Students' Perspectives on Schooling: re-examining participation, power and everyday inequalities

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Introduction

Although schools are designed for children and young people, they are rarely designed in cooperation or in partnership with students. Teachers and school principals may believe they know what their students think, but this is quite likely to be impressionistic and may be over-influenced by the views of a vocal minority. Most schools in Britain and internationally lack mechanisms which allow for the full participation of students in decision-making processes. Even when schools have active student councils or school councils, these may operate with very limited power and authority, and those students who are not members of the student council may feel their voices are not heard.

The research on which this paper draws - *Students' Perspectives on Schooling* (Osler, 2010) –set out to consider how schools might be transformed by engaging more fully with student opinions and experiences, and by giving greater weight to the views of students. It examined the potential benefits to schools and to the wider community of engaging learners in democratic processes. Drawing on human rights principles, it was premised on the belief that there are moral and legal, as well as pragmatic reasons why students should be consulted about their schooling.

The school systems of many countries emphasise that one of the purposes of schooling is to support the development of democratic citizenship and democratic citizens. In reality, learning about democracy through the formal curriculum is often takes priority, with less thought given to schools' duty to provide students with a

democratic environment in which students can experience democracy and participation. A number of commentators have observed that schools remain overwhelmingly authoritarian institutions, even within democratic nation-states(Apple, 1993; Apple and Beane, 1999; Harber, 2002 and 2008). Figure 1 *Democratising the School* (adapted from Carter and Osler, 2000) proposes three pillars for a school where children's rights are protected and respected: democracy, inclusion and transparency. The processes of democratisation require that teachers and other school staff, as well as students, are given real opportunities to participate in school decision–making. This requires a progressive introduction of democratic methods so that staff and students have time to work with them in an atmosphere of relative security. Yet democratic structures alone are likely to be insufficient in bringing about change. The experience of democracy needs to go hand-in-hand with conceptual learning and an understanding of the structures and institutions which support democracy in the wider community and society.

The principle of engaging with young people and taking their perspectives seriously in educational and other areas of decision-making is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), to which governments around the world have committed themselves and which applies to all children and young people under the age of eighteen. The CRC operates as a binding agreement on all nation-states which ratify it and its implementation by these States parties is monitored by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, a body of independent experts. Participation rights in the CRC are to be found in Articles 12-17. Article 12, which relates to the child's right to have their views given due weight in matters affecting the child, is complemented by other related participation rights: enshrined in Articles 13-17. A review of the 'concluding observations' to various State parties

reveals that participation rights, which are among those of greatest significance in accessing quality education, are also among those with which Committee on the Rights of the Child has struggled.

Research design and methods

The research took place in a multicultural city in the English Midlands. Those commissioning the research were concerned with consulting young people about their learning and teaching and other aspects of school life, in ways Rudduck and McIntyre (2007) propose. They wished to feed back young people's opinions to school principals and to teachers, so that a dialogue about teaching and learning might take place. The research team were also concerned to develop research processes and a framework for analysis which supported and strengthened children's' participation rights. We wished to assess the degree to which the young people in the city felt they had an opportunity to participate in the everyday processes of school and to increase our understanding of their hopes and expectations , as well as their concerns about school. Our goal was to interpret students' experiences through a human rights lens, using the CRC as a tool.

Since the young people in our study were not themselves necessarily familiar with children's human rights, nor with Article 12, they did not use a human rights discourse. We consequently faced a dilemma in categorising their responses for analysis. We organised their responses according to the broad types of rights codified in the CRC - protection, provision and participation - but we also recognised that these various rights are interdependent and that young people's terminology does not necessarily match that of the legal experts who drafted the Convention. Nevertheless, our initial review and analysis of the data confirmed that students were, in fact, raising issues consistent with the three Ps of provision, protection and

participation. As far as is possible, we use young people's own words to articulate their concerns about and their recommendations for school. The intention is that by using the words of the students themselves our study may contribute to a better understanding of the ways I which young people articulate children's rights.

The research was carried out in a series of stages. Over the two year period of the project, some 2,000 Year 10 students, aged 14-15 years participated in the research. In the first stage, students from all 13 schools across the city were invited to complete a questionnaire, administered at school level by teachers. The first part of the questionnaire comprised 38 Likert scale questions addressing the students' views about school, learning, teachers, friendship, personal identity, and self-esteem. These questions were devised by local authority personnel and the 1,548 student responses to part one of the questionnaire were analysed by them.

