective, pupils must have influence in matters that are central to their daily life in school. In particular, it warns against councils simply taking charge of fundraising and running events.

In our focus groups, pupils most commonly stated that they had most influence in organising one-off events, followed by raising money and school uniform. In the survey, the greatest number of respondents indicated that their school council had most influence on the school environment (93%), followed by organising one-off events

(75%). In both the survey and the focus groups, teaching and learning was thought to be the area where school councils had the least influence.

Outcomes

Pupils participating in the focus groups highlighted a range of outcomes from taking part in their school council. These included personal outcomes and outcomes for the school, including:

- Greater confidence;
- A sense of achievement;
- Improved communication skills;
- Increased responsibility;
- Improvements to the school environment;
- Positive outcomes for other pupils; and
- Increased engagement with teachers.

In particular, many pupils described a feeling of pride and a sense of achievement as a result of being a school councillor. Increased confidence and greater responsibility were also common themes.

Training and support

The literature asserts that pupils and staff participating in school councils require training in order to support successful outcomes. In our survey 65% of respondents stated that training had been provided to all pupils taking part in the council, and there was a mixture of pupils who had received training and those who had not in the focus groups.

Where training had been provided, this was usually carried out by a teacher or by other pupils who had previously served on the council. While many pupils in the focus groups expressed a preference to 'learn on the job' rather than to receive further training, some thought that a forum for sharing ideas across school councils might be useful.

Reasons for not having a school council and other forms of engagement

Around 60% of schools responding to the survey that did not have a council reported that they were considering or preparing to establish one. Where schools were not planning to establish a council, they often suggested that other mechanisms in place for engagement were sufficient. Some schools, for example very small schools, did not feel that a school council would be appropriate.

The majority of participants in the focus groups who did not have a school council stated that they would like to have one, citing the opportunity to have their say and increased responsibility as among the potential benefits.

In terms of other forms of engagement, most pupils who had a council felt that this was more effective than other approaches. Many of the pupils who did not have a council stated that a number of other approaches were used to ascertain their views in school, such as interest groups or through designated teachers. However, a number of pupils highlighted the potential disadvantages of relying on sharing their views with individual teachers, stating that it depends very much on the teacher.

Conclusion

The research has highlighted many positive outcomes for pupils involved in school councils, and has emphasised the importance of genuine staff engagement. The findings suggest a number of areas that could be given further consideration:

- How schools could be encouraged to establish and support a school council, and to ensure that the council has a say in matters that are central to students' daily life in school;
- Whether teachers involved in school councils could benefit from specific training;
- The usefulness of school councils having increased contact with the Board of Governors, and how this might be facilitated;
- Ways in which pupils' achievements on school councils might be recognised and celebrated;
- Whether a forum for participants in school councils to share ideas and good practice would be beneficial, for example, through a website.

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1 Introduction

The Committee for Education is holding an *Inquiry into School Councils* which aims to examine the work of school councils in Northern Ireland, how they operate and their contribution to school life. The inquiry is seeking to identify ways to support and enhance the work of school councils here. This Research Paper presents the results of research undertaken as part of the inquiry, including the result of a survey of schools, focus groups with pupils and a literature review. Further information can be found in [Paper 85/11: School councils](#) and [Paper 18/12: Survey results for the Committee's Inquiry into School Councils](#).

2 Methodology

The research aspect of the inquiry involved a literature review, a survey of schools and a series of focus groups with pupils.

Literature review

A scoping paper was written by the Assembly Research and Information Service in August 2011 considering the evidence on the potential benefits of school councils, issues and challenges around their effective implementation, and the factors and attributes of successful councils.

Survey

The aim of the quantitative survey was to gather baseline information on the operation and experience of school councils in Northern Ireland. The evidence within the research scoping paper helped to inform the design of the questionnaire. After piloting, the survey was launched on the 9th January 2012 and sent out to all special, primary and post-primary schools by email via the C2K system.

The survey was sent out to 1,112 schools. A total of 289 responses were received, giving an overall response rate of 26%. Overall, there was a reasonable spread of respondents across school management type and Education and Library Board (ELB) area.

Focus groups

The planned qualitative phase of the research aimed to provide more detailed information on the experiences of pupils taking part in school councils here, and the views of pupils whose school does not have a council.

