Having a Say at School

Research Briefing Paper 2: Characteristics of Pupil Councils

Having a Say at School:
Research on Pupil Councils in Scotland

Children in Scotland

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Summary

The Having a Say at School (HASAS) research project has produced the first large-scale evidence about pupil councils throughout Scotland, including primary, secondary, special and independent schools. Pupil councils (also referred to as school or student councils) are by far the most common formal mechanism for involving children and young people in school-wide decision-making about school life. Most of them were set up since 2000. The research was conducted between 2007-2009 jointly by Children in Scotland (the national umbrella organisation for the children’s sector across Scotland) and the University of Edinburgh (Centre for Research on Families and Relationships).

HASAS Research Briefing 2 explains how a major School Survey was conducted and what was learned from it. Two separate questionnaires were sent to each school. One was designed for pupil councils to answer collectively (not as individual pupil councillors). The other was intended to be answered by the school staff (usually the headteachers or adult advisor) who is primarily responsible for pupil councils.

The questionnaires went to all Scottish secondary, independent and special schools. They were also posted to more than one thousand primary schools – large and small, urban and rural – across Scotland (i.e., a stratified random sample). There was a 35% return rate of completed questionnaires, which is a higher proportion of completed questionnaires than had been expected. In many cases, two completed questionnaires were received from the same school (one from a member staff and one from the pupil council). More often, however, only one response was received per school.

There were 1,063 questionnaires received, of which 587 were from the key staff members and 476 were completed by pupil councils. Since these 476 collective council responses included multiple individuals (perhaps up to a dozen in some cases), this means that thousands of students offered their views through this survey. Other information and briefing papers are available at: http://www.havingasavatschool.org.uk/.

Headline findings

1. 90% of schools have ‘whole school’ pupil councils – and an even higher percentage also have year-level pupil groups or ‘house’ groups. Some very small rural schools operate ‘whole school’ councils in a different sense because all students are members of the pupil council.
2. 13 is the average number of students on a ‘whole school’ pupil council. Although there are exceptions, most pupil councils are reasonably balanced in terms of age and gender.
3. 10% of pupil councils have members who require extra support from adults to participate.
4. When completed surveys were received from both the pupil council and the key staff member within the same school, their answers were almost always similar. There was less divergence than might have been anticipated.
5. Few pupil councils have budgets -- and those that do typically have small ones (i.e. the majority had less than £300 per annum). One quarter of pupil councils
identify ‘not enough money’, and a further 11% identify ‘no money’, as problems for their pupil council.

6. Most pupils become council members through self-nomination and then being voted for, usually by their year-level classmates.

7. About half of pupil councils and only 20% of school staff have received training relevant to their pupil council work during that academic year.

8. Communication to non-pupil council members occurs most often through newsletters, council members talking to classes, and school assemblies. However, regular and effective communication is cited as a common weakness between pupil councillors and their fellow students.

9. Most pupil councils see themselves as working collaboratively with staff to make decisions and, to a slightly lesser extent, to take action or implement decisions.

10. Pupil councils generally report being well-connected with adult decision-makers (i.e. the headteacher, senior management team and/or parent council). Only 5% have a pupil council member serving on the parent council.

11. Pupil councils tend to discuss, make decisions and influence change in relation to issues of daily school life that have significance for them. These often include school materials, break-times, projects, uniforms, toilets, money and food. Although there are notable exceptions, pupil councils generally are not similarly involved in academic/educational matters (e.g. appointment of teachers or content of the curriculum).

12. Beyond a lack/absence of a budget or access to funds, pupil councils cite other problems, include a lack of adequate time for (pupil council meetings, collecting views/communicating results, planning and taking actions); less than positive relationships with adult advisors and/or decision-makers, irregular student attendance at council meetings and inadequate preparation.

13. Most survey respondents think pupil councils are giving children and young people a significant say in school life. Primary and/or smaller schools respondents were generally more positive about pupil councils than those from secondary or large schools.