The second part of the questionnaire, also devised by the local authority team, consisted of an open-ended task. At some schools this was completed at the same time as the first part; at others students completed it a few days later. The timings were dependent on school timetabling. This second part of the questionnaire invited students to complete the sentence: School would be better for me if …'. They were provided with two prompts; the first prompt encouraged the student to consider what they thought would make them a better student, and the second, to say how school might be made a more enjoyable experience.

The university research team became involved in the project at stage two, when commissioned to analyse student responses to the open-ended task in the second part of the questionnaire and to engage in further qualitative research with students in the local authority. We developed two further stages of data collection: stage three involved an on-line discussion between students and stage four

consisted of workshops which two members of the research team ran with students. At both stages three and four, we sought to refine our understanding of data collected at stage two. In the fourth stage of data collection, we also sought to encourage students to take on research responsibilities themselves.

On-line discussion

Three schools agreed to give this option to students. In this part of the research process, as in the student workshops which followed, teachers acted as gatekeepers between us, the researchers, and the students who took part, our research subjects. Drawing on our preliminary analysis of results from the questionnaire, we gave students a series of questions to stimulate debate. Figure 2 shows the topics selected. Young people from all three schools took part. Although individuals could contribute on line without being identified by their peers, they were required to register with their schools in order to access the discussion group. Two or three new topics were posted every 24 hours over a period of days.

We hoped through this process, first, to encourage students to contribute by using technology and a format with which they would be comfortable and familiar. Secondly, we hoped this process might also help clarify which of students' concerns and proposals arose out of practices in some schools, and which were more broadly relevant to schools across the city and beyond. Finally, we also hoped the data generated would help us refine our understanding of the issues the wider cohort of students had raised. It would serve as a check to validate or possibly challenge our preliminary analysis. The on-line discussion also served as a form of consultation with students. We hoped students would reflect on our preliminary findings and engage in problem solving with their peers from other schools.

Student workshops

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In line with our commitment to research which enables young people to help shape research processes and collect and analyse data, we planned the workshops so that students might receive some basic training in the practicalities and ethics of data collection; collect data; engage in some preliminary analysis; and present their result to members of the university research team.

The first activity involved paired introductions: the students each introduced themselves to a partner, aiming where possible to say something about themselves which might be new to the rest of the group, in cases where they were already well known to the others. Based on what they had learned, each person then introduced their partner to the researchers and the rest of the group.

The second activity was a group discussion where three broad questions were discussed. These questions were drawn from students' responses across the city to the final open ended question at the end of the questionnaires:

- How can schools develop so that everyone can learn in an environment free from bullying, violence, racism and sexism?

- Our city is culturally diverse. What steps do schools need to take to ensure that girls and boys from different backgrounds are treated fairly?

- Our survey suggested that students are concerned that they are not being listened to at school and are not always respected by teachers. What practical improvements can you suggest to address this problem?

To close the first workshop, we undertook some preliminary work to prepare for the task which students would carry out before the next workshop. We asked the students to imagine that they were photo journalists who wanted to follow up our research with an article on the experiences of students in the city's schools, by

producing a photo essay. We choose the profession of journalist on the assumption that all students would have direct, first-hand experience of the outcomes of journalists' work, but not necessarily of researchers. Later in the workshop we discussed similarities and differences between journalists and researchers.

We examined a range of ethical and practical concerns, pointing out that in many of the circumstances there were not always clear cut answers or rules that could be applied. Students discussed what lines of enquiry they might follow and what issues they would need to take into consideration to ensure that their pictures and any accompanying text was fair and balanced. What evidence would they look for? Were there individuals whose permission needed to be sought before photos were taken? Would it be appropriate to take photos in the classroom and, if so, did they need the prior permission of the teacher? How would their photography be explained to fellow students and what could they do to ensure that their work did not disrupt the regular work of teachers or students, or cause them to behave differently from normal? Were there any places or circumstances where it would not be appropriate to take photos at all? If it was not possible to get a photo to illustrate a particular issue, would it be appropriate to set a photo up? What were the problems with this? From this they drew up a set of draft guidelines for a photo journalist which was then confirmed in negotiation with the university researchers.