Seven focus groups were conducted, of which five involved participants in school councils and two involved pupils whose school did not have a council. The Assembly's Education Officers facilitated the focus groups and Hansard transcribed the sessions.

Each of the groups contained a number of schools. The profile of the groups by phase is outlined in the following table.

Table 1: Profile of focus groups by phase

School phase	With a school council	Number of groups	Total number of schools
Primary	Yes	2	6
	No	1	3
Post-primary	Yes	2	6
	No	1	1
Special	Yes	1	3
Total		7	19

3 Organisation of school councils

Profile of schools with a school council

Overall, 77% of respondents to the survey had a school council. However, it is possible that schools that have a council would be more inclined to respond to the survey, therefore this finding should be treated with some caution.

Post-primary schools were significantly more likely to report that they had a council than primary schools (93% compared to 68% of primaries). Single sex schools were more likely to state that they had a school council than mixed schools (97% compared to 74%): this finding is also statistically significant.

Survey results show that smaller primary schools (those with 89 pupils or fewer) were significantly less likely to have a school council than schools with 90 pupils or more (52% compared to 74%). Differences between Catholic maintained and controlled schools were small and not statistically significant in this regard.

Framework

The majority (58%) of school councils had met six times or more in the past 12 months, while a further 23% had met four to five times. A high proportion (95%) of respondents overall stated that their school council had a clearly defined purpose.

In the focus groups many participants described their purpose as trying to improve school life and as giving pupils in the school a chance to voice their opinions.

Figure 1: Primary school focus group participant's picture describing their school council's purpose



“The aim is to help children get through life easier.”
(Primary focus group participant)

“I think the job of the school council is to make the school in which you are a councillor a better place.” (Primary focus group participant with a school council)

“We give everyone a voice so they can make a difference to their own school.”
(Post-primary focus group participant with a school council)

The guidance suggests that to be as effective as possible, school councils should develop a formal constitution that provides a framework for how the council should be run.¹ In our survey, 53% of respondents stated that they had a formal constitution setting out guidelines and rules on how it should be run. Post-primary respondents were significantly more likely to report that their council had a constitution (78% compared to 53% of respondents from primary schools).

¹ *Democra School* [online] Available at: <http://www.niccy.org/Publications/democra2>

Representation

The evidence also highlights the importance of including a broad range of pupils of different ages and abilities in order to support adequate representation on the school council.² Almost all survey respondents (99%) stated that their school council includes a range of pupils of different ages.

This finding is supported by evidence from the focus groups with pupils. Most participants highlighted that pupils of different ages, often one or two representative(s) of each year group, were involved in their school council. However in one primary school, only pupils in primary 7 were allowed to be councillors.

In the majority of schools that took part in the focus groups, councillors were elected on the basis of a pupil vote, often after making a presentation or speech. In one post-primary school an interview panel approach was used. In another post-primary school, elections had been abandoned as they were perceived to have become a 'popularity contest'. They were replaced with a process whereby candidates wrote down their ideas for the council anonymously, and the teacher picked the candidates on the basis of the ideas.

"We feel it is very effective the way we hold elections because the pupils vote for the council members and can say who they feel will be good in the council."

(Post-primary focus group participant with a school council)

"We had a vote last year, but it came down to whoever was friendly with that person, whoever was smartest or cleverest." (Primary focus group participant with a school council)

Use of guidance

The Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) developed the Democra School programme aiming to support and encourage the development of meaningful school councils.³ Of the respondents to our survey:

- Less than three in ten (29%) schools were aware of and had used Democra School guidance;
- 44% stated that they were aware of the guidance but had not used it; and
- More than a quarter (27%) of schools were not aware of the guidance.

These findings are broadly supported by the focus groups with pupils, with the majority of participants stating that they had not heard of or used the guidance.

² For example Veitch (2009) 'Participation in practice: an evaluation of the primary school council as a participatory tool' *Childhoods Today*

³ *Democra School – School Councils* [online] Available at: <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/5-school-management/school-councils-2.htm>

4 Engagement and reporting

Engagement

Respondents to the survey reported high levels of engagement by staff, with 98% reporting that members of staff are engaged in the work of the school council. The literature highlights the importance of school councils having explicit reporting mechanisms. In our survey most (93%) school councils report to other pupils and to the principal (90%). A much smaller proportion (30%) of school councils reports to the school's Board of Governors.