14. Pupil councils are not the only mechanism for pupil participation. Other popular methods include assemblies (85%) and pupil surveys (84%).

**Introduction**

‘Having a Say at School’ provides evidence on pupil councils throughout Scotland -- across primary, secondary, special and independent schools – based upon the most comprehensive research ever undertaken about this form of pupil participation in Scottish schools.

This project (2007-2009) had five research objectives:

1. Provide a detailed mapping of current pupil councils in Scotland, and the local government/school infrastructure surrounding these councils;

2. Offer well-grounded information on the effectiveness of councils, from the perspectives of adults involved and, critically, of children and young people themselves;

3. Identify the factors that facilitate and support effective pupil councils, i.e. ‘what works?’;

4. Explore how pupil councils fit within the broader context of children and young people’s participation at school; and,

5. Investigate who is excluded and included by pupil councils and, when possible, to discern why.

It is hoped this research project’s findings will become widely known and used to improve pupil councils throughout Scotland. In addition to standard reporting, a comic book was developed to share the key lessons from Having at Say at School directly with
students. Copies were sent to all Scottish schools. Visit the HASAS website, www.havingasayatschool.org.uk for more information, including the technical aspects of this School Survey.

What is a pupil council?
No official definition of a pupil (or school or student) council exists across the UK. The official Welsh website on school councils provides one common understanding of this term:

“A school council is a representative group of pupils elected by their peers to discuss matters about their education and raise concerns with the senior managers and governors of their school.”

Why be interested in pupil councils?
Pupil councils have become the most popular formal mechanism in the UK for children and young people’s participation in school-wide decision-making. Participation by students in schools is now on policy and practice agendas and the value of children and young people’s voices is recognised in major education reforms. In part, this reflects a growing understanding and acceptance of Article 12 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child across the UK.

All publicly funded primary, secondary and special schools in Wales should have pupil councils, as they are required by law (School Councils (Wales) Regulations 2005). Research in England suggests that over 90% of schools now have councils (Whitty and Wisby 2007). In Scotland, the Standards in Scotland’s Schools Act 2000 requires education authorities to have regard to a pupil’s views in decisions that significantly affect that pupil in relation to his or her school education.

Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, introduced in 2009, gives this direction of travel even greater emphasis. The Curriculum for Excellence is intended to result in each child or young person becoming: “a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen and an effective contributor”. Pupil councils are seen as one key mechanism for promoting and achieving all four of these goals (especially ‘responsible citizenship’).

In the UK, the widespread hope is that pupil councils can and will be vital ‘laboratories of democracy’. Yet, children and young people’s participation in schools, in general -- and pupil councils, in particular -- has been subject to considerable criticism. Most research shows pupils to be dissatisfied by their overall involvement in decision-making and particularly by pupil councils that they perceive as tokenistic or lacking in power (Alderson 2000; Borland et al. 2001; Cotmore 2003; Cleaver et al. 2005; Wyness 2005). Similarly, the 2008 conclusions of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child criticise the UK for its lack of progress in fully enshrining Article 12 (i.e. the right of all children to be involved in decisions that affect their lives) in education law and especially in schools’ behaviour and common practices.

Research also finds that children and young people overwhelmingly want to be involved in participative decision-making in their schools (e.g. Alderson 2000; Kilkelly et al. 2004; Pedder and McIntyre 2006). Positive case studies of pupil councils have been documented, from pupil and teacher perspectives (e.g. Learning and Teaching Scotland (www.ltscotland.org.uk/citizenship/about/participation/index.asp); HMIE 2006; Whitty and Wisby 2007).

Alderson (2000) points out that when pupils saw their pupil council as tokenistic, it had a greater impact in

1 http://www.schoolcouncilswales.org.uk/en/fe/page_at.asp?n1=30&n2=31&n3=69 (16.6.09)
2 In non-technical language, Article 12 of the UNCRC states that the child has the right to express his or her opinion freely and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter or procedure affecting the child.
generating pupil disaffection than having no council at all. If pupil councils continue as the most common, formal participation mechanism in schools, then they must be as effective as possible, from the viewpoints of all concerned – children and young people, school staff members, parents and key policymakers/opinion leaders.