We then issued each student with a disposable camera and invited them to research and take photos over the period of a week, as if they were the photo journalist. The photos should illustrate positive and negative aspects of school, from their perspective. We briefly discussed questions of power and responsibility, given that the students were working in their own school and needed the cooperation of both teachers and fellow students, in order to carry out their work. We made practical

arrangements to collect the cameras a week later and promised the students that they would be given two copies of each photo, one to keep and a second to use in the following workshop, two weeks later.

In the second workshop students were given two copies of their own developed photos; the first copy was for them to keep and second to use in the subsequent activity. They were then asked to produce two posters, one which illustrated positive aspects of school and the second which illustrated negative aspects or experiences. They were asked to provide captions and, where appropriate, commentaries to their photos. At Long Meadow School students worked individually on this task, but at Green Lane Community College they chose to work cooperatively, in pairs or small groups.

When the posters were complete, the students were invited to present their posters to the group and to answer questions from their peers and from the researchers, about the data they presented. The second workshop finished with a brief oral evaluation of the process, and students were invited to comment whether the workshops or the photography had influenced their views or actions.

Interpreting the data

This paper reports on the students' understandings of social justice and rights. The wider data set addresses questions of the physical environment of the school and issues of teaching and learning. Although it is possible to identify some differences in perceptions of schooling needs by gender, what is striking about the responses is the common themes across the city and across ethnic groups. The most significant differences are between schools. So, for example, reported concerns about bullying, about dietary needs, and about the organisation of the school day vary between institutions.

It is also possible to detect particular concerns expressed by students from different socio-economic groups. Students raise concerns about the adequacy of the free school meal entitlement, access to laptops, revision guides and text books, pointing out they do not have these at home. There are also requests for specific support, such as free musical instrument lessons, affordable school trips that everyone can take up, one-to-one tutoring, and access to sports facilities. These are less problematic issues for middle class students whose parents can supplement their schooling. A review of the overall sample reveals that the number of requests for further support are more common in schools which have a larger proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (as measured by the uptake of claims for free school meals).

When we examine students' perceptions of schooling and what they believe they require to succeed at school in the context of these recorded national levels of child poverty, it is clear that the students' identified requirements for successful schooling are not in an way whimsical: without access to these facilities many of the young people will experience high levels of social exclusion and are unlikely to be able to benefit fully from the academic benefits of schooling. The evidence students provide suggests that, for many young people, the wider conditions of schooling may have a significant impact on their readiness to learn.

Across the city students are concerned about the physical conditions in which they are required to work and point out that even their teachers, based in the same institutions, do not have to endure basic problems over adequate food, lack of recreational space, or access to drinking water. Teachers have common rooms with access to water, food preparation, and toilets. They also have greater autonomy, and are free to make a range of decisions about their working day. Lack of access to

basic entitlements leave students felling they are disrespected by the school authorities, and that the school is not listening to them. Ultimately this may damage relationships between students and teachers, and negatively affect the learning of individuals and groups.

Perhaps the greatest concern these young people have is that their teachers are unaware of many of their problems and that teachers are also making decisions about issues the students themselves care about passionately. Not to be consulted about problems when you have insights which you believe are not shared by those making the decisions is, of course, deeply frustrating and adds to the stress of school life, impacting on relationships between students and between teachers and students. The concerns that these students express about their working conditions and the ways they believe these are affecting learning, need to be taken seriously.

The students effectively link (inadequate) *provision* of services with their own non-*participation* in decision-making processes. Lack of consultation with students, and insufficient engagement with their perspectives not only causes frustration and resentments, but effectively contributes to a context where many students feel they are materially disadvantaged in ways which hinder their learning.

It is clear that many students in this study are subject to unsatisfactory physical conditions and poor hygiene at school that would be considered totally unacceptable for adult workers in their workplaces. Adult workers have unions who are prepared mobilize on their behalf, children lack these. Restricted access to toilets, for example, leads to indignities and humiliations which the young people themselves believe drive some of their peers to stay away from school. The fact that these conditions persist is testament to the low status of children and young people

in society, and cannot be unconnected with children's lack of political power, or influence through the ballot box.

These conditions, coupled with inadequate facilities, such as shortage of text books and limited access to the Internet, are a particular burden for children from lower socio-economic groups who are required to complete demanding coursework assignments for examinations. Those in acute poverty stress the need for all young people to have access to nutritious food and additional educational and recreational experiences, making clear the negative impact of their poverty on their learning.