The findings from the focus groups were similar to those from the survey. Most participants described having a key contact in the school, often a teacher or the vice-principal, who then take forward ideas deemed to be viable to the school's principal. Some school councils had closer contact with the principal; however few reported having contact with the Board of Governors.

A number of participants highlighted the importance of genuine staff engagement with the school council, with some suggesting they would like more involvement from senior management.

"In the past it might not have been as effective as it is now because with the new principal, she really wants to make a difference and give the pupils a voice."
(Post-primary focus group participant with a school council)

"It is better if you have teachers involved because it is a back-up. They give some ideas as well, so the pupils can also learn from the teachers." (Special school focus group participant with a school council)

One school participating in the focus groups that did not have a school council stated that a council had previously been established in their school, but had fallen through because the teacher who started it was unable to continue with it.

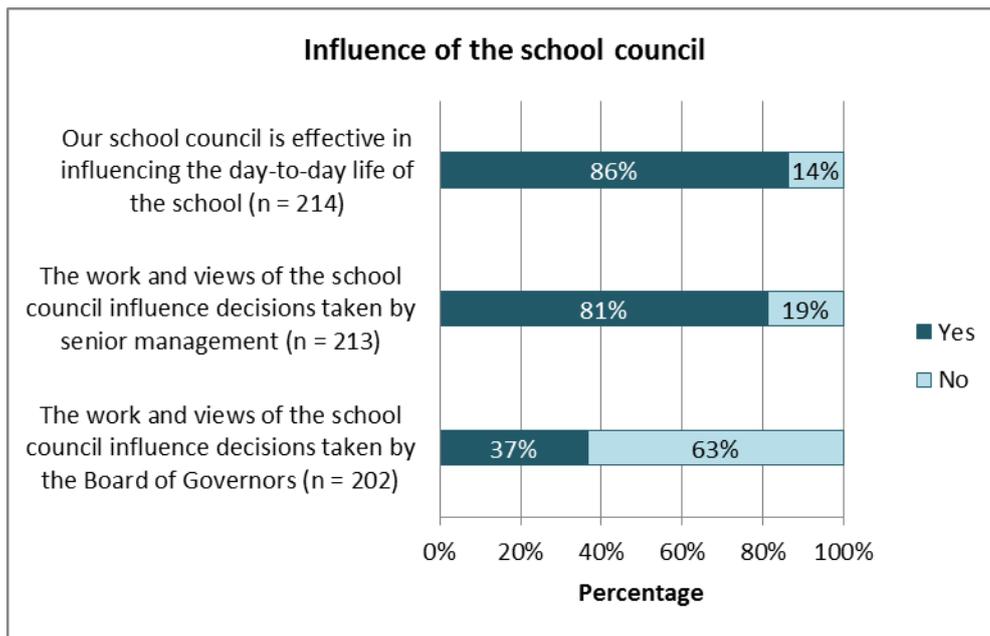
Most focus group participants stated that their school council reports to other pupils in the school, using school newspapers, assemblies, class or form groups or noticeboards to do so. However, some pupils indicated that other pupils may not understand what the school council does, and may not always be interested in its work.

