Participation in practice: an evaluation of the primary school council as a participatory tool
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Introduction
This article reflects on the concept of children’s participation in primary schools, and focuses in particular on the school council as a participatory tool. Set within the framework of the sociology of childhood and borrowing from the international discourse on ‘participation’ this research project views childhood as a social construction and children as competent social actors (Mayall, 2004; James and Prout, 1997). It differentiates between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ forms of children’s participation (Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Morrow, 2000) and, through a participatory research project in one primary school in London, attempts to examine one school council in this light.

The research evaluated the participatory nature of the school council and included focus group discussions with councillors, semi-structured interviews with staff, and observation of council meetings and class discussions on school council issues. In addition, a mini-research project by school councillors was implemented to test the use of participatory research methods. Although the research project found that the school council in question was not a participatory forum, this was more closely related to a passive definition of ‘participation’ used by those promoting school councils than to any failing of the school.

In the United Kingdom (UK) today, children’s participation is an increasingly popular concept that, together with ‘student voice’ and ‘pupil consultation’, is being widely advocated throughout the UK education sector. The Every Child Matters (ECM) initiative, for example, makes it imperative for schools to promote participation. One of the five ECM outcomes for children’s wellbeing says that children should ‘make a positive contribution’, and the first aim given for this outcome places schools under a statutory duty to ensure that “children should engage in decision making and support the community and environment” (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003). Additionally, in November 2008, the
Education and Skills Act introduced a requirement that school governing bodies invite and consider the views of pupils on core policy matters that affect them.

However, it is difficult to find a clear definition of children’s participation in the school context. In one of the few research projects on school councils to analyse participation, Morrow (2000) distinguishes between latent participation (having a share in, taking part) and active participation (the involvement of children at all levels of decision-making). The concept of children’s participation has been more fully explored in the field of international development and children’s rights where international non-governmental organisation, Save the Children, defines children’s participation as “involving boys and girls in decisions about their lives and the lives of their family and community and larger society in which they live” (van Beers et al, 2006: 15). For Save the Children, the core purpose of children’s participation is to empower them as individuals and members of civil society, giving them the opportunity to influence the actions and decisions that affect their lives.

In English schools, the school council is promoted as the key tool to facilitate children’s participation, one that was hailed in 2006 by the then Schools Minister, Lord Adonis, as “truly democratic [where] the pupil body is given real power and responsibility” (quoted in Trafford, 2006: 4). But what are school councils, and are they examples of participatory practice? There is little disagreement on the first question. School Councils UK, a charity that “promotes and facilitates effective structures for pupil participation in every school” defines the school council as “an elected body of pupils whose purpose is to represent their classes and to be a forum for active and constructive pupil input into the daily life of the school community” (School Councils UK website, 2007a).

To answer the second question, a clearer understanding of the term ‘children’s participation’ is required, and this article seeks to provide that. It draws on an MA research project that questions the effectiveness of the school council as a participatory tool in primary schools and consequently critiques the definition (or lack of it) of children’s participation in the school context. Set within the framework of the sociology of childhood, and borrowing from the critique of participatory international development, the research explored the concept of children’s participation which underlies much of the rhetoric on school councils and identified a number ways to re-define participation in the English primary school context in order that children can be involved as competent social actors.
The dominance of citizenship

The emergence of school councils is inextricably linked with the statutory introduction of citizenship education into secondary schools. This followed the 1998 Crick Report into the teaching of democracy which recommended the development of school councils as part of school’s citizenship curriculum – although Crick fell short of recommending that school councils become mandatory (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998). As a consequence, the framework for citizenship education has dominated subsequent developments in policy and legislation on consulting with children. It has also directed recent proposals in the House of Commons to make school councils compulsory in all English maintained schools (Shead, 2007).