This consultation highlights issues which few texts on teaching and learning address. This in itself is testament to the claim that young people should be involved in decision-making relating to their own education and that their voices should impact on educational policy-making at all levels.

Students and social justice

Children and young people do not simply have the right to education. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in its Article 29, also specifies that children have the right an education in human rights, which prepares them for democratic participation, and enables them for tolerant co-existence with people with different experiences, cultures, ethnic and religious backgrounds from their own. It speaks of the nation-states' obligation to promote education for peaceful co-existence with others in their communities, the nation and the wider world:

States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to … The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms … [and] preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of

understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all

peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.

This implies some level of engagement with young people from backgrounds

different from their own and a degree of educational integration between children

from different backgrounds. This type of education, where young people are

supported in learning to live together with difference at all levels from the local to the

global is what has been termed 'education for cosmopolitan citizenship' (Osler and

Starkey, 2003; 2005). I consider here the ways in which young people perceive their

schooling to support preparation for living together with others in a spirit of peace,

tolerance and equality.

Respect for religious beliefs

There were numerous concerns from students across the city relating to religious

holidays and the opportunity to practice religion, in particular the request from

Muslim students that they be given time to pray at particular times during the school

week. There were also requests for holidays celebrate Eid and the Hindu festival of

Navrati. These requests were usually expressed in terms of equity across all

religious faiths represented in the school. Where students are identified by ethnic

group this data is largely drawn from our survey where students have selected an

ethnic category from a pre-determined list. The descriptors, such as 'Indian', 'White

and Asian', 'Other Black African', are the ones used by the city authorities, which

reflects and extends categories used in the 2001 census.

The school gives around two weeks holiday for Christmas, Easter (Christian

festivals) then why don't the school give holidays for other religious festivals such

as Eid etc.?   Another point is that people (Hindus) who celebrate Navratri got a

hour off in the morning as they were celebrating the night before till very late,

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when in fact Muslims who celebrated Ramadan, have to wake up at sunset (very early in the morning) they were expected to come on time. This should stop or it should be equal.

Female Indian 032, School A

The request for a holiday at Eid was also made by students at schools K and G, with students suggesting that 'everyone gets two days off at this time'. Muslim students at some schools were given time for prayers on Fridays, but at other schools this was not the case, so that students at school F, for example, requested the chance to 'able to pray at certain times of week at certain times'. Since religious festivals are special occasions in many young people's' calendars, a student at Green Meadow requested 'fun lessons when festivals take place', rather than a school holiday.

Such requests relate to freedom of religion and are about the degree to which students are able to practice their religion while at the same time being fully integrated into school life. So, for example, it would seem reasonable for the school to arrange occasional holidays to coincide with major religious festivals. Another consideration is the ways in which homework and course work is set, so that students are able to fulfil their academic commitments, as well as their religious obligations. A number of students at the all girls' school C asked for the school day to be compressed, with fewer/shorter breaks, so that they could meet their religious obligations. These requests were expressed in terms of enabling their maximum academic potential and avoiding unnecessary stress:

I would do better at school if I had more time at home to complete homework. I go to mosque from 5-8 pm. When I do my homework, I end up sleeping late and waking early to do mosque's work, resulting in stress.

Female Indian 019, School C

Concerns about respect for students' religious practices were also expressed in terms of the need for greater tolerance within the community of the school, both by students and by teachers:

School would be far more enjoyable for me if students would respect other students for who and what they are and believe.

Female Pakistani 023, School B

For some students this was expressed in terms of a re-orientation within the curriculum, so that

RE {religious education] and social issues are a bigger part of the education in order for students to understand their own culture as well as other peoples.

Female, White and Black Caribbean 301, Long Meadow School

A student at school D suggested that this could be achieved, in her view by 'events to learn about religious festivals organised by students'.

Not all students felt the need for further religious education to enable tolerance and understanding of diversity. A White student at Green Lane Community College argued: 'I think religious studies should be optional because some people don't believe in religion and I don't think they should have to learn about it'. This comment suggests the need for extending religious education to include a study of secular traditions, and further discussion with students about the purposes of religious education, including the contribution it might make to greater tolerance and cooperation.