5 Influence

Level of influence

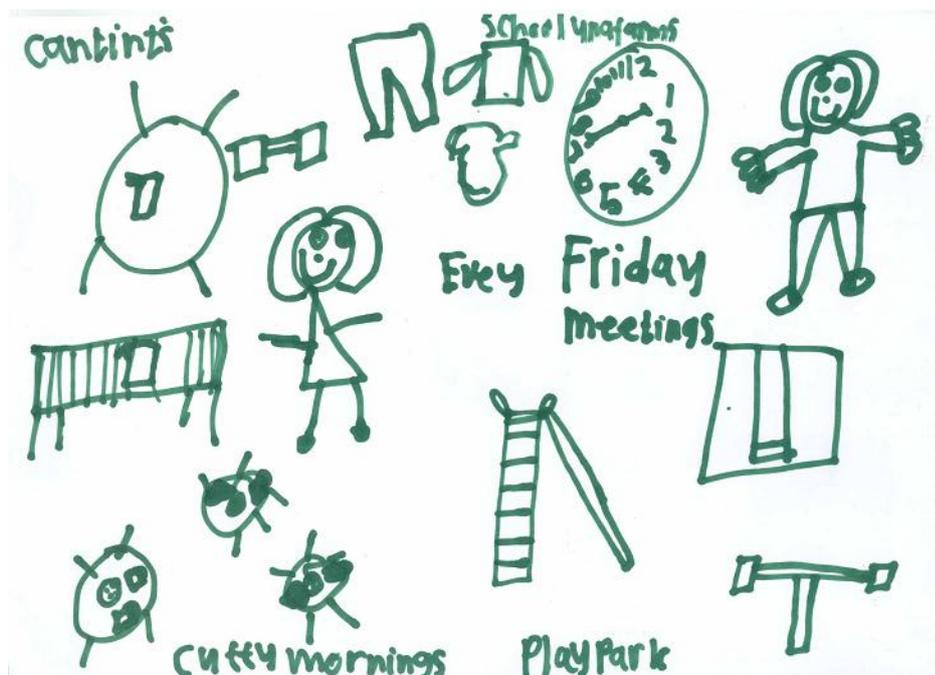
A high proportion (86%) of respondents to the survey believed that their school council was effective in influencing the day-to-day life of the school. Levels of influence reported by respondents are illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 2: Survey findings on the influence of the school council



In addition, a high proportion (86%) of survey respondents stated that their school council can demonstrate that it has had a positive impact both on pupils who participate in the council and those who do not. Most of the participants in the focus groups felt that their school council had been successful in changing elements of life in school.

Figure 3: Special school focus group participant’s picture illustrating aspects of school life influenced by their council



“We got a new uniform, a play park, new tables in the dining hall. We do coffee mornings to raise money for charity”

(Special school focus group participant)

Areas of influence

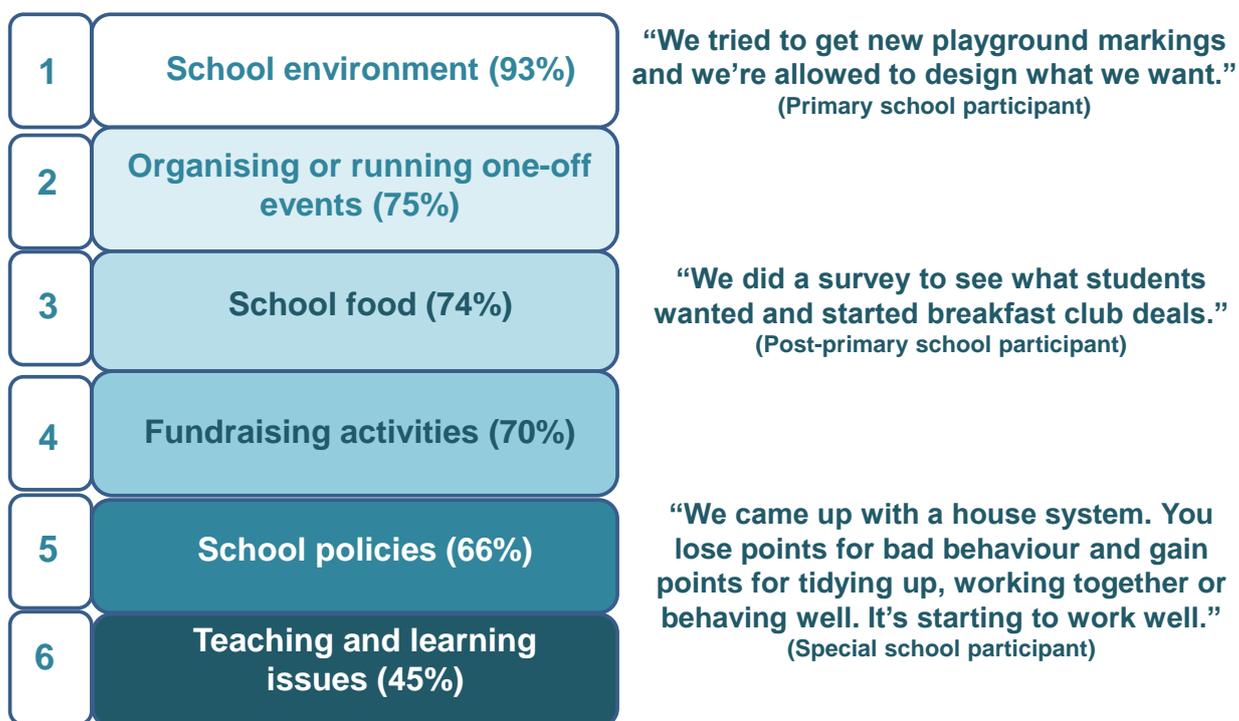
A key factor in the success of a school council cited in the literature is that pupils must have influence in matters that are central to their daily life in school. The evidence warns against school councils simply taking charge of running events and fundraising, as this can overshadow the purpose of the school council.⁴