Discourse framed by the citizenship framework promotes democracy and the advantages of democratic schooling as a key driving force for school councils. In the push for the democratisation of schools, school councils are seen as a barometer of progress (Baginsky and Hannam, 1999; Rudduck et al., 1996) and often presented as a panacea for many of the criticisms of an “over-prescriptive and hierarchical schooling system” (Rowe 2003: 45). Pupil voice is linked to the development of ‘life skills’ which children develop during their experience as councillors. However, in espousing the virtues of school councils as “a most excellent training ground in responsibility for future citizens” (School Councils UK, 2007b), Bernard Crick reveals a developmentalist view of childhood, in that the skills developed by councillors will not be employed by children in the here and now of their school life but rather once they have left school (when they become adults). Within the citizenship framework, research on school councils tends to be practice-focused, reflects a preoccupation with the school council as a concrete example of democracy (Inman and Burke, 2002; Baginsky and Hannam, 1999; Rowe, 2003) and, although recognising the procedural criticisms of school councils (such as no written constitution for school councils, infrequent meetings etc), ignores a more fundamental questioning of the representative democratic model.

Other drivers of school councils link them to the school improvement framework (Cotmore, 2004; Davies, 1999; Whitty and Wisby, 2007) where benefits (for head teachers) include reducing school exclusions and children being seen as ‘expert witnesses’ who can express their views to schools on management issues through the school council (Fielding, 2001; Rowe, 2003; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000). The idea of children giving ‘feedback’ through school councils to improve the running of the school has
also been connected to New Labour’s notion of ‘active citizenship’ and ‘personalised learning’ (Whitty and Wisby, 2007).

Although the vast majority of research is set within the citizenship framework, some of the most recent analysis of school councils is more closely connected to the paradigm of the sociology of childhood where childhood is seen as a social construction (James and Prout, 1997) and children are viewed as competent from an early age. Research within this paradigm has focused on children’s competence and agency, recognising that these are constrained by structural factors (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998: 8). Within this paradigm, formal, collective forms of children’s participation (such as school councils) are generally viewed as restricted and weak (Alderson, 2000a; Morrow, 1999; 2000). Interest in the concept of children’s agency has produced research that highlights and analyses the agency and participation of children in school councils (Cotmore, 2004; Cox and Robinson-Pant, 2006; Wyse, 2001), pays more attention to children’s rights and competences within schools, and analyses the power relations at play in school councils between adults and children. It also gives more weight to children’s views of their school councils, uses participatory techniques to undertake research with children (Alderson, 2000a; Cotmore, 2004; Gallagher, 2006; Morrow, 1999) and focuses on primary rather than secondary students. Furthermore, it points to the school council as a space within the school context that is “the locus of an ongoing struggle” between children’s agency and institutional structures (Gallagher, 2006: 165).

However, the dominance of the citizenship framework results in school councils being analysed as educational products rather than participative processes (Wyse, 2001). Consequently, the term ‘participation’ is often used but very seldom defined. In government guidelines for schools on personal social and health education the word ‘participate’ (used to highlight an aspect of the knowledge, skills and understanding taught as part of the curriculum) is simply followed by the example of a ‘school’s decision-making process’ and how this process is related to other democratic structures and processes such as parliaments and voting. The terms ‘school council’, ‘participation’ and ‘pupil voice’ tend to be used interchangeably. In Morrow’s analysis of children’s participation in communities and institutions in the UK (2000), she concludes that active participation (the involvement of children at all levels of decision-making and which the school council is deemed to promote) is non-existent. It seems that the dominance of the citizenship framework results in participation being defined broadly as ‘taking part’, enabling the
school council to be viewed as an effective participatory tool. When participation is defined more narrowly – as a radical, transformative and empowering process – the school council is viewed as tokenistic.

**The emergence of a participative framework**

Academics and practitioners in the field of international development have made better progress in questioning the validity and purpose of the concept of participation than educationalists who espouse pupil participation. Consequently, a deeper understanding of the term ‘participation’, and associated concepts such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘representation’, has been reached by those working in international rights and development. This understanding has emerged from an international discourse on participation where existing views of the intrinsic value of participative practice have been questioned by a series of practitioners and academics in a critique entitled ‘Participation: the new tyranny?’ (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). In a response entitled ‘Participation: from tyranny to transformation?’ Hickey and Mohan (2004) bring together an equally broad range of contributors to the debate and argue the need to reconstitute the term participation through engagement in three key areas of debate. These three areas are explained here, and used to throw light on the reality of participation in school councils.