The need for tolerance is also illustrated by a request by a student from school A that St George's day be given as a holiday. St George's day has not traditionally been a public holiday and this request might be interpreted as a request for equity, since other students are demanding that specific festivals within the Islamic and Hindu traditions are observed. However, if this is the case, then the student would need to acknowledge, as some students point out, that key Christian festivals of Easter and Christmas are already marked by school holidays. It is also possible that the student has been influenced by class by mainstream politicians to promote 'Britishness'.

However, it may be the case that the student has been influenced by far right political propaganda, in calling for a St George's day holiday. The British National Party (BNP) has been active in the city and the wider Midlands region over a number of years. In June 2009 the BNP achieved the first parliamentary success of a far right party in Britain in the European elections, with two Members of the European Parliament elected, one for the North West and the second for Yorkshire and Humberside. The BNP polled 8.6 per cent in both the East and West Midlands and although this was insufficient to secure a parliamentary seat in either region, it was a greater proportion of the vote than in the North West, where just 8 per cent was enough to return a parliamentary candidate (*The Guardian* 2009). This suggests that teachers cannot afford to be complacent about the susceptibility of students to such political propaganda and that they have a duty to ensure that all students are educated for democracy and tolerance (Osler, 2009 and forthcoming).

In keeping with the judgement of the Supreme Court of Canada and in line with the right of all students to be educated for human rights and participation: 'it is incumbent on the school to discharge their obligation to instil in their students this

value [tolerance] that is the very foundation of democracy'. This principle notwithstanding, the request from a student at school E that the school develop 'work to suit every religion in the school, not just Asian people but other ethnic backgrounds' needs to be heeded, if all students are to feel that the curriculum is inclusive of themselves.

What is clear from the survey responses is that many students, particularly those in schools where the student population is drawn from many faith communities as well as from secular backgrounds, show considerable respect for other's beliefs and an understanding of others' religious needs. Among such students the right of others to exercise freedom of religion and be included in the school community is unquestioned. Some raise concerns that the school curriculum does not recognise secular lifestyles or acknowledge atheistic beliefs. Yet some students, particularly those in less diverse school settings, also show resentment and distrust of others' beliefs, and this is confirmed by the concerns of others that their identities and faiths are not respected. While it is a challenge to try to reconcile different demands, it is clear that increased dialogue between students of different faiths and between those who have a religious faith and those who do not, will resolve some misunderstandings. Teachers too may have much to learn in such a dialogue.

In some nations, school is a religion-free zone. However, it is clear from international standards relating to freedom of religion, that this acts as an exclusionary practice. It is important that all aspects of a students' identity are respected, including faith.

The challenge in faith schools is to recognise other aspects of young peoples' identities. As the Runnymede Trust report on faith schooling and community

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cohesion notes: 'Faith traditions often reflect and sustain gender inequalities in society that remain a source of contention within many religious communities. … faith schools should, like all schools, redouble their efforts towards valuing and appreciating diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, disability, age and sexual orientation' (Berkeley, 2008:L 39).

Efforts to promote tolerance and understanding of others need to be extended so as to address how people from different communities can live together. This implies a form of political education and critical evaluation skills, based on human rights norms. As one respondent to the Runnymede Trust consultation acknowledged, knowing about others and even engaging with others will be insufficient:

> It is more important that young people are taught critical reasoning skills and are allowed to apply these to their own and other belief systems. Bland multi-cultural sharing without comparative analysis and critique only serves to create intellectual and social dissonance (quoted in Berkeley, 2008: 38). .

Teachers respecting students

One theme that runs through the students' responses is the need to be shown respect by teachers. Laura, a student at Green Lane Community College, acknowledged the need for reciprocity between teachers and students, but suggested this was also an issue for teacher education:

> Teachers' should be taught about how younger people think and act. Teachers should be told and students that if you respect them you will earn respect back.

Students at Green Lane perceived a large gap between them and teachers. They observed that some teachers treated them like infants and did not like to be proved wrong about anything. It was suggested that younger teachers were more likely to negotiate issues with students compared with older teachers. As one of them put in discussion: 'If teachers and students were closer it would improve learning', Dilon agreed with Laura concerning teacher education, arguing that teachers, like students, needed guidance on showing respect to all, regardless of age:

> They [teachers] would need to be taught how to respect one another, and that racism will not be tolerated and give punishments for racist incidents, so it don't carry on. The good things are that racism hardly happens in my school, as everyone learns to respect one another, and they know what the consequences are.