Responses to the survey indicate that school councils here most often influence the school environment (93% of responses). Three quarters of school councils (75%) were involved in running one-off events and 70% played a role in fundraising activities.

In the focus groups with school council members, organising one-off events was most frequently cited by participants as the area where school councils have the greatest influence. This was followed by raising money for the school and school uniform. Organising one-off events was also most often cited by participants who did not have a school council as the area where they had the greatest influence in their school.

Teaching and learning was most often cited as the area where school councils had the least influence. The following figure presents the results of the survey of schools regarding areas of influence, together with quotations from the focus groups with pupils.

Figure 4: Survey and focus group findings on areas of influence



Source: survey of schools and focus groups with pupils

⁴ Mould, D. (2011) “The Requirements of Representation” *Ethos Vol. 19, No. 1*

Figure 5: Primary school focus group participant's picture illustrating aspects of school life influenced by their council

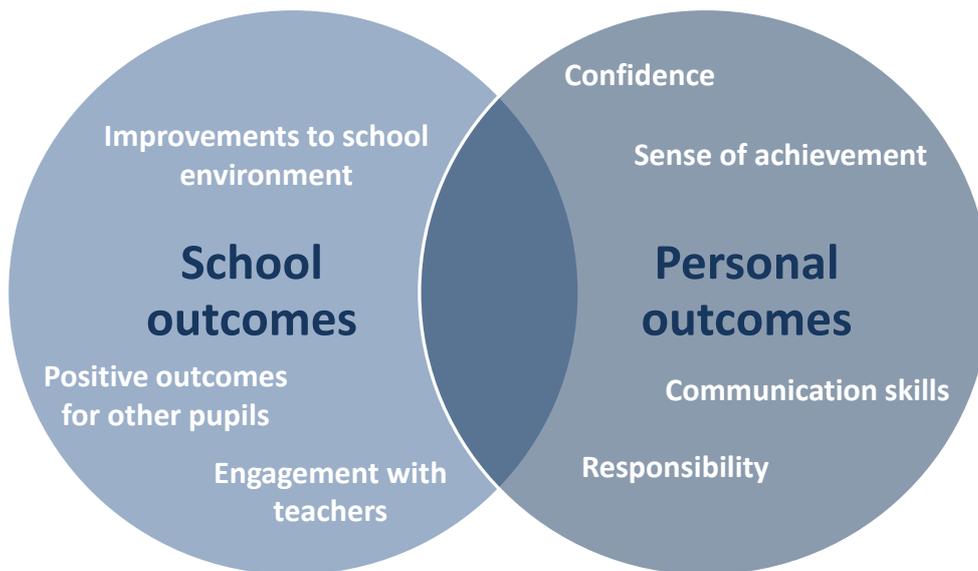


“The school council has been involved in a sponsored silence, playground equipment and raising money.” (Primary focus group participant)

