

Mr Peter McCallion
Clerk to Committee for Education
Room 375
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
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8 April 2015

Dear Mr McCallion

Inquiry into the Education Training Inspectorate and the School Improvement Process

Thank you for your letter requesting information, on behalf of the Education Committee, in relation to how school councils might contribute to informing school inspections and improvement.

Background and Context

As the Committee will be aware, NICCY has been calling for schools to provide and support appropriate and effective mechanisms through which pupils can fully participate in their schools, since 2005. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) clearly states that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and for these views to be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. Children and young peoples' effective participation in education settings should therefore be a key priority for government.

NICCY contributed oral and written evidence to the Committee's inquiry into School Councils 2011/12, highlighting the considerable benefits of effective pupil participation structures, not only for pupils, but also for staff, parents, and the wider school community. During this inquiry, NICCY also called for the Department of Education to develop a policy on pupil participation, which would require every school to establish a school council or an alternative participatory structure. The provision of an appropriate and effective mechanism in every school would enable pupils to not only voice their opinions and share their views, but ensure these are genuinely heard and considered as part of the wider decision making processes in schools.

NICCY has had ongoing engagement with departmental officials and met with the previous Minister for Education as well as the current Minister. During the period 2010-11, the Office provided the Department with information and advice to inform the development of a school councils' policy. However, the Minister decided not to proceed with such a policy, opting instead to issue guidance to schools through a circular on pupil participation. This was sent to schools in June 2014. NICCY does not believe this goes far enough as it does not guarantee every pupil the opportunity to effectively participate in school life. The Minister made a commitment to review the Circular, and if he believes that insufficient progress has been

made, to consider taking stronger action to promote pupil participation in schools. In a recent meeting with the Minister for Education, I expressed my concerns about the lack of opportunities for many pupils to participate fully in decision-making in their schools and the importance of the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) having appropriate procedures in place to inspect and evaluate the effectiveness of school councils

NICCY recently worked with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) to undertake research into pupil participation in schools. A report of the findings recommended that the Department of Education starts its review of the impact of the Pupil Participation Circular, by setting out a timetable and making a commitment to engage with children and young people throughout the review. It also strongly recommended the Department undertake a study to determine baselines for pupil participation, as currently, there is no accurate data on the number of school councils and the quality of participation in schools in Northern Ireland.

Pupils participation in School Inspection Processes

In its advice to the Department of Education and the Education Committee, NICCY illustrated how school councils or alternative democratic structures can be beneficial – creating a more positive school environment and generating greater inclusivity by bringing pupils, staff, senior managers and Boards of Governors together. Evidence also indicates that effective participative structures can positively impact on school ethos, teacher-pupil relationships, and pupils' behaviour, and create a greater sense of ownership of the school and its activities amongst pupils¹.

Involving pupils in school inspections and improvement has been recognised as a positive and healthy feature of a school's engagement with its pupils, also providing a useful barometer for the overall effectiveness of a school, particularly when pupils' views are either very positive or very negative. The use of the student voice has been a feature of Ofsted inspections in England. In the 2010 'Evaluation Schedule for Schools', inspectors evaluated;

- 'the extent to which pupils, including those from different groups, take on responsibilities and play a part in the school and wider community
- the extent to which pupils, including those from different groups, engage in decision-making or consultation about issues which affect the quality of their learning and well-being, and;
- the impact of the pupils' contribution to the school and wider community'².

The Schedule also included a comprehensive list of indicators relating to the opportunities for pupils to participate and quality of their involvement which inspectors are asked to consider and a list of questions for schools to help them consider their provision for pupil participation.

¹ Davies, L., Williams, C. & H.Yamashita (2006) Inspiring Schools – Impact and Outcomes: taking up the challenge of pupil participation. London: Carnegie.