Chelsea also advocated some kind of teacher training:

> Try to do some teachers' day where [teachers] are made aware that the younger generation are different to them, and have different opinions

Most of the students at green Lane suggested that there was not much overt or inter-personal racism in schools, but schools could do more to provide for diverse groups, promote equality and respect for diversity. Interestingly, one student articulated this as universal right for all, regardless of background. The comment reflects an understanding of human rights and a degree of global awareness:

> Well, things should be fair in the first place. People should be a lot more aware of the world today and how it is simple humanity to show every person that they are equal.

Students at Green Lane were attempting to find solutions to a problem that students observed across the city, namely that some teachers did not respect students and that their day-to-day practices were sometimes unjust. This was sometimes simply expressed in very general terms, as in 'School would be better for me if there were not teachers who dislike students'. However, in other cases, it was expressed as a matter of bias or discriminatory behaviour by particular teachers:

Various teachers discriminate against students who share different beliefs, I find this disgusting.

Female Indian 018, School C

Teachers need to be fair to all students

Male Pakistani 158, School E

It would help me to learn if teachers taught students equally not favour clever pupils.

Female, Indian 031, School A

Give all students equal opportunities meaning more clever people won't get more opportunities.

Female African Asian 007, School G

If…everyone was treated fairly by teachers not matter what race.

Female White and Asian 023, School C

I think by being respected for who I am and what I am will make me a better student.

Male Other Black African, 087, School D

If…the teachers didn't prejudge me or anyone else.

Female White and Asian 011, School C

School would be much easier if you knew that your homework was marked equally like others other than thinking just because your [you're] Somalian your [you're] either trouble or dumb.

Male Black Somali 2833, School G

There was recognition throughout of the reciprocal nature of understanding, respect and fairness for both teachers and students, as expressed by this student at School I: 'If teachers want respect they should give students respect too and they should also respect our ideas and our view' and:

School would be a much more positive experience for me if…teachers gave students the same respect as I give them

Female Other Asian, Green Lane Community College

Often the difficulties were acknowledged to be part of a wider tension between young people and adults, related to the status of young people in society:

Students should not be seen as inferior to adults

Male Pakistani 013, School F

Students gave many small examples of ways in which teachers could demonstrate respect to students, such as not shouting, not pushing in in the lunch queue, not

restricting rewards, such as school trips, to the highest attaining students, and most importantly, giving students a chance to put their case across, allowing them to disagree politely, and, above all, to listen.

Bullying and violence

Bullying is an issue about which all schools in England have been have been made aware. They are expected to develop anti-bullying policies which aim to protect students. Previous research into exclusion from school, including self -exclusion, highlighted that bullying was the only factor in school exclusion which students perceived differently from the professionals who worked with them. Whereas young people placed it high on the list of factors which might lead to exclusion, professionals were unlikely to make a causal link between bullying and exclusion from school or exclusion from learning (Osler and Vincent, 2003).

Young women also highlighted how forms of bullying experienced and practised by girls were much more difficult to detect than those practised or experienced by young men. These forms of bullying typically rely more heavily on psychological, rather than physical violence. Since this research was published, the use of technology, including mobile phones and the Internet, has made it easier for young people to practice forms of bullying which are unobserved by teachers, and consequently more difficult to detect or address. The issue of sexuality was raised just once in the survey. This is perhaps not surprising, since this kind of research tool does not lend itself easily to expressing concerns or identities that may not even be recognised as legitimate in some schools. The student simply wrote: 'School would be better for me if I could say I am gay'.

Across the city, students from all schools commented on how it would be easier to learn and to enjoy school, if bullying was more effectively addressed. And while some students, in discussion with the researchers suggested that racism was not a problem, in all schools there were students who expressed concerns about racism, sometimes linked to bullying. Sometimes students showed an awareness of general problems , not necessarily raising issues which they felt directly. As in the case of this White girl from school B:

> This school would be a better place if all the trouble makers and bullies were not here and there was no racism and discriminations and everyone was equal.

At school A there were calls for 'better anti-bullying policies', 'no racism' and the plea: 'If they were stricter with bullying, I might enjoy coming to school. The call for 'better bullying programmes' was repeated at Long Meadow School. At Green Lane School, Selma (White European female) observed:

> I think the different year groups should come together because sometimes bullying is older people who don't really know the other. If you had people to talk to it would be easier to deal with and solve.