The first area is transformation, and is an answer to Cooke and Kothari’s critique that participatory practice should be aiming to achieve political change (2001). Hickey and Mohan recognise the temporal nature of much participative practice (a reliance on quick-fix, one-off participatory events) and call for long-term strategies that aim to transform society so that the bargaining power of the poor is strengthened. Wyse (2001) suggests that participation in UK schools falls far short of this transformatory vision, critiquing school councils as merely products of the curriculum. He calls for a closer look at the intentions of school councils and more emphasis on the processes within schools that can be used to facilitate participation and democratic involvement (Wyse, 2001: 216).

The second area of debate surrounding participation can be described as the temporal and spatial. Hickey and Mohan (2004) recognise that transformative action with marginalised people – for example, action that strengthens their bargaining power – needs to take place in the ‘here and now’ (the immediate experience of participants) as well as in the long term (the wider benefits to the future of the community). Acknowledgement of children as participants in the here and now recognises them as active agents – ‘human
beings’ – rather than agents in waiting – ‘human becomings’ (Qvortrup, 1991). This latter developmentalist construction is reflected in citizenship education, where school councils are used to teach children how to become active citizens (once they have reached the age of majority) rather than focusing on their active citizenship as children in the present: “citizens now, not citizens in waiting” (Maitles and Deuchar, 2006: 250).

Hickey and Mohan (2004: 18) also put forward the idea of “space as a social and theoretical construct” which, even if created by the powerful, has “the potential for action which is to some degree managed by the marginal”. This connects to the idea of the school council as a distinctive social space within the school environment and analysis of the tension between agency and structure within school councils. Using participatory methods with children, child-participation practitioner, Richard Cotmore, analyses school councils as a social space and concludes that council representatives are placed in an intermediary position between the demands of pupils and of the school as an institution (Cotmore, 2004: 64). From a geographer’s point of view, Gallagher expands the social–spatial debate on school councils and, by analysing power relations, participation and inclusion in school spaces, recognises school councils as participatory initiatives that are “the political domain in which the distinction between structure and agency breaks down” (Gallagher, 2006: 165).

Finally, by analysing the concept of representation, Hickey and Mohan (2004) challenge the notion that the representative democratic model is inherently participative or empowering. In citizenship education, the concept of representation, where a large group of people is represented by a smaller group, clearly fits within the model of procedural democracy on which school councils are based, and the subsequent calls for the democratisation of schools (Inman and Burke, 2002; Maitles and Deuchar, 2006; Rowe, 2003; Trafford, 2003). There is growing recognition that the reliance of the procedural democracy model on literacy skills disqualifies many children from taking part in school councils; leading to the use of alternative ‘child-friendly’ processes such as visual tools which enable a greater number of children to participate in school councils (Cox and Robinson-Pant, 2006). However, a more fundamental questioning or analysis of the democratic model is lacking in most research on school councils.

The concept of children’s participation has been influenced by the international debate on participation insomuch that models have been developed that focus on levels or
principles of participation rather than the development of a succinct definition of the term. For example, international non-governmental organisation Save the Children has developed five principles of participation (transparency and accountability, children-friendly environment, equality of opportunity, safety and protection of children and finally, commitment and competency of adults) to measure participative activities. In addition, Shier’s ‘pathways to participation’ model (2001) is also based on five levels of participation and takes account of the commitment from an organisation or individual staff to develop a participative environment.

The great difficulty in clarifying the concept of children’s participation in the education sector – and even in the field of children’s rights where I have worked on participative projects with children – is intriguing. Why is there no internationally recognised definition of participation when it appears to have become a development model in its own right? And why, when participation is transferred to the education sector, is it so often defined simply as ‘the school council’? Is the concept of participation merely a method or a new paradigm? In setting out to analyse the school council as a participatory tool I had not anticipated the depth of research and analysis required to find an appropriate definition for children’s participation in the primary school context. But this subject eventually came to dominate the conduct of the research project.

**Participatory research in the primary school**

During the research, participants all struggled with the abstract nature of participation. Even when asked directly, staff at the school found it difficult to explain how they understand the concept of children’s participation, tending instead to describe the purpose of school councils. Consequently, the concept of participation was explored by evaluating the school council in terms of the level of participation it represented.