How did HASAS learn about pupil councils nationwide?

1. Survey of all 32 Scottish local authorities (i.e. headquarter’s advisor for pupil councils or equivalent) and analysis of each local authority’s policies on pupil councils;
2. School survey, with separate questionnaires posted to adult advisors/headteachers and to pupil councils at each and every special, independent and secondary school, as well as hundreds of diverse primary schools throughout Scotland;
3. Case studies of six illustrative schools, involving: focus groups with pupil council members at the start and end of the academic year; a survey of pupil council members; staff interviews; and documentary analysis; and
4. Further research in two of these six schools, involving: observation of pupil council meetings throughout the year; and, a survey of students who are not pupil council members.

A National Advisory Group greatly assisted the Having a Say at School project. The group included pupil council members (from primary and secondary schools), teachers, national and local policy makers, researchers, and other experts. Although it did not meet often as a group, there were numerous helpful interactions with individual members during these years.

The HASAS project team also assisted the Scottish Consumer Council (Tisdall et al. 2007) in conducting a representative survey of secondary school pupils, on pupil councils. The SCC results were also compared with the earlier findings of a similar survey, undertaken by Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People in 2005.

What did the HASAS School Survey reveal about the major characteristics of Scotland’s pupil councils?

Children and young people’s participation in schools

Most schools are consulting children and young people, and doing so in various ways. Schools were most likely to involve children and young people through ‘whole school’ pupil councils (90%), assemblies (85%) and pupil surveys (84%). ‘Circle time’ is more popular in primary and special schools than secondary schools, while year-level fora and house groups are more widespread in secondary schools. Schools without ‘whole school’ pupil councils were more likely to be secondary schools or independent schools.

The HASAS survey suggests that pupil councils are on the rise (see Alderson et al. 2000; Whitty and Wisby 2007). Most pupil councils are young, with nearly three-quarters (73%) created since 2000. This growth is particularly strong among primary, small, rural and denominational schools.

How are pupils councils created, populated and resourced?

The average number of members on a pupil council is 13, while the median is 11. Primary schools are more likely to have smaller councils than secondary schools. Boys and girls were equally likely to be pupil council members. This is due, at least in some schools, to a deliberate balance maintained by the school’s selection/election procedures, e.g. P6 students are allowed to elect two pupil councillors to represent them; one from a list of nominated girls and the other from a list of nominated boys. However, there still are
a minority of schools in which pupil councillors during a given year are all (or nearly all) of one gender.

The overwhelming majority of pupil councils are elected. Approximately 70% involve self-nomination and then voting by pupils, while 23% use class-nomination (or occasionally teacher nomination) of the candidates and then voting by pupils (see also, Baginsky and Hannam 1999, for secondary schools). A small number of schools (3%) rely upon teacher selection, with no voting by pupils. This exceptional practice tends to occur in special schools or large secondary schools. Some pupil councils (4%) – virtually all of which are small and rural – have no elections because all students automatically are members of the school-wide pupil council.

One in ten pupil councils (10%) have members who require extra support from adults to participate. These range from pupil councillors who are blind to others who have been diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum. Pupil councils with members needing additional support are more likely to be found in the big four Scottish urban areas (and, of course, in special schools).

Just over one-quarter (28%) of pupil councils have their own budget. These councils are more likely to be found in secondary or other large schools (with 600 or more pupils). Even in the minority of schools that have budgets at all, the amount of money they control tends to be small (31% had budgets under £150, while another 25% had between £150-299).

Half of pupil councils with budgets spent their money on equipment, while 26% used their funds for special projects. At the other end of the spectrum, more than one-third of all the pupil councils cited ‘not having enough money’ or having ‘no money’ as a significant problem. Most schools make needed funds available upon request by the pupil council for a special purpose, without a set amount being allocated. Thus, pupil councillors usually have some access to at least a modest level of resources, even in the absence of controlling their own budget.