6 Outcomes

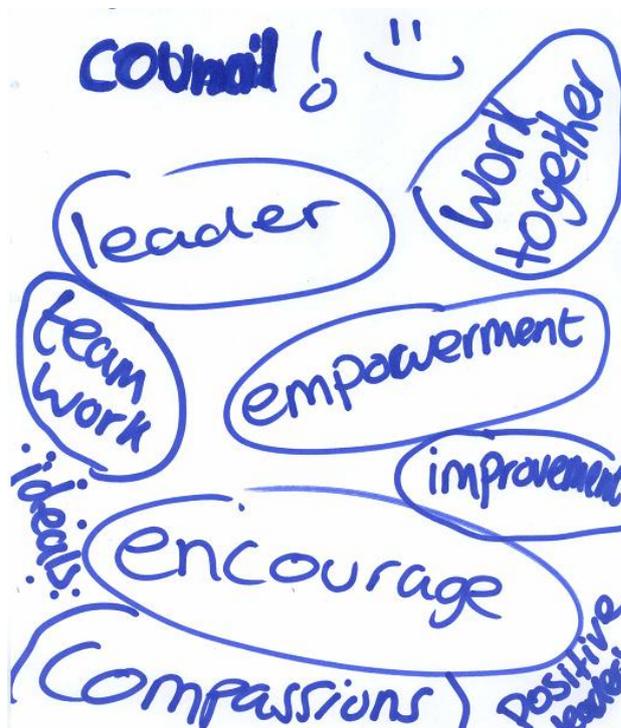
Participants in the focus groups discussed a range of outcomes from taking part in their school council. These included outcomes for the school, such as changes to the school environment or uniform, as well as personal outcomes. The following figure provides an overview of the main outcomes of school councils cited by participants in the focus groups.

Figure 6: Main outcomes of participating in a school council cited by pupils



As illustrated in the previous figure, many participants in the focus groups discussed a feeling of pride and sense of achievement as a result of being a school councillor. Many highlighted particular achievements, and others cited personal outcomes such as improved communication and organisational skills.

Figure 7: Special school focus group participant’s perceptions of school council



“We have empowerment so we can improve and make things better. We encourage people to work with us to improve behaviour, skills and compassion. We have lots and lots of ideas”
 (Special school focus group participant)

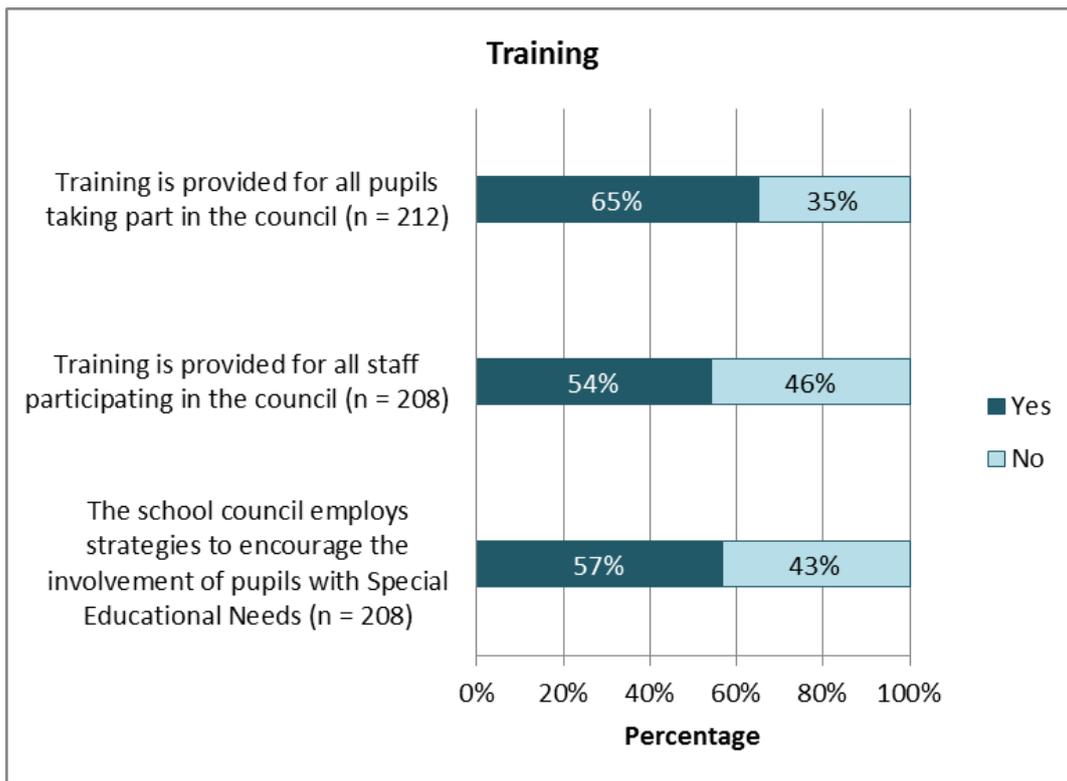
“Before I took part in the council I had no confidence, now I am very, very confident.” (Special school focus group participant with a school council)