In studying participation in this setting, it made sense to use participatory research methods. These are methods that enable children to demonstrate their capacities as research participants and partners (Mayall, 2004), and consequently to take part in collecting and analysing the data that is collected in the course of study into their own lives (Ennew and Plateau, 2004). Participatory techniques aim to facilitate dialogue, analysis and debate and are often used in action-focused research; that is research which promotes changes in policy or practice (O’Kane, 2000; Veale, 2005). Participatory techniques are particularly suitable for exploring children’s competence as research
participants and partners (Christensen and James, 2000; Johnson et al, 1995). During the research project, participatory methods were implemented in three ways:

1. children were involved in overseeing the whole research process;
2. participatory techniques were used with child respondents in the collection of data;
3. children performed part of the research themselves, through a mini-research project.

The research was carried out in a Church of England primary school over a period of seven months in 2007, with sixteen school councillors (one girl and one boy from each school year), two other students (involved in overseeing the research project), two teachers and one learning support officer (responsible for facilitating the school council). The project used a multi-method approach so that children of different abilities could take part (see Table 1).

Table 1. A summary of the multi-method approach used in the study

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Activity/ participants</th>
<th>Aim of analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Research on children</strong></td>
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<td>Quantitative analysis</td>
<td>Minutes of council meetings</td>
<td>Impact of school council</td>
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<td>Observation</td>
<td>School council meetings</td>
<td>Participatory nature of the activity</td>
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<td>Class discussions on council issues</td>
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<td>Semi-structured interviews</td>
<td>One infant school teacher</td>
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<td>One junior school teacher</td>
<td>Effectiveness of participation models in determining the nature of participation in the school council</td>
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<td>Learning support officer</td>
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<td><strong>Mini research project with children</strong></td>
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<td>Focus group discussions</td>
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<td><strong>Research by children</strong></td>
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<td>Survey</td>
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A quantitative analysis was made of council meeting minutes over a two-year period (17 meetings in total), noting the frequency and range of topics brought to council meetings. The subsequent written responses from the head teacher (who did not attend council meetings) were assessed in terms of the impact the council had on the school. A number of qualitative research methods were also used:

- unstructured observation of eight council meetings over a period of seven months to assess the participatory process during council meetings, plus two sessions of classroom discussion on council issues to see whether the council processes were significantly different from discussions on similar issues in the classroom context;
- a reflective journal kept by the researcher, with data fed into stakeholder discussions (meetings of two students, a teacher, the learning support officer and the researcher who, together, supervised the whole research project);
- semi-structured interviews with staff to gauge the effectiveness of the council in the class context and to assess staff’s understanding of participation as it relates to the school context; and
- focus-group discussions using age-appropriate structured activities which aimed to encourage non-literate participants to take part; these provided the bulk of the data.

This article concentrates mainly on the focus-group discussions, as they were most effective in enabling an analysis of participation. Focus-group discussions were chosen as the most appropriate method for research with the children as they are known to be useful when exploring information for which people have a common understanding. In addition, they enable groups of children to feel more comfortable as they reduce the role and power of (adult) researchers (Ennew and Plateau, 2004) and allow children to talk more easily about their daily lives than interviews or surveys (Mauthner, 1997). Focus-group discussions were held with infant and junior councillors separately. They explored councillors’ views on the effectiveness of the council and their role as councillors, and finally elicited their recommendations for changing the school council. Age-appropriate activities were used, such as storytelling, role play, drawing and ranking exercises.