80% of school staff (adult advisors) report that they are receiving no special training to support their pupil council work. Whether they ever have given such training is not known. 50% of pupil councils report that they are receiving some type of training for their role, while the other half indicate that no training has been offered to them as pupil councillors. It seems unlikely that many pupils would have received council training previously, but this question was not posed in the HASAS survey.

How often do pupil councils meet and how are communications handled?

Just over a third (34%) of pupil councils meet monthly – making this the most common type of scheduling. 19% of pupil councils have planned meetings fortnightly, while 14% meet only once every term. The remaining one-third of pupil councils meet on an irregular basis. In a significant majority of schools (61%), pupil council meetings are held during lesson times. Meeting during breaks or at lunchtime is the next most common pattern for pupil councils (20%). For the remaining 19% of pupil councils no established pattern is reported. When and how often pupil council meeting are convened has been the subject of commentary, particularly in terms of demonstrating adult commitment (or lack thereof) to these councils (Wyse 2001; Dürr 2005).

Communication from the pupil council to those not on it – both other students and school staff members – occurs in a wide variety of ways. Most pupil councils relay a multiple means of communication, rather than single one. Newsletters are the most popular form of communicating what the pupil council is doing; with more than four of every five pupil councils (82%) using this method. The next most popular means is for individual pupil councillors to make an oral report.
back to their class/year-group/house (pupil council members talking to their classes (72%). Pupil council reports being given at school assemblies was also used at a nearly two-thirds of schools (63%).

Figure 1: How do pupils and staff who are not involved with the pupil council find out what it has been doing?

Pupil council goals and decision-making
In 1992, Roger Hart suggested a 'ladder of participation’, which recognised that the term ‘participation’ can have different meanings and occur at different levels. It also has been used as a tool for comparing the manifestations of ‘participation' in schools. In the context of Having a Say at School, participation was conceived as meaning ‘participation in decision-making about school life’.

Hart’s ladder was modified for the HASAS School Survey, with school staff and pupil councils asked to each express their views about the 'main reason’ for a pupil council existing within their school. The options offered in the survey were framed around various levels/types of participation in decision-making. The responses from key staff members (adult advisors) and pupil councils do not differ radically. In both cases, the option chosen most often is: “For students and staff to make decisions together” (40% among staff and 37% among students).
About one in five pupil councils and school staff pick the ‘highest rung’ on Hart’s ladder, where children and young people have the most decision-making power (‘for pupils to make decisions about what happens in the school’). In general, pupil councils are more likely than school staff to see themselves in a consultative or collaborative, rather than decision-making, role.

Given these answers, it follows logically that seven out of ten respondents (70%) report that pupils and staff members decide together what is talked about at pupil council meetings. 20% indicate that pupils make the decision on what to talk about.

An overwhelming majority of respondents to the HASAS School Survey affirm that pupil councils do give pupils a say on how their schools are run (84% of pupil councils, and 84% of school staff, ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’). Pupil councils from primary and/or smaller schools are more likely to be positive on this point than those from secondary or larger schools.

A collaborative approach continues when answering the Survey question: ‘Overall, whose job is it to make sure that things decided by the pupil council actually happen?’. The answer chosen most often is ‘The pupil council and the Head Teacher’ (45% of pupil councils and 47% of school staff). The next two most popular responses are: for ‘The staff member who comes to the pupil council meetings’ (18% of pupil councils and 22% of staff) and ‘The pupil council themselves’ (13% of pupil councils and 17% of staff). Primary and/or smaller schools are more likely to choose ‘pupil council and Head Teacher’, in part because it is more usual in such schools for the headteacher to be the pupil council’s regular adult advisor, too.