“The new seating area we arranged was a lot of help for students, and they even came and thanked us for it.” (Post-primary focus group participant with a school council)

7 Training and support

There is broad agreement in the literature that participants in school councils (both pupils and staff) require training in order to support successful outcomes. Just under two thirds of respondents (65%) to the survey stated that training had been provided for all pupils taking part in the council. These findings and details of the proportion of schools whose staff have received training in this regard are illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 8: Survey findings on the influence of the school council



In the focus groups there was a mixture of pupils who had been provided with training and those who had not received any training. Where training had been provided, it tended to be provided by teachers, the principal or by other pupils who had previously been councillors.

“The principal organised a couple of workshops before we got elected, on team-building and communication skills.” (Post-primary focus group participant with a school council)

“We learned from our last school councillors and our teacher who helps the school council.” (Primary focus group participant with a school council)

“We just sort of did it. We haven’t had any training on how to do things.” (Primary focus group participant with a school council)

Most pupils in the focus groups did not feel that they needed more training, describing a preference to learn ‘on the job’. However, some pupils thought that a forum for sharing ideas across different school councils, such as a website, would be useful.

8 Reasons for not having a school council and other forms of engagement

Of the 68 schools responding to the survey that stated that they do not have a council, around 60% reported that they were considering or preparing to establish one. Some respondents stated that the development of a school council is set out within the school development plan and/ or that staff are receiving training in preparation.

“Training on Circle Time formed part of staff development in the past two years. Now that this practice is firmly embedded throughout the curriculum we feel in a state of readiness to develop a school’s council. One teacher has already agreed and is signed up to attend training, with a view to starting this up immediately afterwards.” (Primary survey respondent)

These findings are in line with those from the focus groups with pupils who did not have a council, as many schools participating were planning to establish a school council in the future.

The main reason reported by schools responding to the survey for not having or preparing to establish a school council was that there were other mechanisms in place for engagement that the school deemed sufficient. This was particularly the case in small schools, where pupils may have more direct, informal contact with teachers.

“We are a very small primary school and children are regularly consulted during class time and circle time about their needs, wants and concerns... To take on another new initiative at this time would put unnecessary strain on staff who are already responsible for numerous areas of the curriculum.” (Primary survey respondent)

In a small number of cases a school council was not considered appropriate, for example in special schools for pupils with profound learning difficulties, or due to a perception that school councils are not inclusive.

“Our school is small and we found that a council type structure did not give any avenue to those who were quiet and lacking in confidence or the less able. Often it was pupils who “shouted the loudest” or who were the more able who were voted in and this could/ did in some cases lead to pressure on other pupils to avoid giving their opinion or being heard.” (Post-primary survey respondent)

Other reasons provided for not establishing a school council were:

- Insufficient time to develop a council;
- School council not considered a priority;
- New school;
- Staff are unable or unwilling to commit time to the development of a council;

The majority of participants in the focus groups who did not have a school council stated that they would like to have one.