The concept of participation was analysed at every level of the research process. This included measuring the effectiveness of participatory techniques with children. The techniques explored were:
• role play, storytelling and ranking exercises
• research methods – councillors undertook their own mini-research project for which they designed the research process and collected, analysed and presented data to the school
• the use of models of participation to determine the participative nature of the council

Ethical considerations
As the research project proposed doing research both with and by children, ethical considerations were a crucial element of the research design. The research adhered to the school policy on confidentiality so that consent was obtained from all participants and their parents through a children-friendly briefing leaflet which explained the research to councillors, their parents and teachers. In addition, the concept of ongoing consent, often considered problematic when undertaking research with children, was dealt with by simply reminding participants, at the beginning of all research activities, that they could opt out of the research at any point; consequently, during one of the focus group discussions with junior school councillors, two of the participants left after approximately 20 minutes, explaining that they wanted to attend a PE class instead of the discussion. In addition, as humourously illustrated by an entry in the reflexive journal kept by the researcher, the children had little difficulty in understanding the concept of consent:

18 June 2007: When I was rounding up the children to take part in the focus group, [name of two councillors] had to be pulled out of a PE lesson…when I went to check on them [name of boy councillor] said ‘I hate school council’ (which he has said before in a similarly whiney voice). I explained that we were not having a school council meeting and that we would be having biscuits (as part of the first activity), but he still looked at me in a dejected way. So, then I explained that he didn’t HAVE to come and could go back to his PE lesson – at which he immediately whooped for joy and started putting his PE kit back on.

The primary school council

How the school council worked
The school council met every two or three weeks on Monday afternoons between 3.00 and 3.30pm. Councillors were democratically elected at the beginning of the year and included one boy and one girl from each class, from nursery (aged three to four) through to Year 6 (aged ten to eleven). At council meetings, which were facilitated by the Learning Support
Officer, each pair of class councillors was expected to bring a ‘school council book’ which listed items and issues previously discussed by their class. During the meeting, councillors read from the books in turn and minutes were recorded by another councillor. Externally to council meetings, the Learning Support Officer presented the minutes to the head teacher, who gave an oral response. The final minutes, consisting of issues and requests from councillors and a response from the head teacher, were distributed to class teachers who were expected to use them to discuss council issues with all the children in the class.

The impact of the council on the school
Quantitative analysis of council minutes found that the vast majority of issues brought to council meetings were requests – a wish list from students. These requests tended to be for equipment or for changes to such things as the lunch menu. A request for juice instead of water was mentioned 11 times over a period of 17 meetings.

From analysis of written responses by the head teacher in council minutes it was determined that the greatest impact the school council had was in highlighting the need for cleaning or repairs, for example to locks in toilets. Of the 41 points addressed positively by the head teacher, eight concerned repairs or cleaning. This corresponds with research on school councils where the remit of the councils generally concerns relatively insignificant issues – “tuck shop and toilets” – rather than aspects of the core curriculum (Rowe, 2003: 2; Wyse, 2001). Many of the responses from the head teacher were to ‘explain’ why it was not possible to grant a certain request. On four occasions the head teacher used the opportunity to respond to requests from the school council to reprimand or warn children.

From observational analysis of school council meetings it was clear that, as the head teacher did not attend meetings, a dialogue between the councillors and the ‘decision-maker’ was not formed. Consequently, many of the same issues were raised each month in council meetings – even when a response had been previously given by the head teacher. For example, in 2007, at six separate council meetings requests continued to be made for playground equipment when the head teacher had previously stated that it had already been ordered by the school.

Staff and school councillors’ views of the council
Through focus-group discussions councillors were asked to explain their role and what happened at council meetings. They highlighted key issues that they liked and disliked
about the council, making recommendations for changes. These discussions were used to analyse the participatory practice of the council.

Infant school councillors (aged 3 to 7) saw the council as a “meeting” where “we tell the teacher what we want” – a view supported by staff who saw the school council as a forum for children “to request anything for the school”. Despite a general lack of clarity over the role of the school council, children were aware that literacy skills were important for the job of councillor, although most of the infant school children had not yet developed these. They also appeared to be aware of the lack of status the council held in the school. The following exchange between Shelley (4) and Marcus (5) is indicative:

_Helen V:_ What do you need to be, to be a school council representative, do you think?
_Shelley:_ Like Marcus.

[short pause]
_Helen V:_ What's he like? What’s he good at?
_Shelley:_ Good at reading.
_Helen V:_ Right … OK, so is it important…
_Marcus:_ [interrupts] …I’m good at reading dictionaries.
_Shelley:_ He keeps expecting you read this [points at council book].
_Marcus:_ No it’s not that important
_Helen V:_ It’s not? Is there anything it’s important to be?
_Abi:_ Sometimes, if you’re not there, it’s not that important.