Pupil councils in the UK have been criticised for focusing on ‘inconsequential’ issues and failing to address fundamental academic issues (Wyness 2005, Whitty and Wisby 2007, ESTYN 2008). From a long list of possible issues, school staff and pupil councils are more likely to say that pupil councils discussed, made decisions, and influenced changes in relation to: school materials (e.g. books or playground games); projects (e.g. health promoting schools or school gardens); food in school (e.g. lunches, snacks or water) or other school life issues of significance to students themselves (e.g. toilets or uniforms). Topics related to academic matters (e.g. subjects taught, how well pupils are taught, student assessment and helping to select school staff members) are the least selected as areas of
focus for pupil councils, by both pupil councils and school staff (see also ESTYN 2008; Cross et al. 2009).

Most, but far from all, pupil councils are reported as having reasonable access to, or connections with, adult decision-makers at their school. 75%, for instance, cite meetings and/or correspondence with the headteacher. The quality of these connections was not clear from respondents to the HASAS survey. More than a quarter of pupil councils (27%) also are in contact with the parent council at their school. In fact, 5% of schools report having a pupil council member also serving on the school board/parent council.

Conclusions

The School Survey conducted by the Having a Say at School research project confirms that pupil councils have become the most popular formal mechanism for children and young people’s participation in schools – and, if anything, are on the increase.

This survey shows that primary schools as a group are more participative, and have more positively evaluated pupil councils, than secondary schools (see also Cross et al. 2009). The reasons for this, though, can only be speculative. Because there are few very large primary schools, it was not possible to match them with secondary schools of the same size. Thus, the survey results do not indicate whether such differences are due to age, the operations and ethos of primary versus secondary schools, school size or other critical factors.

Primary schools may benefit from more frequently having: smaller classes; fewer students who move around from class to class and teacher to teacher; and/or less pressure to produce academic exam results (see also Whitty and Wisby 2007; Cross et al. 2009). Positive pupil participation may be easier to create and maintain in smaller settings (where contact can be more frequent between school members) than in larger, more anonymous school settings.

Common concerns found in other studies of pupil participation are replicated here. Most pupil councils are not routinely involved in academic matters. There are problems with lack of time and lack of support, for both staff and council members. Few councils have their own budget and usually have access only to very modest resources. As ESTYN (the education inspectorate in Wales) notes, budgets give “increased status to the school council, and pupils feel more highly valued” (2008: 8) – while also noting that councils can still be effective if they can otherwise gain access to resources. Only about half of pupil councils (and even fewer staff) are receiving special training. This is a similar finding to England and perceived as problematic (Whitty and Wisby 2007).

Respondents to the HASAS survey see pupil councils as having reasonable access to, or relationships with, adult decision-makers at their schools. However, pupil councils generally do not view themselves as being powerful in making and implementing decisions on their own or playing a clear leadership role within schools. For example, a pupil council member sitting on senior management teams or parent councils is very rare. Still, these connections may sometimes be better than those reported elsewhere in the UK (e.g. ESTYN 2008; Whitty and Wisby 2007).

According to the HASAS School Survey, the dominant model of a pupil council in Scotland today is one in which a reasonably representative group of students are elected as pupil councillors and perform a consultative and collaborative influencing role within their schools, particularly around school life issues of direct and immediate importance to students themselves.

Along with the more detailed case studies and other information sources, the HASAS School Survey also contributed to a richer understanding of what pupil council ‘effectiveness’ actually means and how it is made manifest in the context of Scottish schools. These findings are explored in-depth in the Having a Say at School Research Briefings 4 and 5.
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The principal investigators, and main contributors to this HASAS Research Briefing, are:
Children in Scotland: Dr Fungi Gwanzura-Ottemoller and Dr Jonathan Sher
University of Edinburgh (CRFR): Professor Kay Tisdall and Dr Sue Milne

Also participating in the HASAS research upon which this Briefing is based are:
Aibek Iliasov, SPSS, University of Edinburgh
Sheila Masaba, SPSS, University of Edinburgh
Dr Andrew Thompson, SPSS, University of Edinburgh

www.havingasayatschool.co.uk
www.childreninscotland.org.uk
www.crfr.ac.uk

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