There appeared to be general agreement across all schools that bullying could not be completely eradicated, but that if students were involved in finding a solution, that solution was more likely to be effective, in improving the everyday life of all. Sometimes however, there was no solution offered, just a simple request, as in 'Give me a safer working environment' as requested at the all boys' school K. Clearly, some students felt extremely vulnerable, as in the case of a student at school B, who requested a means of reporting instances of bullying anonymously. Another student at the same school extended the problem of security to travel to and from school,

saying he would feel safe and be able to learn more effectively 'if the area [around school] was much safer'.

At school G, a number of issues were raised about the treatment of girls, both by teachers and by boys at the school. For example, one girl asked for girls' 'rights on the [football] pitch' to be respected, with opportunities for girls to play a wider range of sports. Another girl explained that she would feel safer at school, if there were 'less perverted boys', suggesting a degree of sexual harassment. At a number of schools there were complaints about 'sexist teachers' although the problems were not elaborated. Boys also made occasional comments about gender inequalities in statements like: 'it's important for teachers to realise girls misbehave too' and for requests for 'equal punishments for both sexes'. This confirms the observations of girls in previous research who suggested they found it relatively easy to escape punishment on some occasions by using strategies like apologising or crying, noting that boys didn't find it easy to back down when in confrontation with teachers (Osler and Vincent, 2003).

Conclusion

Students did not simply identify injustices in school, many also tried to offer solutions to perceived problems. There were a number of suggestions from students about what schools needed to do more to promote diversity and equality. Students noted that racism should not be tolerated in schools: racist teachers should not be teaching; there should be punishments for racist incidents. They suggested that there needed to be more teaching about diversity (groups and cultures, celebrations and views), provision for diversity (religious requirements, i.e. halal food, dress,

prayer rooms) and diversity in schools (having teachers from diverse backgrounds, equal treatment of all students). This is most clearly articulated in a discussion between students at Green Lane Community college about how schools should address diversity and ensure equality:

> There definitely [are] things that schools can do more for different ethnicities in schools but that also doesn't mean that there's much racism in all schools either. There's little things that could be done like halal food for Muslims. (Sunita)

> They should be able to wear their religious dress. Provide more halal foods. Not much racism in school. Ask their views on things, such as PE with boys. (Kirandeep)

> Treat them the same in every way. Treat their celebrations seriously and maybe do some displays. Do food to suit every religion. When people need to pray, have rooms so at lunchtime they can go there. (Chelsea)

> Provide [for] the needs of different people and everyone should be treated equally. Racist people should be taken out. (Alim)

> Make sure racist people aren't employed and teach the student's about religions and backgrounds other than theirs. Racism should be dealt with severely so it didn't keep happening. (Selma)

> Make sure that personal things like the [student's] background are kept personal. Teacher's should always treat the student equal to everyone, not throwing, religion, race in their face. I don't think that racism can ever be stopped, apart from trying to make them understand, that different religions have different views. (Laura)

Interestingly, in this discussion, it is the non-Muslim students who are suggesting how Muslim students' needs and religious practices can be accommodated through the provision of halal food and prayer rooms in school. These students are demonstrating tolerance and an understanding of diversity. They are also demonstrating that aspects of their education- at home or at school- have prepared them for living in contexts of diversity. They recognise the need for democratic dialogue: 'ask them' and consult. They also recognise the need to persist in education for tolerance: 'trying to make them understand that different religions (and cultures) have different views'. A strong learning dialogue needs to be developed in all schools, between students and between teachers and students, so that education for democracy and diversity can be made more effective.