Although junior school councillors (aged 8 to 11) had a much clearer idea of the skills required to be a councillor – listening to others, representing others’ views – and the role of the council in giving children the chance to “sort out the things that we don’t like about the school”, they were also more aware than infants of the frustrations of being a council representative; the lack of power that councillors possessed. The following excerpt from a focus-group discussion highlights the frustration councillors felt when their requests were rejected (by the head teacher) and when decision-making was taken out of their hands:

_Helen V:_ [Reading from the ‘dislike’ list produced during a focus-group session – see Figure 1] Some important things get rejected.
_Alesha (10):_ I hate it when that happens.
Helen V: So, who do you think should be making the decisions?

[From group]: [Name of deputy head teacher.]

Kemi (9): Because we’re the school council representatives and it should be like, there should be like…

[From group]: [name of deputy head teacher] should do it!

Kemi: No, we should get like…

[From group]: We should do it!

Alesha: We should know how much money the things cost then…

Kemi: We should get a bunch of adults and we should have a vote across it actually.

[From group]: Yea!

Kemi: ‘Cos, it’s not fair how we always get rejected.

Figure 1 - ‘Dislike’ list produced by one councillor in a focus-group discussion

Junior school councillors also displayed an awareness of the special position councillors held in the school, in comparison to their classmates. In discussing what happens at council meetings, one 10–year-old councillor responded as follows:
Alesha: Well, the people who are on my school council, they normally ask for better food and drinks and equipment, and a climbing frame…

[Interruption from group]

Alesha: …but, when you actually go to the meetings, you realise that there’s more important things than stuff that you want…but there’s stuff that we need, like stuff needs to be fixed, and more healthy food, and stuff, and I think that we don’t actually need juice, ‘cos sometimes we get it for afters, or I think water’s fine, ‘cos I think there’s no difference.

Frustrations with the lack of impact of the school council were more keenly felt by councillors than by staff. Even so, staff had a stronger sense than the children that the council had a potential which was not being fulfilled, with one teacher stating that it:

should be asking for a lot more, really, than it is, sometimes, but I think it’s an important role for them to feel that they’re involved in what’s going on in the school

The importance of defining participation

In choosing to study a widely promoted and relatively common feature of primary school life I had not expected that the task of defining the concept of participation would play such a crucial role in evaluating a school council.

When participation is defined narrowly, which, in its simplest form translates as ‘active decision-making’ (Morrow, 2000), the level of participation can be determined by the level of decision-making that children are involved in. By this definition, the school council under study was not participatory. The council was a forum where children ‘voiced their views’, which were mainly in the form of requests and were quite often their own views rather than those of their class. Decision-making was made externally by the head teacher, with councillors informed of any decisions at the same time as the rest of the school. Furthermore, using models of participation (such as Save the Children’s five principles on participation) the school council studied fared no better having no dialogue, no accountability and little transparency concerning the final decisions made by the head teacher. The council was not a children-friendly environment and, because of a poor understanding of the concept of participation, there was a subsequent lack of commitment from staff to implement participatory practice.
Staff at the school typically defined participation as either ‘taking part’ or, indirectly, as ‘the school council’ (which was seen as the official space within the school that allowed children to take part). This latent definition of participation (see Morrow, 2000) is passive and implies that children are present but are not agents of change. Defining participation as simply ‘the school council’ is a practice that is supported by the government (in guidelines for primary schools on citizenship education). Furthermore, this passive understanding of the term by staff in the study reflects a general lack of debate and analysis of participation in literature on school councils – particularly in terms of the power relations in the school environment and how empowerment of children might occur through school councils. It has led to children’s participation in schools being viewed as a technical method (the school council) rather than “a political methodology of empowerment” (Hickey and Mohan, 2004: 11). In this respect, a parallel with the discourse on participation in international development can be drawn, which criticises approaches to participation that do not incorporate the political perspective or the constitution of power (Hickey and Mohan, 2004). Translated into the school context, this can be equated with a denial of the tension between structure and children’s agency that is inherent in childhood and exemplified in school councils.