Ofsted (2006) Improving Behaviour: Lessons learned from HMI monitoring of secondary schools where behaviour has been judged to be unsatisfactory. www.ofsted.gov.uk

² <http://www.teachingtimes.com/articles/pupil-contribution-community2.htm>

As well as being involved in formal external inspections, pupils can also contribute effectively to school self-evaluations, providing valuable insights and advice to support schools improve many aspects of their provision and practice³.

Methods of Engagement

There are a range of different mechanisms which could be used to engage pupils and to promote their participation in inspection or self-evaluation processes. In order to identify the most appropriate engagement mechanism, a range of factors should be considered, including for example, the age range, ability levels and particular needs of pupils and size of school. Clearly, it will be essential to identify effective engagement approaches which will enable and support all pupils to share their experiences and express their views. Particular attention should be given to devising approaches which will facilitate the participation of pupils in special schools, early years' settings and alternative education provision, as well as children and young people who are regarded as particularly vulnerable. Resources, guidance and good practice examples from other jurisdictions may inform the development of effective approaches.⁴

Possible methods of engagement include inspectors or evaluators meeting with the whole school council or elected representatives of the school council participating in focus groups with inspectors to discuss aspects of school performance. If a school has an alternative participative structure in place, face-to-face engagement could be sought with members or representatives. Inspectors should prepare specific questions and consider either forwarding these to the school council or providing the school council with an outline of the issues to be discussed in advance of the meeting. Surveys could also be issued to school councils or to a pupil sample across the school. Obviously these must be accessible to all pupils, taking into account the age range and ability levels of the target pupil groups.

The questions for focus groups, interviews or surveys should closely relate to the key issues arising through the school inspection but should include the following:

- Enjoyment of school
- Feeling safe
- Feeling valued
- Effectiveness of anti-bullying policies
- After schools provision
- Homework
- Views of teaching quality
- Marking and feedback
- Degree of involvement and consultation with school council in school activities.

³ <http://www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk/index.asp>

⁴ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/391979/Bennerley_20Fields_20-20_20Good_20Practice_20Example.pdf;
<http://apps.warwickshire.gov.uk/api/documents/WCCC-990-193>
<http://www.journeytoexcellence.org.uk/people/videos.asp?iPage=2&strSubmit=True&strSearchText=&id=educationaltheme||presentation%20subject|Journey%20to%20excellence%20themes|People|Empowering%20learners|Pupil%20voice>
<http://www.pupilvoicewales.org.uk/uploads/publications/562.pdf>

In any consultation with pupils, irrespective of the approach, it will be important to reassure pupils, that in sharing their views, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers and that it is to be expected that pupils may hold differing opinions. Reassurance should also be given to pupils in relation to their anonymity and the confidentiality of any information shared, unless of course, child protection issues arise.

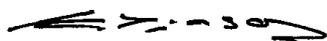
It is important that following an inspection or self-evaluation process, pupils are informed as to the findings and outcomes and appraised of any recommendations for change. This may be delivered through a letter or short briefing, compiled in a child -friendly document, using accessible language and formatting or through an oral briefing.

The Pupil Participation Circular, issued by the Department of Education states that 'During a school inspection, the inspection team will evaluate the extent to which leadership encourage pupil involvement in discussions and decisions on aspects of school life that directly affect them, to ensure the student voice is represented'.⁵ The Circular also encourages the development of student councils or alternative democratic structures. NICCY would suggest that in the process of developing and evaluating its approach to assessing the representation of student voice, ETI will be reviewing different mechanisms and tools in order to identify those which will be most appropriate and effective across a range of different educational settings. The development of these tools should help to inform its engagement with school councils.

Finally, in devising an effective mechanism or process, NICCY would strongly suggest that pupils are fully consulted from the outset. As they are *the* key contributors they will be best placed to advise what are the most appropriate and effective approaches to pupil participation.

I hope this information and advice is helpful to the Education Committee. Should you require anything further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best wishes



Koulla Yiasouma
Commissioner for Children and Young People

⁵ http://www.deni.gov.uk/pupil_participation_circular.pdf, p.10.