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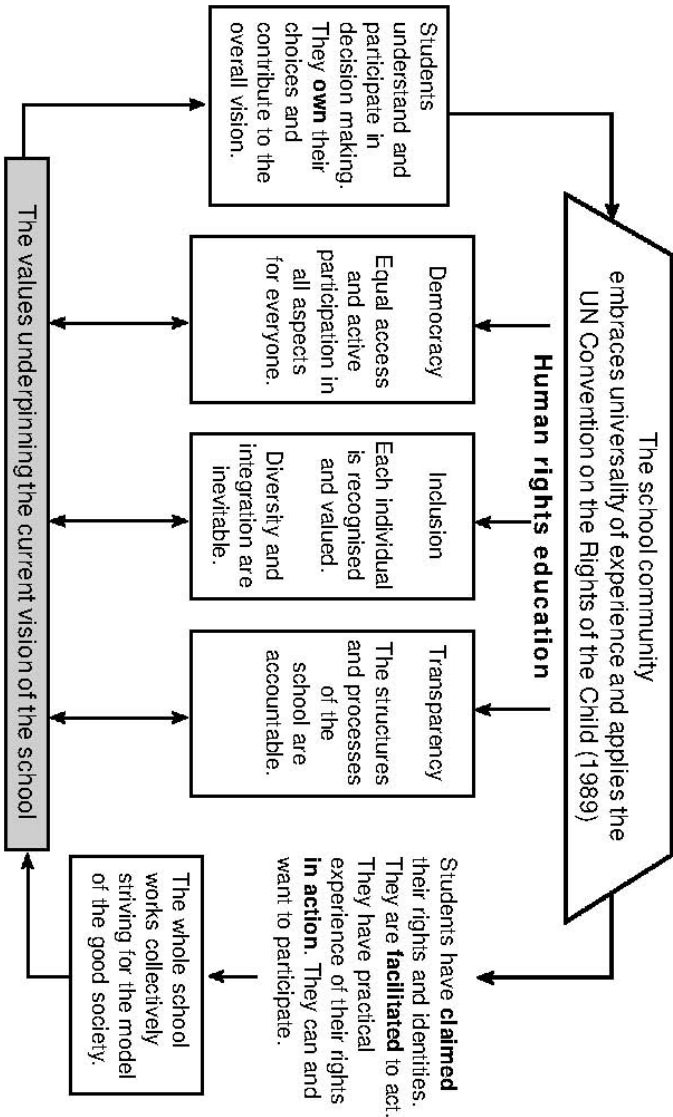
Figure 1:

The school community embraces universality of experience and applies the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

Human rights education

Students understand and participate in decision making. They **own** their choices and contribute to the overall vision.

Democracy
Equal access and active participation in all aspects for everyone.

Inclusion
Each individual is recognised and valued. Diversity and integration are inevitable.

Transparency
The structures and processes of the school are accountable.

The values underpinning the current vision of the school

The whole school works collectively striving for the model of the good society.

Students have **claimed** their rights and identities. They are **facilitated** to act. They have practical experience of their rights **in action**. They can and want to participate.

Figure 2: On-line discussion topics generated by students' questionnaire responses

	Topic	*Stimulus for debate*
A	Rules	School rules and class rules need to be negotiated with students. If students help draw up the rules they are more likely to keep them. Schools where students are properly involved in decision-making are almost non existent. How does your school measure up? What good ideas have you got?
B	The school day	The school day should be flexible, so that if a student wants to make a later start and work on into the evening they can do so. Would this arrangement appeal to you? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
C	Interesting lessons	Many students believe that lessons could be made more interesting. What learning methods work for you? Is the curriculum relevant?
D	A fair environment	Schools could do more to make sure that everyone can learn in an environment free from violence, bullying, racism and sexism. Our survey showed that girls feel more strongly about these issues than boys. What are your ideas for helping students and teachers to achieve a fair environment?
E	Safety	Not all schools are safe learning environments for all students. Some students will always be vulnerable to bullying. Girls and boys have very different experiences of bullying. What can schools, teachers and students do about this?
F	Respect	Relationships between teachers and students based on mutual respect are essential for academic success. Students need more encouragement. Many teachers try to dictate to students. How could teachers and students cooperate more?
G	Student involvement and participation	A good student doesn't simply focus on school work but makes a wider contribution to the school community by getting involved with projects designed to improve things. However, many students told us that school councils need to be more effective. What are your views?
H	Extending learning	Schools are too inward looking. They need to be open to adults as well as children. Young people need opportunities to study through visits, work experience placements and projects. How can schools improve in this area?
I	Cultural diversity	Schools should cater for the cultural diversity of students and teachers. Does your school make special provision for students from different ethnic or religious groups? For example, give religious holidays, consider food requirements or religious commitments?
J	Your ideal school	If you could design your ideal school, what would be its most important features?
K	Advice to Year 6	What advice would you give to a Year 6 student about getting along with teachers and students? How can a Year 6 student increase their chances of success at secondary school?