When an active understanding of participation is used to analyse the school council’s effectiveness as a participatory tool, the tension between children’s agency and structure is more apparent. This interpretation draws on international policy and debate such as Morrow’s definition – “children are actively involved in decisions that affect them” (Morrow, 2000: 153) – which reflects the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) – or definitions from the international discourse on participation where participation is seen as “active decision-making” at all levels of society (Hickey and Mohan, 2004: 12).

I came relatively quickly to the conclusion that the school council studied was not a participatory environment. In coming to this conclusion, the why (purpose) and how (practice) of school councils was explored in detail and helped to redefine the concept of participation in relation to the primary school council.

Children’s empowerment
The research project found that, hand in hand with a lack of clarity on the definition of participation there was a weak interpretation of the purpose (the why) of the school council
by staff. This was highlighted by the staff member responsible for running the school council who differentiated between the aim of the council – “to listen to the views and ideas of our children” – and what she would like the aim to be: “[for children] to make a decision and be able to change things that they would like to be changed, and to actually see those changes happen”. A number of studies highlight the importance of clarifying the purpose of participatory activities or spaces such as school councils (Cotmore, 2004; Gallagher, 2006; Taylor, 2002). When participatory activities aim to challenge power structures that frustrate and oppress children, they can be an empowering experience for the children involved (the councillors) but also, crucially, for children more generally (all children in the school). However, the term ‘empowerment’ is rarely used in connection with school councils and where it is used is seen as a product of the school council rather than the purpose (Taylor, 2002). Further, it could be argued that children’s ‘empowerment’ in the school council is currently being equated with ‘responsibility by pupils’ and a managerial approach to the running of schools promoted by the government (Whitty and Wisby, 2007). In this environment, ‘empowerment’ is more akin to ‘responsibility’ – where students become responsible for the success of their own school and school councils become the vehicle for this burden.

Through organisations such as School Councils UK, school councils are promoted to senior management in schools as an answer to many of their behaviour management problems (Cotmore, 2004). Some of the claims made on behalf of school councils, notably that they can improve attainment levels in schools, are not based on robust evidence (Whitty and Wisby, 2007).

When understood as a ‘constructed’ space within the school, it is clear that there is a tension inherent in the school council between the participatory ethos, which focuses on empowering children, and the current educational ethos, which focuses on the needs of senior management in schools. The research project suggested that there is a need for further research to clarify this inherent tension, in particular research that positions children’s empowerment as the key purpose of school councils.

When empowerment is the purpose of participation or a participatory tool such as the school council, a correlation is clear between Hickey and Mohan’s concept of transformation and the sociology of childhood’s concept of children’s agency. The school council becomes a space where the “struggles for power, contested meanings and
negotiated relationships” that children need to engage with to challenge existing power structures can take place (Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998: 9). Despite the purpose (the why) of participation receiving little attention, it is a crucial prerequisite for answering the how of participation – where the focus on research has rested. Consequently, the redefinition of participation in the school context needs to use the concept of children’s empowerment to re-contextualise the ‘how’ of participation. With respect to school councils, this requires re-evaluating representative democratic models in light of what they mean for children, recognising the temporal and spatial issues that restrict children’s lives and finding alternatives that give children opportunities to be involved in the decisions about their lives, their communities and their society.

**Democracy through participatory methods**
The research found that the school council was conceptualised within the citizenship framework and based on the representative democratic model. This is not surprising given that the majority of research on school councils presents them as an “apprenticeship in democracy” (Inman and Burke, 2002: 27). In this context, the democratic model is rarely challenged. Instead, recommendations for improving school councils or the participation of children in their schooling tend to be based on further ‘democratising’ of the school council or school in general (Inman and Burke, 2002; Rowe, 2003; Trafford, 2003). However, the research project found that procedures used to run council meetings, which were based on a representative model of democracy were adult-centric, requiring high levels of literacy which consequently isolated and discriminated against younger or less literate children. By basing its processes on representative democratic practice, the environment of the council meetings was therefore not child-friendly – in that it was not re-organised so that the space, equipment, practices and behaviour were comfortable for children. However, when participatory methods were used to facilitate a mini-research project by junior school councillors, children were proven to be competent researchers, able to collect and analyse the views of their peers (see Alderson, 2000b; Kellett et al, 2004).