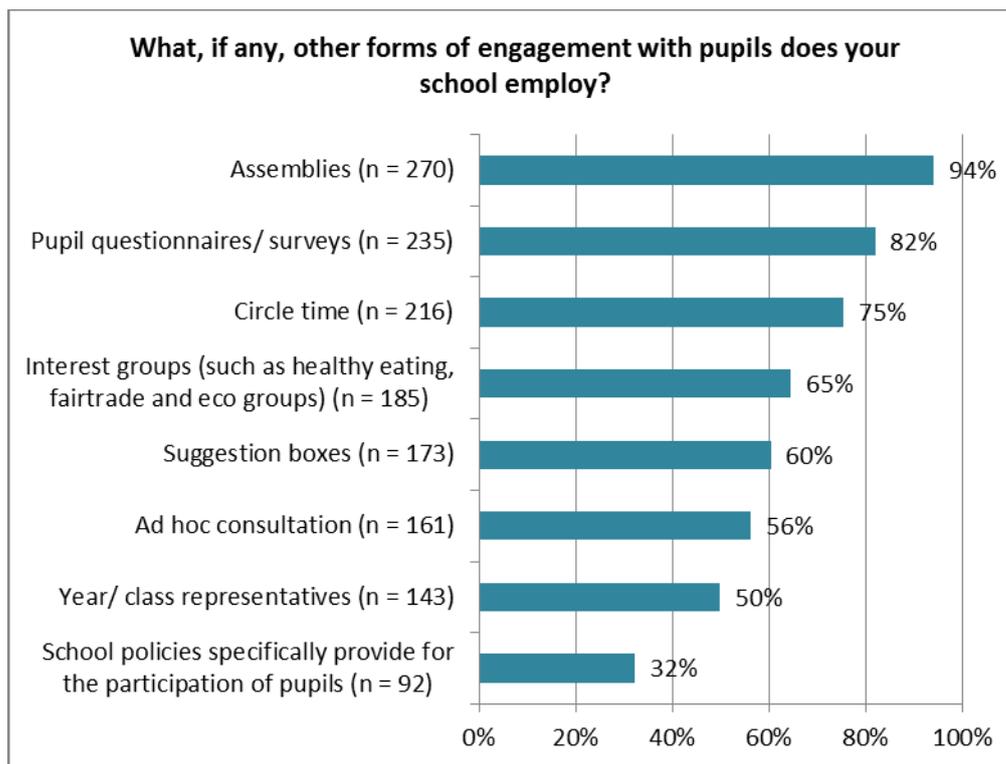
“The pupils would be able to interact with other pupils and find out the issues that they think are important, rather than teachers forcing ideas about these issues onto pupils.” (Post-primary focus group participant without a school council)

“It would give us responsibility as pupils; that we would have our say.” (Post-primary focus group participant without a school council)

Other forms of engagement

The evidence highlights the importance of school councils being located within wider structures and practices in schools that promote participation. Authors suggest that in order for school councils to reach their potential, schools need to have a genuine and consistent commitment to pupil participation.⁵ All respondents to the survey were asked what other forms of engagement with pupils they use. The responses to this question are illustrated in the following figure.

⁵ Inman, S. and Burke, H. (2002) *School councils: an apprenticeship in democracy?* London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers, Whitty, G. and Wisby, E. (2007) *Real Decision Making? School Councils in Action* London: Institute of Education

Figure 9: Survey findings on other forms of engagement used

In the focus groups, the majority of pupils felt that school councils were more useful than most other ways of being asked their views. However, they tended to acknowledge the importance of having a range of methods to engage pupils and some suggested that other approaches could complement the work of the school council.

“Surveys are good and the school council can use them but not on their own. We have an eco-club in school and we work closely with them.” (Primary focus group participant with a school council)

The pupils who did not have a school council who participated in the focus groups described a range of other approaches used in their school to engage them and ascertain their views. These included interest groups, designated teachers for cases such as bullying and speaking directly to class teachers or the principal. A majority of pupils thought that year or class representatives and interest groups were more effective ways of listening to pupils’ views.

Many pupils who did not have a council highlighted the disadvantages of relying on individual teachers to share their views, with some suggesting that a more formal approach might be beneficial.

“Some of them listen to you and some of them don’t. It depends what teacher it is and how busy they are.” (Primary focus group participant without a school council)

9 Conclusion

This research has explored school councils in Northern Ireland, their operation and experiences. The findings suggest that there are positive outcomes for pupils involved in school councils, and highlight the importance of genuine staff engagement. The evidence highlights a number of areas that could be given further consideration.

- How schools could be encouraged to establish and support a school council, and to ensure that the council has a say in matters that are central to students’ daily life in school;
- Whether teachers involved in school councils could benefit from specific training;
- The usefulness of school councils having increased contact with the Board of Governors, and how this might be facilitated;
- Ways in which pupils’ achievements on school councils might be recognised and celebrated;
- Whether a forum for participants in school councils to share ideas and good practice would be beneficial, for example, through a website.