Although the main research project made use of participatory methods, the abstract nature of the subject under investigation – participation – made it difficult to test the theory that participatory methods enable children to express their views more easily and contribute to, or actually take, more informed decisions. Participatory methods are typically used with non-literate participants and have focused on concrete subjects. The lack of such a concrete subject matter in the research project made it harder to know which
participatory techniques were most appropriate. For example, when drawing exercises were used in discussions with councillors, it was the children’s drawing ability which often fuelled their interest in drawing specific things and appeared to be the primary motivation for them in choosing the ideas to express.

However, the mini-research project was more successful than the main research project in testing the use of participatory methods with children. The mini-research project was implemented through a series of focus-group discussions where councillors decided on an appropriate issue (classroom equipment and organisation) and method for the research (survey with classmates). Councillors undertook the research over one week during playtime. They then analysed the data in a focus-group discussion and presented their findings to senior management at the school. It was more successful than the main research project as an example of participatory methods because it focused on a more concrete subject: classroom equipment. As an example of research by children, it gave councillors the experience of garnering and ‘representing’ the views of their classmates. Rather than being a dry questionnaire, the survey became an opportunity for councillors to engage in a dialogue with their classmates and highlighted the competence of children to undertake consultations with the rest of the school.

A lack of dialogue or discussion in the school council was one of the key findings from the main research project and was prevalent in every realm of the council; in discussions between councillors during council meetings, between adults (notably the head teacher) and councillors and finally between councillors and their classmates. This lack of dialogue gave councillors no opportunity to develop an argument or gain an understanding of why a particular issue was important for their classmates. This meant that they had no means by which to properly ‘represent’ their classmates. The role of ‘representative’ in the discourse on participation has been found to be problematic and calls have been made for a deeper analysis of the term (Hickey and Mohan, 2004). Perhaps new interpretations of ‘representation’ need to be found for school councils – such as at Hampton Wick Infant and Nursery School where the whole of Year 2 (aged 6 to 7) became council representatives (Shead, 2007).

What appears to be key to the notion of ‘representation’ is the creation of dialogue, particularly for younger, non-literate children, where participatory techniques can be used to support this process. Just as a ‘listening ethos’ or ‘listening’ as a way of relating to
others is being promoted as the cornerstone of participative practice with young children (Clark et al., 2005), the concept of dialogue moves beyond ‘listening’ to a reciprocal relationship between adults and children.

Ultimately, the research showed that it is not the principles of democracy that necessarily need to be challenged but the processes (particularly representation) that have been developed to implement democracy. A range of processes that are based on children’s competences and which encourage children’s agency can help children experience democracy in the here and now rather than learn about democratic practice for the ‘adult’ world in the future.

**Conclusion**

With the increasing implementation of participative practice with children, it is important that children and adults are clear on what they mean by ‘participation’. In the international development sector, a critique of participative approaches with children has given rise to a reconceptualisation of the term. This, in turn, has prompted a rights-based participative approach with children that “promotes justice, equality and freedom and tackles the power issues that lie at the root of poverty and exploitation” (Theis, 2004). However, the debate on participation does not appear to have reached the education sector in England. The concept of participation is still regarded as ‘taking part’, children are simply ‘listened to’ and school councils are the ‘space’ where this takes place.

The Education and Skills Act (2008), in the context of which school governing bodies are required to ‘invite the views of pupils’ on core policy matters, is likely to re-focus attention on school councils as the most appropriate tool to consult with children. But will this make school councils more participative in nature? My research project highlighted the need for a redefinition of children’s participation in the education sector that accords with the concept of children as active and competent social actors and aims to empower children. This will require more analysis of the school council as a participatory forum and a repositioning of school children as rights-holders. It will also require recognition of the school council as a constructed space within the school environment where children’s agency and the increasingly managerial ethos of schools are allowed to be in tension. Without a stronger focus on the purpose of children’s participation, a recognition of the agency and competence children already possess, and the rights that school children hold
to participate in the ‘here and now’ of their schooling, school councils will continue to be
tokenistic.

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